
Vertigo

A Story

John J. Clayton

HERE IS a man stripped of much of what he thought of as his life. His son is dead, his work is gone, his mother fading, his daughter off in college and when they speak on the phone they have nothing to say. This summer, this fall, he seems deep in dream. He's thick, this Daniel Bergoff: thick-jawed, balding, a chunky, strong man, a one-time wrestler, with body hair and long heavy eyebrows half gray, half black, not someone you'd expect to be a dreamer. A gorilla, dreaming? He'd been comptroller and chief financial officer for a high-tech company in Cambridge, someone more likely to think numbers and protocols than to take in light on barn and field and trees, not a candidate for revelations.

But for months now he's been walking, walking and sitting, watching afternoon light playing on barn and field and trees and on the water of the pond, Walden Pond. Thoreau's pond—well, hardly that, with its smoothed-out trails now railed off for handicap access, sandy beach and timbered steps, the hum of traffic on Route 2, but still full of beauty. He's been praying from the *siddur* or sitting, eyes shut, watching the little monkey of the mind do its tricks.

He breathes in beauty. He remembers the visit. One night, four months ago, late spring, after the

unveiling of his son's stone, he had a dream, and in the morning he told Shayna about it. "I was wrapping myself in my *tallis*, and the fringes became feathers, the *tallis* became wings that lifted me. Of course I didn't make up the image. In the morning prayer, when you put on your *tallis*—it's compared to sheltering wings."

"It sounds like a healing dream," she said. "Beautiful. I should have such dreams."

He felt it was a mistake to tell her—it might keep the angel away. The next night he wanted the dream so much he couldn't get to sleep. But when he finally slept, the wings were around him again, or he was wearing the wings, only the whole atmosphere was full of danger. This time he kept the angel to himself.

Of course, you could say his strangeness, his silence, the visitation itself—they were simply his ways of grieving, of coping. Gabe: killed just over a year ago. The first anniversary of his dying, the *yobrtzayt*, was last spring. And upstairs Daniel's mother, Gertrude, barely complaining now about her arthritis, murmurs old love songs in a husky voice ruined by cigarettes, as if she were the ghost of Edith Piaf, of Lotte Lenya. At eighty-five, she's slipping into forgetfulness; remembers, forgets. She still walks a little, still cooks a little. She's writing family history on her own laptop. She can still do that, though sometimes she forgets how to turn off the machine. Or else she sits by the window,

JOHN J. CLAYTON is the author of two novels and two collections of short stories. His previous stories in COMMENTARY include "The Company You Keep" (April), "Fables of the Erotic Other" (October 2003), and "Adult Fiction" (May 2003).

open a crack to let the smoke out, and nods to herself. This was a woman who wrote a witty syndicated column that at its peak was picked up by over a hundred newspapers. Now, old. Her skin smells sweet.

Sometimes he hides upstairs, sitting in Mother's room in an old easy chair his daughter Celia made him drag home from the dump when she was a kid. Until Gabe went off to Dartmouth, this was Gabe's room; maybe that's another reason Daniel sits there. When his mother began to wither a few years ago, her crusty, haughty selfhood to soften, and she moved in, Gabe's room seemed best. Gabe hadn't minded; when he came home he slept in the study.

Gertrude Bergoff: old bones, with a little puffed belly under her blue housedress, she's calmer than in Daniel's memory she's ever been. Even her wrinkles seem to have relaxed; her face seems youthful. "So? How's your day?" she asks. "Fine. Fine, Ma." And sometimes she remembers about Gabe and they shake their heads. But sometimes she asks, "When's your Gabe coming home from school? Isn't he late? He's playing soccer?" And he reminds her, "No, Ma. He's not playing soccer. Remember what happened to Gabe? Remember? The accident?" And she begins to cry. "Oh, no, not Gabe, it couldn't happen, Danny, Danny"—as if learning for the first time all over again, and he comforts her. He rubs her back in big circles the way he'd once rubbed Gabe's back. "God should only take me soon," she says.

SOMETIMES HE pokes through the closet, still Gabe's. His school papers. His soccer awards, papers from the summer he interned at the State House in Boston. His baseball cards, thousands of cards. When he was eight, nine, ten—that's where his birthday money, his Chanukah money went.

Daniel's mother smiles at him, one eyebrow tilted up in an irony that no longer bites. He sits with her, his eyes in soft focus. Or he picks up a photograph Gabe took and tries to locate himself in those eyes, as if by yoking his look to Gabe's, he can reach him in the world-to-come. With his mother he can be as strange as he wants—she thinks it's ordinary. Otherwise, he hides his strangeness as best he can.

He can't hide it from Shayna. It's a Friday morning. Leaning against the kitchen counter, her clear gray eyes gazing steadily, brows raised in a pretense of amusement, she watches him knead dough for challah, pressing knuckles and rolling out with the heel of his hand, turning the ball, and again. She lowers her head and stares at him over granny glasses. It's probably a gimmick she's picked up as a

guidance counselor, and though he's no teenager he shrinks like a kid from meeting her glance. "We need to talk about this, Danny."

"Talk about what? Nothing's wrong."

She puts her hands on his shoulders, kneading them as he kneads the dough, turning him to face her. She raises a lecture-finger. "This peculiar retirement—that's the problem. You? You're too young to retire. You're not even sixty. So—you know what you're like? You're like some Olympic athlete who suddenly quits training. All those muscles are revved up aching to be used, and soon they're just aching, full of acid."

"Maybe I'm in training for something else."

"In training! You're in mourning is what you're in. In your sleep, I've heard his name. You turn over and curl up away from me. 'Gabe, Gabe. . . .' Many nights, Danny."

He shrugs. Well? Isn't it true for both of them? Didn't he hear Shayna crying just last week behind a shut bedroom door? He closes his eyes but keeps kneading the dough, heel of his hand, roll it under, heel of his hand, until the dough resists, a fat lady's earlobe. He puts it into the yellow bowl.

"Look, look at you. Half asleep. Brooding all the time. If you're brooding, where are the eggs?—oh, come on, Danny, that's a joke. Or baking bread. What is this, what are *you* doing baking bread? Or organizing the garage?—God knows in our twenty years in this house did you ever clean once without being nagged? Please. Honey. Call Rabbi Shulberger. Go work for the Hesed committee. You've got so much to offer, Danny."

A YEAR ago last April they lost Gabe, their first-born, a senior at Dartmouth—car crash late at night, someone else driving, too much to drink, Gabe asleep, killed instantly. He remembers calling the inn to cancel the reservations they'd made for the weekend of his graduation.

For months, coping meant being willing to get up in the morning. Meant being willing to bear looking at Shayna, making the loss real again by seeing it in her face. The thought of sex nauseated and depressed him. This made no sense, but it was true. He wrote in a notebook about Gabe, about the hole in the heart, but the cavity, cleaned out, left a bigger cavity, more decay. He remembered failures as a father—impatience, irritation, and how could he make reparations? Let's be honest: there were times with Gabe. . . . Oh, he was never like his own father, never roared his rage directly. The old rage, knotted up, got transmuted into judgment. The judgment

in my eyes—Gabe suffered from that, surely. My lousy little failures of soul.

He prays. He also works out daily at the gym. He's bought an expensive single scull and rows on the Charles. He takes a course in Hasidism at the synagogue; they study the words of the Baal Shem Tov as written down by his disciples. Rabbi Shulberger explains *devekut*, cleaving with all of yourself to God: this is a state he can't imagine.

To keep occupied, he's begun day-trading in commodities, and he's performed consistently well, even in this bear market. When he meets someone at the gym, instead of saying, "I'm retired," he can say, "I'm a commodities trader." He's taken enough of an interest to read books on the mathematics of the markets. What a peculiar thing, not ever to lay eyes on the commodities he trades. He doesn't trade commodities at all, only paper certificates, and not even those but pixels on a screen representing mathematical curves. Fiction upon fiction.

Again and again these days, his father's heavy, worried face comes to him; he sees beads of sweat wiped away by a dirty handkerchief. He can almost smell his father's self-disgust. A couple of times when Daniel was in his teens, his father had gotten past snarling, past blaming other people, sat in his big red poppa chair and wept, blew his nose in that handkerchief. *Danny, you got a bum for a father!* In that guttural, raspy, tough-guy voice, not even his own voice but one he needed in order to let his guard down. A bum for a father. What did he mean a bum? Money. He meant money, that's all. He couldn't bring home enough money. At those times of self-exposure, Daniel would forget how much he hated the man, would sit on the edge of the chair, put his arm around his father's shoulder. *Dad, Dad, it's okay. . . .*

He'd been a tough, resisting boy. When his father yelled and threatened, Daniel fought back. He was always better with words; his father was afraid of his words. And Daniel could sense the last possible moment, the moment before his father would shove him or hit him, to retreat to his room, where he locked the door, shrank inside himself into a knot made of iron. Face down on his bed, he throttled, bit his pillow, tightened his jaw like a bulldog. And in this way Daniel lost the war, for he still has this knot of cold iron inside, has to lug all the rage of his father. Poor bastard, he says to himself, poor bastard, meaning his father, meaning himself.

When his father died, he hadn't been able to bring himself to say kaddish. He'd rationalize—

what would it mean to Dad? Nothing. So now, as if in compensation, almost every day for the eleven prescribed months, he has said kaddish for his son.

Retire? How do you retire from your childhood? Here he is, a half-century later, still hiding in his room—now, his study—or in his mother's room. No meetings with the CEO, no reshuffling of the company's portfolio. No budget statements, no negotiations over lines of credit. He takes walks.

ON HIS walk along Walden Pond one late spring morning over a carpet of last year's leaves and new moss, he'd stopped and, staring at the water, staring at the pattern of tiny wind ripples, felt a dizziness that began in his stomach—like when a plane hits clear-air turbulence and suddenly drops fifty feet. It was like staring at one of those 3-D pictures that appear to be flat patterns of color but, gazed at in soft focus, suddenly melt and reveal a three-dimensional architecture to get lost in.

He closed his eyes as he was pulled in and through, traveling a tunnel of inner space that let him out as suddenly as it sucked him in. And there he was at the same water, pond's edge, staring. Same water, same trees in early green, but everything pulsing with its own intent, each fragment, bark, leaf, water expressing its own self, its special speech, to his self. Nothing to do with angels. Still, he imagined himself held by wings, tips of feathers framing his view of water, patterns of pollen on its surface, fallen tree, moss and lichen on damp rock. These very things.

It wasn't wholly unfamiliar. When he was getting his MBA at Harvard in the 70's people used to put on funny, prismatic glasses and pretend to be tripping. It was like that. Or like the day he found himself in a total eclipse of the sun without knowing it was happening, and the light grew thin and strange. Or remember what it was like to smoke dope? Say you're walking along a path through the woods. Stoned, you let the path lose its role as a way to get you from point A to point B. You almost lose the illusion of continuity and experience a series of separate moments that are—well, simply what they are.

He wasn't afraid that morning at Walden; in fact, he tried to intensify the vision. But that simply made him aware of the effort, and the numinous quality fell away. So over these months he's learned to breathe in what he sees, not to push it, and these are the times he really sees, his eyes and ears caressed the way a swimmer is caressed by water. There's a hum associated with this way of being, the blood in the ears perhaps, or a shimmer at the

edges of things. His breath eases, deepens, as if he were asleep, but colors are more vibrant, and everything seems to sing about itself. He breathes deep and sits, and if, at these times, he thinks about Gabe, it isn't a terrible thing. Gabe enters as breath.

This vertigo he feels—what is it but the wooziness caused by the leap between worlds? When he was a child lying in the dark in a churning house, he'd float away from his parents' guttural whispered fights by burying his head under a pillow and staring at the window (apartment building across the courtyard, mauve light from city streets) until the window bent and shrank to the size of his thumbnail and he pulled back, afraid the window would become a pinhole and he himself tiny enough to pass through and away. Then there was the sound of a car horn or a cough or hissed curse from the other room, and he'd be back.

Now, if he shrinks himself down, first there's the vertigo and then he can almost enter the light. He has to become very small. He is barely there; Gabe is barely not-there. He strains to find the place where they both exist.

MORNINGS THIS fall, during the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Daniel walks at Walden, but now he's taken to sitting on a rock off the path. He brings a cushion protected by a plastic bag and sits. He drifts off, returns. Nice here, uncomplicated. All through the previous month, then through the High Holy Days and until the end of Sukkot, they have been reciting Psalm 27 in the synagogue:

One thing I asked of the Lord, one thing I shall seek
To live in the house of the Lord all the days
of my life. . . .
He will hide me in His haven on an evil day.

Sounds like a good deal to him. This is the time of year when we're told to take stock, a time of turning. The year turns, we are to turn our lives toward God. But is he turning? Or is he simply hiding on an evil day? The thing about hiding is it brings you right back to what you're hiding from. Sitting, he sees Gabe—his beautiful face. At first, this brings peace. But only at first.

Mid-winter the year Gabe died, Daniel drove up to Dartmouth and spent a couple of days hanging out. He can't stand motels, so Gabe gave up his bed and slept on a camping mattress on the floor.

Lying in the dark, Daniel asked about courses, about grad schools. They laughed about the dress Celia had chosen for her high-school prom. Lights from college paths played on the concrete-block walls, on the blown-up photo of FDR that Gabe had tacked up in his room at home just after his bar mitzvah. Before they said goodnight, Daniel said to him, "Gabe? It's been pretty great being your father." He knew it embarrassed Gabe to hear things like that, but he said it anyway.

There came a long silence. He hadn't expected that. It grew thicker, more dangerous. Half a minute. A minute. He sighed, he yawned, to break the silence. Gabe spoke.

"Dad? You know I love you a lot . . . but when I was a little kid, it wasn't always easy being your son."

"I was too hard on you?"

"Not that. No. Most of the time, you were so kind. But then I'd screw up in some way that bothered you, and you'd get choked up and not yell but get hard like a wall, hard as ice, Dad, your eyes so cold—you'd turn your face away, I couldn't reach you to make things right. After a while you'd be okay—for you it was over, but not for me. I'd be left holding a lot of stuff I couldn't put down anywhere. You've mellowed, you know. Gotten sweet in your old age—just kidding, just kidding. And . . . well, Dad, I know how to handle you."

"You always knew that," Daniel laughed. Then: "How come you never spoke about this?"

Gabe had no answer. Daniel knew better than to press.

From down the hall, ugly music. Thump, thump, thump of the bass. Laughter. He could hear Gabe trying to get comfortable on the camping mattress. It took a long time to get to sleep that night.

In the morning they embraced and Gabe went off to the library, Daniel drove home. And that was the last time he saw his son. Now he's left holding a lot of stuff, nowhere to put it down. He still speaks to Gabe, but does anyone answer? Can the vertigo take him to a place where they're both present? On the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, fasting all day in synagogue, he can't put it down, can't make it up.

IT'S THE first holiday season that Celia hasn't spent with the family; too busy with her studies to fly home, she attends services at Swarthmore. Maybe her absence makes Celia more a presence for Daniel, for right after Sukkot he flies to see her. What's the good of being retired if he can't take off

a couple of days? Why has it been so hard to call? Walking around Walden Pond, he says “Celia” into his voice-activated cell phone, but then kills the call. He sucks up a huge breath to quiet his heart. “Celia,” he says again, as if he’s angry at the phone.

She meets him at the Philadelphia airport, Swarthmore just a half-hour away. He enjoys it that she’s the driver—pretty little blue used Corolla they bought for her—and he can relax and look over at her. He sees her freshly, as if she’s not his child—tall as he, taller when sitting in the car, long-waisted as she is. She’s bony-lean like Shayna, her eyes wonderfully clear, her beauty formed: a young woman. “I can’t get over it.”

She glances over at him. “Over Gabe? You can’t get over Gabe, Dad?”

“No. No. I mean *you*—look at you, you’re all grown up and lovely.” She twists down the corner of her mouth, an old gag, and, without turning from the wheel, thumps him hard on the chest.

While she takes classes, he wanders—the Swarthmore campus another haven, specimen trees in full color. The gardens, fall-pruned, are sad, but the sky is clear and blue. He sits on newspapers on the damp lawn and watches breath pass through him, world to world. At her cross-country practice he puts on sneakers and runs alongside of her but soon he’s heaving breath and she leaves him behind.

Dinnertime, Celia takes him to the eating hall and introduces him to a blur of names and faces. They make a fuss over him, and since they don’t know him from Adam it makes him feel that Celia is loved around here. Later, in the dark, bundled up against the cold evening, they walk to the library and she tells him about her courses, the a-cappella group she’s joined, and later, both carrying books, they walk back to her dorm. She shows him a few papers. Over her bed is Gabe’s blown-up photo of Roosevelt. On the opposite wall is a blown-up picture of Gabe.

Celia works at her desk. Her long black fuzzy hair is rolled up and pinned out of the way. He remembers Shayna getting tired of running after her with a hairbrush, Celia refusing to cut it off, him laughing, the mediator. Her roommate’s staying with a friend tonight so he can have a bed. He sits on the bed trying to read, but gets stuck like an old phonograph needle on one passage. Thump of a bass, somebody’s stereo; laughter from the hallway. Roosevelt, battered at the edges, above her bed, Gabe looking at him from the wall across. Tournament Frisbees form a pattern on one wall, a collage of ski posters on another—she and Gabe were both skiers

from the time they were four or five. She looks up. “Dad? What is it? You look incredibly moony.”

“Who, me?”

She turns from her computer screen to face him. “My pop. My soda pop.” She does the old stuff—runs her fingers through his thinning hair, rubs his shoulder.

“I wonder, Celia. Do you ever feel in contact with him?” It’s only after he’s said this that he knows he’s been rehearsing it all day.

“No.”

“Never?”

“Sometimes I dream about him, but that’s all.”

“Good dreams?”

“Not bad ones. I can’t remember. . . . You never used to talk like this.”

“No?”

“And since Gabe died, do you know we’ve hardly talked about him at all? In fact . . . this whole visit is amazing to me. When you called, I got a little nervous. I’ll tell you what I thought. That maybe Mom or you were really sick God forbid or something. Because we never talk.”

“Celia? Gabe said I came down hard on him, judged him. He said I could get like ice.”

“Well, maybe you were like that sometimes with Gabe—you know, fathers and sons? On me you were always easy.”

As if he’s praying, he rocks, rocks, to the thump of the bass. “Honey?” he says. “This is going to sound peculiar: I’ve been trying to reach him.”

“What does that mean, Dad?”

He shakes his head as if it’s impossible to say, then says, “If I can leave my self behind, maybe I can get to the place . . . where we’re both present.”

“Oh, Dad. Dad.” She came over and hugged, hard, then held him at arm’s length and looked into his eyes. “Have you talked to Mom about this?”

“A little.”

“You ought to talk to Mom. She’s lonely.”

THE MORNING after his return, while Shayna sleeps, he goes back to Walden. Here, at the pond, sitting on a stump he’s covered with a pillow, he can let things go. Maybe seeing Celia helped. It becomes soothing to breathe in morning light, brackish water, weave of currents and detritus on the pond surface, leaves of yellow and now burnished reds of oak obliterating the path—breathe them in so they seem permeated with their origin. It’s as if he’s a little drunk. The humming in his blood suffuses pond, leafy path. Under his ribs the tug of fear—he’ll go too far, this self will disappear. And the opposite fear—this way of seeing will disappear.

He watches words, not his own, babbling through him, watches . . . nothing; there's no one to *do* the watching. As he sits, eyes shut, there's a vertiginous lifting, from above his body he can look down and see himself sitting, Daniel looking down at Daniel. He's above himself, outside the map. This is too much. At once—whoosh—he's back in his house of bones.

How long was he outside himself? A few seconds? No time at all? But he thinks about it all the time. In his office at home, playing with a pencil, he remembers, as if still from above, a sitting fool who's lost his son. Well, so many have lost their sons. *Kindertotenlieder*: songs of the death of children. But that doesn't make it inconsequential. Loss and loss, intensified by all the parents keening in chorus for all the children. He could have said this a year ago, ten years ago. But now, feeling part of one great wave of grief, he finds some of the burden lift: it's not merely his.

He can't stop replaying the moment. He sticks to his study or walks at the pond, shies away from Shayna, cancels lunch downtown with his old friend Morris Goldman. Why? Out of fear it might show? Out of fear he'll lose the understanding?

One afternoon, returning from the pond, he says hello to Shayna, just home from school, and stops in at his mother's room upstairs. But his mother's not there, or in the bathroom, or listening to music downstairs. Where could she be? Sometimes she takes a walk, but never alone. Hurrying downstairs, he calls, "Shayna, Shayna, where did Mom go?"

"She's not upstairs?" Shayna gets up from her laptop and they hunt through the house. No Gertrude. No Gertrude anywhere. "She could have had a stroke," Shayna says. Then: "Don't panic," in a flat, frozen voice, her voice of panic. Daniel goes for his car; Shayna stays home to wait for a call.

Gertrude's usual walk, always with him or with Shayna, is two blocks away to a local park. She sits and feeds the ducks, pets the dogs. Not today. He reaches Shayna on his cell phone. No, she says, no one's called home. "Should we call the police?"

"Not yet. I'm heading up the road toward town."

He's still on the line with Shayna when he spots his mother standing at the black iron fence to the playground, leaning a little on her cane but looking fit and determined. "There she is. We'll be home in a couple of minutes." Daniel pulls alongside and lowers the window. "Ma? You want to get in, please?" He opens the door for her.

"Daniel. How nice. I thought I'd go find Celia in the playground." She points—the playground where Celia and Gabe used to swing and slide, fixed up now

with colorful plastic play units but otherwise the same. "Your father and I haven't seen her all day."

He says, "Celia will be home soon, Ma. For Thanksgiving. We'll have a big turkey." He gets out of the car and stands by the entrance to the playground and looks.

She looks blankly, blankly; then her eyes take focus. She snorts. "Don't you condescend to me, Mister," she says, glaring, hands akimbo. "Don't you think I know where Celia is?" Now, thrusting up her chin, she's playing Rosalind Russell, Bette Davis. He's a boy again and she's telling him a thing or two. "So, my son. You caught me in a little gap? At my age, that's permitted."

"Sorry, sorry, Ma."

"Look at the way the time goes, my darling." Softer, now. "Suppose I did slip into a slightly different time. So what? Don't be such a coward. That's just the way things are. Your father, before he died, half the time he was in another world. You couldn't talk sensibly to him for five minutes in his last years. And Celia was such a *lovely* little girl. Only this very morning wasn't she six years old? Look at her there—"

Gertrude points with her cane. Daniel follows. There's a girl with dark hair tied up in a pony tail, there on the swings. Trick of the eyes, trick of the light?—it's Celia, she's six years old, and the big boy pushing from behind, that's Gabe, age ten. It's my distance vision, playing games. But Daniel doesn't want to lose it. He knows, doesn't he, that Celia's a young woman at Swarthmore, outside Philadelphia? But he knows, too, that all he has to do is leave his mother, walk into the playground, and, if he doesn't look back, he'll find them there, age ten, age six.

Instantly, as if he were only in a reasonable, shared world, he says, "Ma? She's *still* lovely."

Gertrude picks up on the last word. "And what about your mother?" She lifts her penciled, Rosalind Russell eyebrows at him. She presents him with her face, as if it were a portrait of herself. There!

"Oh, lovely, too."

"Well? Am I *not* a bit of all right?" They laugh together. He takes her arm and leads her to the car. Just before she steps in, they both look back at the girl on the swing, the boy pushing. She nods. She sits down in his car, the *grande dame*, and says to her chauffeur, "Home, Mister."

SHAYNA'S making out reports for the Department of Social Services. She's sitting over her laptop, papers spread out on the dining-room table, and looks at him over her glasses, perched halfway down her nose.

“You know what?” she says when he tells her about the playground, “I feel that way all the time, Danny. That’s just our ordinary loss of children. Our little girl Celia—that terrific sweetness, remember?—playing on those swings?” She takes off her glasses and folding them neatly, places them on her papers. “Listen, I know, I should count my blessings that Celia has grown up into a marvelous adult, and I do—but I still miss that little girl. So. Your poor mother. Time crumples up for her? Maybe she’s lucky.”

“What I’m thinking is—you know—well, maybe it’s a form of communication?”

“Oh, baby.” Shayna pulls off her computer glasses and stands up as if she were to meet a friend coming to the door. “Oh.” She looks at him with her clear, severe look, then, softening, puts her arms around his neck. “You mean a message from Gabe using your mother? Danny? Is that what you mean?”

“I didn’t say that at all,” Dan says, face hot. He tries to slacken, but the fortress of bones keeps resisting. At this moment he deeply understands what he has always known, that in this terrible time he has her, has had her all the way—but what in God’s name does she have? He makes himself hug back.

The next afternoon he drives back to the playground. The big kids are still at school; only little ones, two of them, are playing on the colorful plastic climbs and slides. Their mothers, standing nearby, talk together. It’s a sunny day; bundled in sweater and parka, he’s buffered against the cold.

HE SITS on a wooden platform—part of a structure where big kids climb—cross-legged, his back against an upright. It’s like a giant chair, like the chair on which Alice sat. He closes his eyes. In his mind’s eye he can see the old equipment, heavy aluminum, where Gabe and Celia swung, slid, seesawed, spun. And then, as he

opens his eyes, well, there are these hoops of light to be considered. What about them? Each of them might be an angel . . . or just a trick of perception. Hoops of luminescence float or seem to float, and the objects themselves are surrounded by this pulsing light, as if light loved the things of this world.

It’s making him dizzy. Gone limp inside, he isn’t breathing but being breathed. His face hot with blood, head humming with blood, a high-pitched keening. The leaves are falling. He knows that.

Gabe—why, Gabe is just through those trees over there. So he takes a little walk. He knows he can join his son just past the trees. But trees, they just give way to trees. A path into the conservation area, and beyond the little woods, a wooden barn and hayfield. There’s nobody conserved in these woods. He might get small and small, might dissipate his being and then—what if there’s nothing, or nothing like a son? Suppose his eyes blur with tears, with light; instead of Gabe, all there is is light’s confusion. Just some father, some body, that’s all, stumbling through piles of yellow, orange, red maple leaves drying in the late fall sun. Leaves fall, adding vertigo to vertigo, until they make a bed for someone.

Crumpling the dry leaves, he lies down in his bones until the dizziness passes, but then it’s so comforting to lie here on this bed that he closes his eyes and sleeps. No angels, no children, and all the scattered energy of light calms down like the leaves. It’s okay here. Leaves like feathers.

Don’t worry; in a while he’ll get up. He remembers where he lives. He’ll go home, and if Shayna’s lonely, sitting at her laptop, he’ll try to comfort her. The leaves are like camouflage; sunlight of late afternoon speckles the leaves and, past the woods, barn and hayfield. Soon, Daniel will step back inside the map, lug his bones home.