



VINTAGE

THE ECHO MAKER

RICHARD POWERS

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About the Book

On a winter night on a remote road in Nebraska, twenty-seven-year-old Mark Schluter's truck turns over in a near fatal accident. His older sister, Karin, his only close relative, returns reluctantly to their hometown to nurse Mark back from a traumatic head injury. But when he emerges from a protracted coma, Mark believes that this woman – who looks, acts, and sounds just like his sister – is really an identical impostor.

Shattered by her brother's refusal to recognise her, Karin contacts the cognitive neurologist Gerald Weber, famous for his case studies describing the infinitely bizarre worlds of brain disorder. Weber recognises Mark as a very unusual case of Capgras syndrome and is keen to investigate. But what he discovers in Mark begins to undermine even his own sense of self.

Meanwhile, Mark, armed only with a note left by an anonymous witness, attempts to learn what happened on the night of his accident. The truth of that evening will change the lives of all three beyond recognition.

Set against the spectacular spring migrations of American Sandhill cranes, *The Echo Maker* is a profound and riveting novel that explores how memory, instinct and relationships make us who we are.

About the Author

Richard Powers is the author of nine novels, including *Galatea 2.2* and *The Gold Bug Variations*, both of which were nominated for the US National Book Critics Circle Award; *Operation Wandering Soul*, which was nominated for the US National Book Award for Fiction; *Plowing the Dark*; *Gain*; and, most recently, *The Time of Our Singing*, winner of the WH Smith Literary Award. *The Echo Maker* won the US National Book Award in 2006. Richard Powers lives in Illinois.

Also by Richard Powers

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance

Prisoner's Dilemma

The Gold Bug Variations

Operation Wandering Soul

Galatea 2.2

Gain

Plowing the Dark

The Time of Our Singing

RICHARD POWERS

The Echo Maker

VINTAGE BOOKS
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To find the soul it is necessary to lose it.
—A. R. Luria

PART ONE

I AM NO ONE

We are all potential fossils still carrying within our bodies the crudities of former existences, the marks of a world in which living creatures flow with little more consistency than clouds from age to age.

—Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*, “The Slit”

CRANES KEEP LANDING as night falls. Ribbons of them roll down, slack against the sky. They float in from all compass points, in kettles of a dozen, dropping with the dusk. Scores of *Grus canadensis* settle on the thawing river. They gather on the island flats, grazing, beating their wings, trumpeting: the advance wave of a mass evacuation. More birds land by the minute, the air red with calls.

A neck stretches long; legs drape behind. Wings curl forward, the length of a man. Spread like fingers, primaries tip the bird into the wind's plane. The blood-red head bows and the wings sweep together, a cloaked priest giving benediction. Tail cups and belly buckles, surprised by the upsurge of ground. Legs kick out, their backward knees flapping like broken landing gear. Another bird plummets and stumbles forward, fighting for a spot in the packed staging ground along those few miles of water still clear and wide enough to pass as safe.

Twilight comes early, as it will for a few more weeks. The sky, ice blue through the encroaching willows and cottonwoods, flares up, a brief rose, before collapsing to indigo. Late February on the Platte, and the night's chill haze hangs over this river, frosting the stubble from last fall that still fills the bordering fields. The nervous birds, tall as children, crowd together wing by wing on this stretch of river, one that they've learned to find by memory.

They converge on the river at winter's end as they have for eons, carpeting the wetlands. In this light, something saurian still clings to them: the oldest flying things on earth, one stutter-step away from pterodactyls. As darkness falls for real, it's a beginner's world again, the same evening as that day sixty million years ago when this migration began.

Half a million birds—four-fifths of all the sandhill cranes on earth—home in on this river. They trace the Central Flyway, an hourglass laid over the continent. They push up

from New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico, hundreds of miles each day, with thousands more ahead before they reach their remembered nests. For a few weeks, this stretch of river shelters the miles-long flock. Then, by the start of spring, they'll rise and head away, feeling their way up to Saskatchewan, Alaska, or beyond.

This year's flight has always been. Something in the birds retraces a route laid down centuries before their parents showed it to them. And each crane recalls the route still to come.

Tonight's cranes mill again on the braided water. For another hour, their massed calls carry on the emptying air. The birds flap and fidget, edgy with migration. Some tear up frosty twigs and toss them in the air. Their jitters spill over into combat. At last the sandhills settle down into wary, stilt-legged sleep, most standing in the water, a few farther up in the stubbled fields.

A squeal of brakes, the crunch of metal on asphalt, one broken scream and then another rouse the flock. The truck arcs through the air, corkscrewing into the field. A plume shoots through the birds. They lurch off the ground, wings beating. The panicked carpet lifts, circles, and falls again. Calls that seem to come from creatures twice their size carry miles before fading.

By morning, that sound never happened. Again there is only here, now, the river's braid, a feast of waste grain that will carry these flocks north, beyond the Arctic Circle. As first light breaks, the fossils return to life, testing their legs, tasting the frozen air, leaping free, bills skyward and throats open. And then, as if the night took nothing, forgetting everything but this moment, the dawn sandhills start to dance. Dance as they have since before this river started.

Her brother needed her. The thought protected Karin through the alien night. She drove in a trance, keeping to the long dogleg, south down Nebraska 77 from Siouxland, then west on 30, tracking the Platte. The back roads were impossible, in her condition. Still shattered from the telephone's stab at two a.m.: *Karin Schluter? This is Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney. Your brother has had an accident.*

The aide wouldn't say anything over the phone. Just that Mark had flipped over on the shoulder of North Line Road and had lain pinned in his cab, almost frozen by the time the paramedics found and freed him. For a long time after hanging up, she couldn't feel her fingers until she found them pressed into her cheeks. Her face was numb, as if *she* had been the one lying out there, in the freezing February night.

Her hands, stiff and blue, clawed the wheel as she slipped through the reservations. First the Winnebago, then the rolling Omaha. The scrub trees along the patchy road bowed under tufts of snow. Winnebago Junction, the Pow Wow grounds, the tribal court and volunteer fire department, the station where she bought her tax-free gas, the hand-painted wooden shingle reading "Native Arts Gift Shop," the high school—*Home of the Indians*—where she'd volunteer-tutored until despair drove her off: the scene turned away from her, hostile. On the long, empty stretch east of Rosalie, a lone male her brother's age in a too-light coat and hat—*Go Big Red*—tracked through the roadside drift. He turned and snarled as she passed, repelling the intrusion.

The suture of the centerline drew her downward into the snowy black. It made no sense: Mark, a near-professional driver, rolling off an arrow-straight country road that was as familiar to him as breathing. Driving off the road, in central Nebraska—like falling off a wooden horse. She toyed with the date: 02/20/02. Did it mean anything? Her

palms butted the wheel, and the car shook. *Your brother has had an accident.* In fact, he'd long ago taken every wrong turn you could take in life, and from the wrong lane. Telephone calls coming in at awful hours, as far back as she could remember. But never one like this.

She used the radio to keep herself awake. She tuned in to a crackpot talk-radio show about the best way to protect your pets from water-borne terrorist poisonings. All the deranged, static voices in the dark seeped into her, whispering what she was: alone on a deserted road, half a mile from her own disaster.

What a loving child Mark had been, staffing his earthworm hospital, selling his toys to stave off the farm foreclosure, throwing his eight-year-old body between their parents that hideous night nineteen years ago when Cappy took a loop of power cord to Joan. That was how she pictured her brother, as she fell headlong into the dark. The root of all his accidents: too caring by half.

Outside Grand Island, two hundred miles down from Sioux, as the day broke and the sky went peach, she glimpsed the Platte. First light glinted off its muddy brown, calming her. Something caught her eye, bobbing pearl waves flecked with red. Even she thought highway hypnosis, at first. A carpet of four-foot birds spread as far as the distant tree line. She'd seen them every spring for more than thirty years, and still the dancing mass made her jerk the wheel, almost following her brother.

He'd waited until the birds returned to spin out. He'd been a mess already, back in October, when she drove this same route for their mother's wake. Camping out with his beef-packing friends in the ninth circle of Nintendo hell, starting in on the six-packs for liquid brunch, fully loaded by the time he headed in to work on the swing shift. *Traditions to protect, Rabbit; family honor.* She hadn't had the will then, to talk sense to him. He wouldn't have heard

her, if she had. But he'd made it through the winter, even pulled himself together a little. Only for this.

Kearney rose up: the scattered outskirts, the newly extruded superstore strip, the fast-food grease trough along Second, the old main drag. The whole town suddenly struck her as a glorified I-80 exit ramp. Familiarity filled her with a weird, inappropriate calm. Home.

She found Good Samaritan the way the birds found the Platte. She spoke to the trauma doctor, working hard to follow him. He kept saying *moderate severity, stable, and lucky*. He looked young enough to have been out partying with Mark earlier that night. She wanted to ask to see his med school diploma. Instead she asked what "moderate severity" meant, and nodded politely at the opaque answer. She asked about "lucky," and the trauma doctor explained: "Lucky to be alive."

Firemen had cut him out of his cab with an acetylene torch. He might have lain there all night, confined against the windshield, freezing and bleeding to death, just off the shoulder of the country road, except for the anonymous call from a gas station on the edge of town.

They let her into the unit to see him. A nurse tried to prepare her, but Karin heard nothing. She stood in front of a nest of cables and monitors. On the bed lay a lump of white wrapping. A face cradled inside the tangle of tubes, swollen and rainbowed, coated in abrasions. His bloody lips and cheeks were flecked with embedded gravel. The matted hair gave way to a patch of bare skull sprouting wires. The forehead had been pressed to a hot grill. In a flimsy robin's-egg gown, her brother struggled to inhale.

She heard herself call him, from a distance. "Mark?" The eyes opened at the sound, like the hard plastic eyes of her girlhood dolls. Nothing moved, not even his eyelids. Nothing, until his mouth pumped, without sound. She leaned down into the equipment. Air hissed through his

lips, above the hum of the monitors. Wind through a field of ready wheat.

His face knew her. But nothing came out of his mouth except a trickle of saliva. His eyes pleaded, terrified. He needed something from her, life or death. "It's okay; I'm here," she said. But assurance only made him worse. She was exciting him, exactly what the nurses had forbidden. She looked away, anywhere but at his animal eyes. The room burned into her memory: the drawn curtain, the two racks of threatening electronic equipment, the lime sherbet-colored wall, the rolling table alongside his bed.

She tried again. "Markie, it's Karin. You're going to be all right." Saying it made a kind of truth. A groan escaped his sealed mouth. His hand, stuck with an IV tube, reached up and grabbed her wrist. His aim stunned her. The grip was feeble but deadly, drawing her down into the mesh of tubes. His fingers feathered at her, frantic, as if, in this split second, she might still keep his truck from wiping out.

The nurse made her leave. Karin Schluter sat in the trauma waiting room, a glass terrarium at the end of a long corridor smelling of antiseptics, dread, and ancient health magazines. Rows of head-bowed farmers and their wives, in dark sweatshirts and overalls, sat in the squared-off, padded apricot chairs alongside her. She figured them: *Father heart attack; husband hunting accident; child overdose*. Off in the corner, a muted television beamed images of a mountain wasteland scattered with guerrillas. Afghanistan, winter, 2002. After a while, she noticed a thread of blood wicking down her right index finger, where she'd bitten through her cuticle. She found herself rising and drifting to the restroom, where she vomited.

Later, she ate, something warm and sticky from the hospital cafeteria. At one point, she stood in one of those half-finished stairwells of poured concrete meant to be seen only when the building was on fire, calling back to Sioux City, the massive computer and home electronics company

where she worked in consumer relations. She stood smoothing her rumpled bouclé skirt as if her supervisor could see her over the line. She told her boss, as vaguely as she could, about the accident. A remarkably level account: thirty years of practice hiding Schluter truths. She asked for two days off. He offered her three. She started to protest, but switched at once to grateful acceptance.

Back in the waiting room, she witnessed eight middle-aged men in flannel standing in a ring, their slow eyes scanning the floor. A murmur issued from them, wind teasing the lonely screens of a farmhouse. The sound rose and fell in waves. It took her a moment to realize: a prayer circle, for another victim who'd come in just after Mark. A makeshift Pentecostal service, covering anything that scalpels, drugs, and lasers couldn't. The gift of tongues descended on the circle of men, like small talk at a family reunion. Home was the place you never escape, even in nightmare.

Stable. Lucky. The words got Karin through to midday. But when the trauma doctor next talked to her, the words had become *cerebral edema*. Something had spiked the pressure inside her brother's skull. Nurses tried cooling his body. The doctor mentioned a ventilator and ventricular drain. Luck and stability were gone.

When they let her see Mark again, she no longer knew him. The person they took her to the second time lay comatose, his face collapsed into some stranger's. His eyes wouldn't open when she called his name. His arms hung still, even when she squeezed them.

Hospital personnel came to talk to her. They spoke to her as if she were brain-damaged. She pumped them for information. Mark's blood alcohol content had been just under the Nebraska limit—three or four beers in the hours before rolling his truck. Nothing else noticeable in his system. His truck was destroyed.

Two policemen took her aside in the corridor and asked her questions. She answered what she knew, which was nothing. An hour later, she wondered if she'd imagined the conversation. Late that afternoon, a man of fifty in a blue work shirt sat down next to her where she waited. She managed to turn and blink. Not possible, not even in this town: hit on, in the trauma-unit waiting room.

"You should get a lawyer," the man said.

She blinked again and shook her head. Sleep deprivation.

"You're with the fellow who rolled his truck? Read about him in the *Telegraph*. You should definitely get a lawyer."

Her head would not stop shaking. "Are you one?"

The man jerked back. "Good God, no. Just neighborly advice."

She hunted down the newspaper and read the flimsy accident account until it crumbled. She sat in the glass terrarium as long as she could, then circled the ward, then sat again. Every hour, she begged to see him. Each time, they denied her. She dozed for five minutes at a shot, propped in the sculpted apricot chair. Mark rose up in her dreams, like buffalo grass after a prairie fire. A child who, out of pity, always picked the worst players for his team. An adult who called only when weepy drunk. Her eyes stung and her mouth thickened with scum. She checked the mirror in the floor's bathroom: blotchy and teetering, her fall of red hair a tangled beadcurtain. But still presentable, given everything.

"There has been some reversal," the doctor explained. He spoke in B waves and millimeters of mercury, lobes and ventricles and hematomas. Karin finally understood. Mark would need surgery.

They slit his throat and put a bolt into his skull. The nurses stopped answering Karin's questions. Hours later, in her best consumer-relations voice, she asked again to see him. They said he was too weakened by the procedures.

The nurses offered to get something for her, and Karin only slowly realized they meant medication.

"Oh, no thanks," she said. "I'm good."

"Go home for a while," the trauma doctor advised. "Doctor's orders. You need some rest."

"Other people are sleeping on the floor of the waiting room. I can get a sleeping bag and be right back."

"There's nothing you can do right now," the doctor claimed. But that couldn't be; not in the world she came from.

She promised to go rest if they let her see Mark, just for a moment. They did. His eyes were still closed, and he responded to nothing.

Then she saw the note. It lay on the bed stand, waiting. No one could tell her when it had appeared. Some messenger had slipped into the room unseen, even while Karin was shut out. The writing was spidery, ethereal: immigrant scrawl from a century ago.

I am No One
but Tonight on North Line Road
GOD led me to you
so You could Live
and bring back someone else.

A flock of birds, each one burning. Stars swoop down to bullets. Hot red specks take flesh, nest there, a body part, part body.

Lasts forever: no change to measure.

Flock of fiery cinders. When gray pain of them thins, then always water. Flattest width so slow it fails as liquid. Nothing in the end but flow. Nextless stream, lowest thing above knowing. A thing itself the cold and so can't feel it.

Body flat water, falling an inch a mile. Torso long as the world. Frozen run all the way from open to close. Great

oxbows, age bends, lazy delayed *S*, switch current to still as long as possible the one long drop it already finishes.

Not even river, not even *wet brown slow west*, no now or then except in now and then rising. Face forcing up into soundless scream. White column, lit in a river of light. Then pure terror, peeling into air, flipping and falling, anything but hit target.

One sound gets not a word but still says: *come*. Come with. Try death.

At last only water. Flat water spreading to its level. Water that is nothing but into nothing falls.

She checked into one of those crane-tourist places off the interstate. It seemed to have just fallen off the back of a truck. They gouged her for a room. But she was close to the hospital—all that mattered. She stayed one night, then had to find something else. As next of kin, she qualified for the shelter house a block from the hospital, a hostel subsidized with the pocket change of the world's largest global fast-food cartel. The Clown House, she and Mark had called it, back when their father was dying of fatal insomnia four years before. It had taken the man forty days to die, and at the last, when he finally agreed to go to the hospital, their mother sometimes stayed overnight at the Clown House to be near him. Karin could not face that memory, not now. Instead, she drove to Mark's place, half an hour away.

She navigated out to Farview, where Mark had bought a catalog house just months after their father's death with his portion of the meager inheritance. She got lost and had to ask for directions to River Run Estates from the Walter Brennan impersonator at the Four Corners Texaco. Psychological. She'd never wanted Mark living there. But after Cappy died, Mark listened to no one.

At last she found the modular Homestar, the pride of Mark's adulthood. He'd bought it just before starting as a Maintenance and Repair Technician II at the meat packing plant in Lexington. The day Mark wrote the down-payment check, he ran around town celebrating as if he'd just gotten engaged.

A fresh loop of dog shit welcomed her inside the front door. Blackie cowered in the living room corner, whimpering in guilty confusion. Karin let the poor creature out and fed her. In the postage-stamp yard, the border collie reverted to herding things—squirrels, snow motes, fence posts—anything to convince the humans that she was still worthy of love.

The heat was down. Only her brother's habit of never completely shutting off a tap had kept the pipes from bursting. She scooped the cone of shit into the frosty yard. The dog crept up to her, willing to make friends, but wanting first to know Mark's whereabouts. Karin lowered herself to the stoop and pressed her face into the frozen railing.

Shivering, she went back inside. She could ready the house for him, at least: cleaning that hadn't been done in weeks. In what her brother called the family room, she straightened the stacks of truck-customization and cheesecake magazines. She gathered scattered discs and stacked them behind the paneled bar that Mark, with limited success, had installed himself. A poster of a girl in a black leather bikini slung over a vintage truck's hood sagged off the bedroom wall. Disgusted, she tore it down. Only when she looked at the scraps in her hands did she see what she'd done. She found a hammer in the utility closet and tried to tack the poster back up, but it was too torn. She threw it in the bin, cursing herself.

The bathroom was a science-fair project in full bloom. Mark had no cleaning supplies except pipe cleaners and Black Leather Soap. She searched the kitchen for vinegar

or ammonia, but found nothing more solvent than Old Style. Under the sink, she turned up a rag-filled bucket with a can of scouring powder that thumped when she lifted it. She twisted the lid and it popped open. Inside was a packet of pills.

She sat down on the kitchen floor and cried. She considered heading back to Sioux City, cutting her losses and resuming her life. She picked at the pills, her fingers flipping them. Dollhouse accessories or sports equipment: white plates, red barbells, tiny purple saucers with unreadable monograms. Who was he hiding them from, down there, besides himself? She thought she recognized the local favorite: Ecstasy. She'd taken some once, two years ago in Boulder. Had spent the evening mind-merging with friends and hugging perfect strangers. Numb, she held a pill and rubbed it against her sagging tongue. She tore it away and fed the whole stash down the disposal. She let the yipping Blackie back inside. The dog nosed around her calves, needing her. "It's all right," she promised the creature. "Everything's going to be back again, soon."

She moved on to the bedroom, a museum of cows' teeth, colored minerals, and hundreds of exotic bottle caps mounted on homemade stands. She inspected the closet. Alongside the mostly dark denim and corduroy, three grease-stained jumpsuits with the IBP logo hung on a hook above his caked work boots, the ones he wore every day, heading to the slaughter. The thought sliced through her: things she should have handled the day before. She phoned the plant. Iowa Beef Processors: *World's largest supplier of premium beef, pork, and allied products*. She got an automated menu. Then another. Then chirpy music, then a chirpy person, then a croaky person who kept calling her *ma'am*. Ma'am. Somewhere along the line, she'd become her own mother. A personnel counselor walked her through the steps to start Mark's disability. For the hour it took to

transact the forms, she felt the release of being useful. The pleasure of it burned.

She called her own employers, up in Sioux. They were a big outfit, the third-largest computer vendor in the country. Years ago, in the early days of the PC clone boom, they'd broken out of the pack of identical mail-order vendors on the simple gimmick of running herds of Holsteins in their ads. Mark had laughed at her when she'd dragged back to Nebraska from Colorado and got a job with them. *You're going to work complaints for the Cow Computer Company?* She couldn't explain. After years of what she'd thought of as career advancement—graduating from phone receptionist in Chicago to ad-copy saleswoman for trendy trade magazines in Los Angeles, progressing to right-hand woman and finally company face for two dot-com entrepreneurs in Boulder who were going to make millions with an online world where people could develop rich alter egos, but who ended up suing each other—she'd slammed back down to earth. Past thirty, she had no more time or pride to risk on ambition. Nothing wrong with honest gruntwork for a secure company that lacked all pretension. If her fate lay in consumer relations, she would relate to consumers as expertly as humanly possible. In fact, she'd discovered a hidden aptitude for complaint-handling. Two e-mails and fifteen minutes on the phone, and she could convince a customer ready to firebomb the outfit that she and her multi-thousand-employee firm wanted nothing more than the man's lifelong friendship and respect.

She couldn't explain to her brother or anyone: status and satisfaction meant nothing. Competence was all. At long last, her life had stopped misleading her. She had a job she performed well, a new one-bedroom condo near the river in South Sioux, even a nice little shared nervousness with a friendly mammal in tech support that threatened to turn into a relationship any month now. Then this. One phone call, and reality found her out again.

No matter. Nothing in Sioux needed her. The one that really needed her lay in the hospital, on a dark island, with no other family to look out for him.

She reached her office manager, smoothing her hair as he came on the line. He looked up her vacation days and said she could stay out until a week from the coming Monday. As self-effacingly as she could, she explained that she wasn't sure that would be enough. It probably had to be enough, her manager said. She thanked him, apologized again, hung up, and returned to more furious cleaning.

With only dish soap and paper towels, she brought Mark's place back to livable. She studied herself in the bathroom mirror as she cleaned the spatter-spots: a thirty-one-year-old professional soother, three and a half pounds overweight with red hair eighteen inches too long for her age, desperate for something to fix. She could rise to this. Mark would be back soon, gleefully respattering the mirror. She would return to Cow Computer country, where people respected the work she did and only strangers asked her for help. She smoothed her dry cheeks back toward her ears and slowed her breathing. She finished the sink and tub, then went out to the car and checked her backpack: two pullovers, a pair of twill slacks, and three changes of underwear. She drove out to the Kearney outlet strip and bought a sweater, two pairs of jeans, and some moisturizer. Even that much tempted fate.

I am No One, but Tonight on North Line Road ... She asked around the trauma unit about the note. By all accounts, it had simply appeared on the bedside stand shortly after Mark's admission. A Hispanic clerical nurse with an elaborate crucifix necklace studded with turquoise boulders insisted that no one but Karin and hospital personnel had been allowed to see him for the first thirty-six hours. She produced the paperwork to prove it. The

nurse tried to confiscate the slip of paper, but Karin refused to surrender it. She needed it for Mark, when he came to.

They moved him from trauma to a room where she could sit with him. He lay stretched on the bed, a felled mannequin. Two days later, he opened his eyes for half a minute, only to squeeze them shut. But they opened again, at dusk that evening. Over the next day, she counted six more eye openings. Each time, he looked out on some living horror film.

His face began moving like a rubber costume mask. His unplugged gaze sought her out. She sat at bedside, slipping on scree at the lip of a deep quarry. "What is it, Mark? Tell me. I'm here."

She begged the nurses for something to do, anything, however small, that might help. They gave her special nylon socks and basketball high-tops to put on Mark and remove again, every few hours. She did this every forty minutes, massaging his feet as well. It kept his blood circulating and prevented clots. She sat at bedside, squeezing and kneading. Once, she caught herself sub-vocalizing her old 4-H pledge:

my Head to clearer thinking,
my Heart to greater loyalty,
my Hands to larger service,
and my Health to better living ...

as if she were back in high school and Mark were her project for the county fair.

Larger service: she'd looked for it her whole life, armed with nothing more than a bachelor's in sociology from UNK. Teacher's aide on the Winnebago reservation, volunteer at homeless feeding stations in downtown L.A., pro bono clerical worker for a law firm in Chicago. For the sake of a prospective boyfriend in Boulder, she'd even briefly served as street demonstrator in antiglobalization

marches, chanting out the protests with a zeal that could not mask her profound sense of silliness. She would have stayed home forever, given herself to keeping her family intact, had it not been for her family. Now the last other member of it lay next to her, inert, unable to object to her services.

The doctor put a metal tap in her brother's brain, draining it. Monstrous, but it worked. The pressure in his skull dropped. The cysts and sacs shrank. His brain now had all the room it needed. She told him as much. "All you need to do now is heal."

Hours went by in a heartbeat. But the days stretched out without end. She sat by the bed, cooling his body with special chilling blankets, taking off his shoes and putting them on again. All the while, she spoke to him. He never showed any hint of hearing, but she kept talking. The eardrums still had to move, the nerves behind them ripple. "Brought you some roses from the IGA. Aren't they pretty? They smell good, too. The nurse is changing the empties on the drip again, Markie. Don't worry; I'm still here. You've got to get up and see the cranes this year, before they go. They're out of this world. I've never seen so many of them. Coming into town in packs. Bunch of them landed on the roof of the McDonald's. They're up to something. Jeez, Mark. Your feet are ripe. They smell like a bad Roquefort."

Smell my feet. Her ritual punishment for any transgression, starting the year he passed her in strength. She smelled his stagnant body again, for the first time since they were children. Roquefort and curdled puke. Like the feral kitten they found hiding under the porch when she was nine. Sweet-sour, like the forest of mold on the slice of moist bread Mark left in a covered dish on top of the furnace vent in fifth grade, for a science fair, and forgot about. "We'll draw you a good bubble bath when you get home."

She told him about the stream of visitors to his comatose neighbor's bed: women in smock dresses; men in white shirts and black trousers, like 1960s Mormons on their missions. He took in all her stories, stonelike, his smallest face muscles stilled.

In week two, an older man came into the shared room wearing a puffy coat that made him look like a shiny blue Michelin man. He stood at the bed of Mark's unconscious roommate, shouting. "Gilbert. Boy? You hear me? Wake up, now. We don't have time for such foolishness. That's enough, hear. We got to get on back home." A nurse came to check on the commotion and led the protesting man away. After that, Karin stopped speaking to Mark. He didn't seem to notice.

Dr. Hayes said that the fifteenth day was the point of no return. Nine-tenths of closed-head trauma victims who came back came back by then. "The eyes are good news," he told her. "His reptilian brain is showing nice activity."

"He has a reptile brain?"

Dr. Hayes smiled, like a doctor in an old public health film. "We all do. A record of the long way here."

Clearly he wasn't from around these parts. Most locals hadn't come the long way. Both Schluter parents believed evolution was Communist propaganda. Mark himself had his doubts. *If all the millions of species are constantly evolving, how come we're the only ones who got smart?*

The doctor elaborated. "The brain is a mind-boggling redesign. But it can't escape its past. It can only add to what's already there."

She pictured those mangled Kearney mansions, glorious old wooden Victorians enlarged with brick in the 1930s and again in the 1970s with pressboard and aluminum. "What's his reptile brain ... doing? What kind of nice activity?"

Dr. Hayes reeled off names: medulla, pons, midbrain, cerebellum. She copied the words into a tiny spiral

notebook where she recorded everything, to look up later. The neurologist made the brain sound more rickety than the old toy trucks Mark used to assemble from discarded cabinet parts and sawn-off detergent bottles.

“What about his higher ...? What’s above reptile—some kind of bird?”

“The next higher structure is the mammalian.”

Her lips moved as he talked, assisting. She couldn’t help it. “And my brother’s?”

Dr. Hayes grew guarded. “That’s harder to say. We don’t see any explicit damage. There is activity. Regulation. The hippocampus and amygdala seem intact, but we did see some spiking in the amygdala, where some of the negative emotions, like fear, start.”

“You’re saying my brother is *afraid*?” She waved off the doctor’s reassurances, thrilled. Mark was feeling. Fear or anything: it didn’t matter. “What about his ... human brain? The part above the mammal?”

“He’s piecing himself back together. Activity in his prefrontal cortex is struggling to synchronize into consciousness.”

She asked Dr. Hayes for every pamphlet the hospital had on head injury. She underlined all the hopeful suggestions in green fine-line marker. *The brain is our last frontier. The more we learn about it, the more we see how much more there is to know.* The next time she met Dr. Hayes, she was ready.

“Doctor, have you considered any of the new head-injury treatments?” She scrambled in her shoulder bag for her little spiral notebook. “Neuroprotective agents? Cerestat? PEG-SOD?”

“Wow. I’m impressed. You’ve done your homework.”

She tried to look as competent as she wanted him to be.

Dr. Hayes steepled his fingers and touched them to his lips. “Things happen fast in this field. PEG-SOD has been

discontinued, after poor results in a second Phase III trial. And I don't think you want cerestat."

"Doctor." Her client-relations voice. "My brother is struggling to open his eyes. You say he may be terrified. We'll take anything you can give him."

"All research on cerestat—Aptiganel—has been halted. A fifth of all patients taking it have died."

"But you have other drugs, don't you?" She looked down at her notebook, trembling. At any moment, her hands would turn to doves and fly away.

"Most are still in the early testing. You'd have to be in a clinical trial."

"Aren't we, already? I mean ..."

She waved toward her brother's room. In the back of her mind, she heard the radio jingle: *Good Samaritan Hospital ... the largest medical facility between Lincoln and Denver.*

"You'd have to change hospitals. Go where they're running the studies."

She looked at the man. With proper grooming, he could be the advice doctor on breakfast television. If he saw her at all, it was only as a complication. He probably found her pathetic, in every measurable way. Something in her reptilian brain hated him.

Rises up in flooded fields. There is a wave, a rocking in the reeds. Pain again, then nothing.

When sense returns, he is drowning. Father teaching him to swim. Current in his limbs. Four years old, and his father floating him. Flying, then flailing, then falling. His father grabbing his leg, pulling him under. Holding him beneath the surface, stiff hand pressing down his head until all bubbles stop. *River will bite, boy. Be ready.*

But there is no *bite*, no *ready*. There is only *drown*.

There comes a pyramid of light, burning diamonds, twisting fields of stars. His body threads triangles of neon, a tunnel rising. The water over him, his lungs on fire, and then he explodes upward, toward air.

Where his mouth was, just smooth skin. Solid swallows up that hole. House remodeled; windows papered over. Door no more a door. Muscles pull lips but no space to open. Wires only, where words were. Face bent wrong and folded up into its own eyes. Slipped in a metal bed, the hell he must be in. His smallest move a pain worse than dying. Maybe death is done already. Done all ways, in one tip of his life and lifting. Who'd want to live after such a fall?

A room of machines, the space he can't reach. Something splits out from him. People move in and smooth away too fast. Faces push up to his mouthless face, pushing words into him. He chews them and puffs sound back. Someone says be patient, but to not him. *Be patient, be a patient* is what he must be.

This may be days. No saying. Time flaps about, wings broken. Voices pass, some circle back, but one's as close to always there as there is. A face almost his face, so close it wants something of him, if only at least words. That face a she and like water weeping. Nothing she is will say what happened.

One need tries to tear out of him. Need to say, more than the need to be. If a mouth, then all would be out. Then this she would know what happened, know his death wasn't what it seems.

Pressure fills, like fluid crushed. His head: endless pressure, buried already. Sap streams out of his inner ear. Blood out his gorged eyes. Killing pressure, even after all that seeps out of him. A million more schooling thoughts than his brain can hold.

A face hovers near, forming words on fire. Says *Mark, stay*, and he would die to make her stop keeping him alive. He pushes back against the thing collapsing him. Muscles

pull but skin won't move. Something slack. He works forever to winch the tendons in his neck. At last his head tilts. Later, lifetimes, lifts the edge of his upper lip.

Three words would save him. But all muscles can't free one sound.

Thoughts throb in a vein. Red pulses his eyes again, then that one white shaft shooting up from the black he blasted through. Something in the road he'll never reach now. Screaming up close as his life rolled. Someone here in this room, who will die with him.

The first word comes. It surfaces through a bruise wider than his throat. The skin grown over his mouth tears clear and a word forces through the bloody opening. *I*. The word hisses, taking so long she'll never hear. *I didn't mean*.

But words change to flying things as they hit the air.

Two weeks in, Mark sat up and moaned. Karin was at his bedside, five feet from his face. He buckled at the waist, and she screamed. His eyes twisted around and found her. Her scream turned into a laugh, then a sob, while his eyes twitched over her. She called his name, and the face underneath the tubes and scars flinched. Soon a raft of caregivers filled the room.

Much had happened underground, in the days he lay frozen. Now he poked out, like winter wheat through snow. He turned his head, craning his neck. His hands thrust out clumsily. His fingers picked at the invasive hardware. He hated most his gastric feeding tube. As his arms got better at clawing it, the nurses imposed soft restraints.

Now and then, something spooked him, and he thrashed to escape it. Nights were the worst. Once when Karin was leaving for the day, a wave of chemicals bucked through him and he surged upright, scrambling almost to his knees

on his hospital bed. She had to wrestle him down to keep him from tearing out his hoses.

She watched him return, hour by hour, as in some grim Scandinavian film. Sometimes he gazed at her, weighing if she was edible or a threat. Once, a surge of animal sexuality, forgotten in the next moment. At times she was a crust he tried to brush from his eyes. He shot her that liquid, amused look he'd given her one night when they were teens, each of them crawling home from their respective assignments, drunk. *You, too? I didn't know you had it in you.*

He started vocalizing—groans muffled by the tracheotomy tube, a secret, vowel-free language. Every rasp lacerated Karin. She badgered the doctors to do something. They measured scar tissue and cranial fluid, listening to everything but his frantic gurgling. They swapped his trach tube for a fenestrated one, pierced with tiny holes, a window in Mark's throat wide enough for sounds to pass through. And every one of her brother's cries begged for something Karin couldn't identify.

He was back to how she'd first seen him, when she was four, staring down from the second-story landing on a lump of meat wrapped in a blue baby blanket her parents had just dragged home. Her earliest memory: standing at the top of the stairs, wondering why her parents bothered cooing over something far stupider than the outdoor cats. But she soon learned to love this baby, the greatest toy a girl could ask for. She hauled him around like a doll for a year until he finally took a few dazed steps without her. She jabbered at him, wheedled and bribed, kept crayons and bits of food just out of reach until he called for them by their real names. She'd raised her brother, while her mother was busy laying up treasures in heaven. Karin had gotten Mark to walk and talk once already. Surely, with help from Good Samaritan, she could do it twice.