

Cul-de-sac

What does a tiger do in the suburbs?

The question must begin with Alice, lonely Alice, sprawled across her paisley bed. She's opened her window because it's summertime in California, and out there, the whole world has thrown their windows open, too. They have forgotten that someone—she—might hear their beating hearts: the tinkle of forks on plates, heavy footsteps down a dim hallway, a television audience laughing. It is dark out, not quite black but purple, and in this dim, the crickets chirrup. In the distance unseen by Alice, palm trees sway hello, goodbye, but mostly they sway goodbye because lying face-up on her bed, Alice feels in her bones the impossibility of the distance beyond the rows of houses that are the neighborhood where she lives. She has trouble envisioning this beyond as a specific place because the house-rows go on forever. She imagines herself as a boat in the middle of an ocean. She closes her eyes and sees her little wind-whipped sail. Beyond is the thin place where the water falls into the sky.

She opens her eyes. A moth flies through her window and flings itself into her buttercup lights, *din, din, din*.

The swaying palms conduct this great orchestra of goodbye because she is only twelve years old, but Alice knows already that she and everyone else is grasping outwards and beyond themselves. Building houses and paving roads, but what does it matter? She is sure they'll never get there. Because this place, she feels, is as transient as hope, unpin-down-able and unspeakable, the electric current whizzing through the power lines swinging over them all, there one minute and gone the next—like the crickets—*goodbye, goodbye, goodbye*.

Of course, twelve-year-old Alice never meant to know these strange desires, but Precocious snuck into her

house one night and tiptoed around, hunchbacked and with fingernails down to his knees. He snuck into her father's lungs and lit them black and yellow. She felt him back there, behind the bandage on her father's chest. He held her hand over the fluffy gauze. *I'm sick, you see*, and Alice asked if he was dying. Her mother sniffled on the opposite end of the couch. *Of course not*, he said, but his voice wavered, and Alice knew the black thing inside his chest had spoken. The truth zapped her then. It ran from the top of her head down to her toes. She shivered. The truth zapped the floor beneath her feet, and she looked down and saw the earth split open. Inside was this awful, red-stinking gunk.

"They'll make medicine to save you," she said. Her father half-agreed.

Now she closes her bedroom door because her father's face is big as a soccer ball. The stent in his chest makes a strange outline in his T-shirts—a small box or a cupboard, Alice thinks. She closes her door and listens to the orchestra reaching beyond itself.

"Goodnight, princess," her father says from behind her door.

His oxygen tank rumbles, and the wheels of its case squeal down the hallway. Through the wall behind her bed, in her parents' bedroom, it rumbles still. Alice closes her eyes and puts her hands over her ears, but now the rumbling is the blood rushing round her head, *behind* her ears. She wills this wind away. The lightness of open window glass, the pot of gold at the craggy end of the world, the golden horse she imagines standing on the other side of the sky—she wishes for this to stay, if not materialize, please stay, because this light feeling in her chest—the crickets, the palms, the fork tines tinkling on plates—is flying away...away...there, it has flown.

"I'm doing what I can!" she hears, and she runs to her window because next door the yelling has begun.

It happens every night in Jakey's house. Jakey, who lives so close to Alice that she might reach beyond her window and touch the white stucco of his house if only

her arms were longer, and if only there wasn't the fence between them. She peers through the fence slats to catch something more than the yellow light shining through Jakey's bedroom window. She knows Jakey is behind that window. They were playing outside together once, throwing lawn darts at a bush, and she asked Jakey where he went when his parents fought. In my closet, he told her, or beneath my covers. But mostly my closet, he said, which he described as a little house—a four-walled cupboard, Alice corrected him, because a closet is small like a cupboard—and in my house, he said, I keep my pillow and my astronaut.

Alice imagined a house within a house, felt keenly her and Jakey's private lives hidden deep within the private lives around them, the furthestmost shelves in broken-hearted cupboards.

"Stop telling me I'm—" and then the windows rattle shut, one after another. The yelling rattles the windows. Alice can't hear the words but understands their meaning, *Ow, ow, ow*, like the cry of some wounded animal, and Jakey's dad is the wounded animal that cries out at night. In the daytime, he crawls out of his cave and performs strange acts. From the front-room windows, Alice watches him skip to the mailbox in black socks pulled to his knees. He overwaters the violets in the front yard, stands in puddles of muddy water singing strange songs: *Hey-ho, hey-ho, the Asians are on the radio*, Alice once heard, that gravelly voice coming like it was stuck in the bottom of its cave. Once came laughter loud as screaming. Alice ran out back, and there was Jakey's dad, burning a pile of furniture in his backyard.

"Don't worry, Jakey," Alice says. "Be brave."

She says this, even though her words mean nothing behind wood and stucco and glass. But Alice is twelve years old and Jakey is six, which means that Alice has grown up enough to know that believing you aren't alone is almost as good as being understood by something or someone. Yes, Alice feels this in her bones.

She crawls into bed and sends feeling-waves from her head to Jakey's. Waves that say, *I'm here, I hear.*

And then Alice falls asleep.

To sleep...

A low song comes to her while she's in bed: *Lions and lambs, lions and lambs, peanut butter, lions and lambs.* Cigarette-smell awakens her. She moves around beneath her sheets, to face the window. Her brass headboard tinkles. Out there, smoke curls to meet the moon. She hears the song coming like from the other side of the sky: *Lions and lambs, lions and lambs, peanut butter, lions and lambs.*

She shakes the sleep from her head. A window rattles open, rattles shut. *Shhh...* A voice says, *Come on, hurry up,* and Alice runs to her window. Through the fence slats a dark figure—darker than the dark of night—moves in front of Jakey's window. And then Jakey's voice rises over the fence.

Where are we going? he says, and the dark figure says, *Shhh,* and Jakey's head appears over the fence, swaying like a camel's toward the front yard.

"Jakey!" Alice whispers, but he is too far away to hear.

She runs to the living room. She bursts through the front door and stands on her front lawn, barefoot and in her nightgown. Jakey is sitting on his dad's shoulders. His dad is bent over and opening his car door with one hand; a briefcase hangs from the other. He squats down and tips forward. Jakey falls into the car. He giggles. Then Jakey's dad throws the briefcase in after Jakey and taps the car door shut. He runs to the other side of the car and gets in. The car rolls slowly down the driveway.

It's so quiet out, Alice can hear the blood inside her head. It happens slowly, impossibly. They could be moving underwater. The car disappears down the hill. Alice runs to stand in the middle of the street. From there, she looks down: the car's taillights disappear around a corner, two red eyes blinking, *where-where.*

Alice runs after them because he has his foot on the clutch, and his boy in the front seat, and they're coasting

down the hill—thank god they live on a hill, even if the hill is a little broke. He sees that now in his crazed clarity, but when they bought that house all those years ago, it had seemed like a dream to live on top of a California hill. Because going down a hill in stick-shift, he can be in stealth-mode, with his foot on the clutch and the engine off, and it's like him and his boy, Jakey, are finally freeing themselves of the past; because where he's from in Queens, New York, it snows black ice, and once upon a time, living on a hill in California meant snowless skies, clean sidewalks—to him, an unpatented kind of happiness. It meant he'd made it because he'd built something beautiful of his own with a good wife and a good boy, but isn't it true? Beautiful dreams disintegrate, whatever the hell beautiful dreams are. They coast down the hill, and he watches the speedometer: five, ten, fifteen—and the little track homes go by faster and faster in the dark. They pass the same houses again and again: the one with the withering crabapple tree beside the driveway and the sad violets beneath the window; the one with the circle window near the roof looking out onto the wide skies and sidewalks that unfurl into more of the patented same. So much of the same that they could be standing still, and in the back of his throat, he begins to feel that itchy sense of being stuck, resigned. He swallows the feeling away because he's made the choice to move past it, and the needle hits twenty, he lets go of the clutch, the car pops—*kaplowl!*—to a start.

“Me and you, Jakey!” he cries. He says: “Out there, Jakey—out there is something for me and you.”

“There's Alice,” Jakey says. He's standing on the seat, facing the rear window, this pile of kids' bones in saggy pajamas. “She was on the grass,” he laughs. “She's running after us in her pajamas.”

He grabs the bottom of Jakey's pants and pulls him down. He looks in the rearview mirror but sees only a vague fog in the distance.

“Sit down, Jakey,” he says. “Alice isn't out there.”

He pulls up Jakey's pants because the green planets of the boy's underwear are showing. He tries to light a cigarette, but his hands are shaking. He has to try a couple times before he hits the tip with the car lighter's fiery coils. He convinces himself he's shaking because he's gotten away with the first part—dressing in all-black like a cartoon robber and taking his boy into the cartoon night—not because he's scared he won't get away with what comes next: he has this grand plan to surprise Jakey (and the plan's amazing possibilities explode brightly in his mind), and he taps his fingers on the briefcase and chuckles. He catches himself and realizes he's acting like a Russian or a Jihadist. Pick your era, take your pick, *Yippee-kai-yaymotherfuckers!* He's about to show his boy that he's a hero.

"Why are you laughing?" Jakey asks.

He looks at his boy and winks. "Sometimes things get to be so good they're funny," he says.

"We're going fast," says Jakey.

He checks the speedometer: the needle lights up eighty. He presses down on the gas pedal because he wants to be the hero.

"We're speeding ahead like comets, huh?" he says. "*Kabloom, kablah!* Right, Jakey? But hey, you just slide way down in your seat there, and we'll get to go even faster."

Jakey slides down. From the corner of his eye, he watches his boy shake his head into the seats, *no-no*.

"Where-are-we-going?" Jakey asks, in time to each turn of his head.

He wishes he could explain why it has to be strange and in the middle of the night, but how does he explain to his boy they're chasing a feeling? One that runs from you when you call it, is lost when you need it. You've got to take charge and go after it. He takes a drag, and the tip of his cigarette glows for a moment, goes black. The smoke rising from his cigarette is that feeling, he decides, because unless you make it a point to try and snatch it,

you'll spend your life watching it float away. He reaches out and grabs the smoke.

"Trust your dad," he says.

They come to a red light. He looks both ways before he guns it through the intersection, keeping his hands at ten and two and the cigarette dangling from his mouth. He looks out every window because he worries the fog will turn red and blue. Or worse, materialize into Renee cops, crazy Renee cops who are both real cops and wife-cops, all of them trying to put a general damper on life. He hears Renee in his head: *You've lost your goddamn mind.*

But he hasn't lost anything. Instead, he's come to some realizations: that he's spent his life reaching in the wrong directions. The silhouette of a diving board against the sky takes him to the way-back, ghostly beyond. To memory: how they've accumulated and made what he is now, and he feels sorry about this. He's sorry he thought California was a beautiful beach because, of course, he ended up in the Central Valley, land of cows and sour-smelling pools. He's sorry he voted for Reagan; sorry he sells Amway and isn't very good at it. He's sorry he didn't realize he was sorry fifteen years ago—or that he was going to be feeling sorry fifteen years in the future. He's sorry about the whole damn thing because none of it's true. He's this lie. If he'd been braver and more honest he'd be living way up in a tree, surviving on chocolate-flavored insects. He'd have come up with ways to save the world: potable water, electricity-less light bulbs, a machine that takes fear and regret away, *buzz-buzz, beep-beep.*

He looks at Jakey down there in his seat and staring ahead. Once upon a time he was Jakey, scared and confused because the whole world was spinning out of control, on the verge of a wipe out. Watching television all day in the neighbor's house but really listening to his parents fighting on the other side of the wall. He escaped that and found this, but what is *this*? *This* is the puddle of

shimmering heat before the oasis. He sees the palms in his head, the ocean crashing over them.

Duh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh, he whispers. *Wipe-out.*

Jakey whispers along, too.

“That’s right, Jakey,” he says, “That’s the thing. You gotta be brave. If you’re brave, you’ll get to where you want to be, I swear you’ll get there, you’ll avoid the wipe-out. Right, kiddo?”

Jakey stops singing and looks out the passenger window.

He turns on the radio, dials to Art Bell’s *Coast to Coast*. People are calling in to tell Art about the crazy beautiful things they’ve seen: aliens and crop circles and bright lights stretching across the sky. From a tree house in Hawaii, Art Bell is listening and saying it’s possible.

“Believing in the big stuff everyone’s too scared to believe in,” he says. He points past the window glass. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Outside, a light flashes and lights up the car. He looks in the rearview mirror. The fog has risen. Technically it’s fallen, but it seems to be rising behind them, following close behind.

“Hey, Jakey,” he says. “Why don’t you sit way down, like on the floorboards down there, and wait till we’re ready. Just hang on, and I’ll tell you when we’re there.”

He points at the floor with his cigarette. The smoke makes pirouettes to the top of the car.

“Look at that,” he says. He nearly hits the curb.

They speed down the empty suburban streets. The streetlights they pass cast light and shadow over Jakey, so that his boy looks spiritual down there—in light one moment, in darkness the next—all alone, waiting to be filled with meaning. And right then, he sees himself in his boy, not in the usual way he’s seen himself in there before—the tender, sentimental late-at-night-on-the-pillow way that circles back to his own ineffable ego, or else the despairing way that makes him keenly aware of his failures—but in this new way that has more to do

with the circumstances of their lives than anything else: car wheels spinning round and round on asphalt driving everything back from the ineffable to the factual because there is his boy looking at him from thirty years in the past, and there he sits thirty years in the future. He feels himself starting to cry.

"I'm sorry," he says. He rubs his face with his jacket sleeve and turns onto the freeway.

"Why?" says Jakey.

He thinks about it. He's got to tell this story:

"You know your grandpa?" he says.

"No," says Jakey.

"Grandpa was an inventor. My dad. You know what an inventor does?"

"What?"

"They make stuff no one's thought of before. Think about it, Jakey. Someone invented this car we're driving in. They thought it up, they had this dream, and *poof*. Here it is." He takes his hands off the steering wheel to make the *poof*.

"What did Grandpa invent?"

"Well, he had a couple things cookin', you know. He had this thing for Velcro watch straps." He smokes his cigarette. "You see those things everywhere now."

He doesn't want to finish the story because his father was a kook, a deranged old man in plaid pants and a beak nose (he looks in the mirror to see if he has that beak nose), a man with dreams that materialized into a Lower East Side boarding house, canned food, and the hope that a chair could fold out into a toilet and a bed.

"Where's grandpa?" Jakey asks.

"He got old," he says. "And that's about it, kiddo. Sorry, it's not a good story. 'Cuz then your grandpa went to live somewhere and I never saw him much. I came out here. Hey," he says, pointing at Jakey's doll. "Your grandpa wanted to be an astronaut his whole life. Except he never got there. You know what I mean?"

He turns onto the freeway. In the dark, with the radio crackling about a wormhole in the sky, they speed past

yellow signs. And on those signs, shadow families run together, holding hands. A tall woman pulls two kids, her hair blowing behind her. They lean forward into the yellow and then past the yellow. They run into the dark night beginning to lighten now as they—all of them—tilt toward the sun. Toward something like hope, way up in the chest, like of being more than what you are or are doomed to be, to become what you want to be: a hero.

He veers into the rumble strip. Jakey falls into the door and begins to cry.

“I want to go home,” he says.

“But we’re about to see something amazing, Jakey,” he says. “Do you believe me? Do you promise to believe me?” he says while his boy watches from down on the floor. All these lights going by—the street ones, the traffic ones, the gas station ones—land on his dad’s face in shapes. There’s a triangle on dad’s chin and a bar on his nose, and they’re rolling across him like they’re coming out some little rolling machine, *buzz buzz, beep beep*. He’s scared ‘cuz his dad doesn’t feel the *buzz buzz beep beep*. ‘Cuz he’s looking straight ahead, real still, the little ball in his throat going up and down, *wee-oooh, wee-oooh*, Jakey sings along to it and makes a song. What’s out there in the straight-ahead? He stretches his neck till his throat hurts. Out the window, there’s nothing, just the sky looking dirty and the spider-arm streetlights. He crawls onto the seat to look out the front window. Straight ahead it’s real dark, and they’re driving—*kabloom!* his dad says—into dark and dark. He feels all-of-a-sudden not sure. His heart gets stuck in his throat, and he feels kind of like throwing up ‘cuz his dad is taking them into the black and looking serious about it, like the black is the thing, and the black is forever.

His dad says to trust him, but he can’t trust anything about the black. He tries to touch the briefcase on the seat.

“Remember how fast we’ll go if you stay down there?” his dad says. “Remember?”

He slides to the floor. He guesses there's Amway inside the briefcase, like vitamins and toilet paper—their whole house is vitamins and toilet paper—but he's got this feeling there's something else. He's feeling too scared to ask. Down on the floor, he finds some tiny rocks rolling around, and he presses them into his palms. The rocks make bright, red shapes that hurt. The hurt takes the fear away. When it hurts too much, he puts his astronaut against his knees and stares at it for a long time. He wants to bring the astronaut to life, to find some feeling in its face because if the astronaut is scared like him, then he's not alone. It would be easier to be brave, he decides, if the astronaut let him know that the two of them, together, could be brave. Nothing happens. His dad says his grandpa wanted to be an astronaut, and he hides the doll under the seats because he thinks he sees his grandpa in the astronaut, looking at him with old dead-person eyes from a hundred years away.

His dad asks him why he did it.

"I hate dolls," he says. He means it.

Now he's alone but okay. That astronaut was scary. He kicks his feet against the car and remembers Alice running after them in her nightgown. It's cold, and he's sure Alice is cold. But then he's sure Alice doesn't care about cold 'cuz Alice is like a knight. She could walk through ice and fire if she wanted. She won't even get lost 'cuz Alice can't get lost. He wishes he was Alice or that Alice would come get him on a giant white-spotted horse and take him home, *clopclop*, because he's cold, and the radio is talking about people coming down from other planets. He sees monster teeth and old green hunchbacks shooting lasers out their eyes, *buzz-buzz, beep beep*. He says *beep* and scares himself.

I'm a knight, I'm a knight, I'm a knight, he thinks, but he knows he's not, that he'll never be. He looks up and out the window again because maybe something in the glass will come and say, *Okay*. He wants for a blue angel to come and take off her wings, and then it'll be his mom. That's even better than Alice; it's better than his dad.

Something appears that's darker than the sky, these fuzzy-topped trees waving hello, goodbye. He closes his eyes, and the palms stick in his mind before they *go by, go bye*.

He curls up on the floor and tries to sleep. The hot air feels good on his head. His dad changes the radio, and the radio sings, *Don't do me like that*. The car slows down. The tires pop, and the rocky goes *bump bump* beneath him. He tries to sleep, but he can't 'cuz he's scared something's gonna happen. He holds his breath and squeezes himself together. He makes himself stiff until he's sure nothing will get inside to hurt him, but then his whole body aches, and he has to let go. The fear comes again: like the world is gonna end, and his heart starts beating fast—not from volcanoes or explosions or earthquakes or the sky falling down in big pieces that'll send grass and parts of their arms in the air. It's more like the explosions are gonna happen inside them. He's sure. His heart goes *thump-thump-thump*.

"Almost there, kiddo," his dad says. Jakey sits up and holds himself tight against the car door.

Then everything gets quiet in his head because everything gets quiet in the car. But he doesn't know this yet—that it's quiet in the car—because he's too busy squeezing himself together. He hears a click and feels the cold creep up his pajamas. His dad's hands are on his arms.

"Come on, Jakey," he says.

He opens his eyes. Smoke comes out his dad's nostrils, and his head hangs above him. His dad looks like a dragon. The sky is purple-blue behind. Then those arms reach down and lift him up into the sky. The cold zaps his bones. His teeth chatter. His dad sets him down, and the rocks in the road hurt his feet.

"I'm cold," he says. He lets go of himself and starts to cry.

"It'll warm up real fast, Jakey," his dad says. He rubs him all over. "Don't cry, kiddo," he says, and he takes off his big jacket and sets it on Jakey's shoulders.

His knees buckle because the jacket is heavy. He shakes out of it and turns away. Across the big empty parking lot, there are the trees he knows as the crying trees and behind them the duck pond, and next to the duck pond the big gates that open up to Story Land. The zoo's on the other side. It's like every second he sees all this clearer because the sky is getting light, getting lighter. He wants to go over there, but he's scared because if he does, it'll be the end, *kaplow*.

"Put on the jacket, Jakey," his dad says, lifting the coat off the ground. He reaches in the car for the briefcase.

Jakey shakes his head. He doesn't need his dad's coat to be brave. His teeth chatter.

His dad takes his hand and pulls him across the parking lot. The rocks bite the bottom of Jakey's feet. The hurt makes it hard to cry, to even feel scared. The closer he gets to the gates, the more he hears the *caws* and *woots* coming down from the other side of the sky.

They get to the sidewalk, where it doesn't hurt to walk. He lets go of his dad's hand and runs to the big front gate because he sees what he knows: The Simple Pieman's pie rising over the bushes. He lifts himself on his toes because he wants to see the three pigs in their house.

"We're going in?" he cries. He says it again. His dad is knocking on the little ticket booth, *knock-knock-knock*. The blinds are over the window like no one's home.

"No one's home?" Jakey asks.

"Just checking to make sure no one's home," his dad says, and he walks away like he's going to the car except he turns toward the crying trees and the ducks. He walks way over there. Jakey runs after. The soft grass feels good, and now he's feeling good and brave because how can anything bad happen in this place he knows and understands? Nothing bad has happened yet. He picks a stick up off the ground and bangs it against the fence. *Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!!!*

The ground is a little wet, and the wet numbs his toes, but the numb feels okay, like a non-feeling, maybe, not

too bad and not too good. His toes are bright red. He's wriggling them like worms when he runs into the back of his dad's legs, *bam*.

His dad's looking at the fence, laughing, with his hands on his hips. Because the fence has shrunk to rusty metal bars with spiked wire wrapped around. They've come to some end with wire like sharp teeth. His dad puts his foot on the wires and holds them down.

"All right," he says. "Go on under, Jakey."

He gets that bad feeling again, of the world about to end inside them. Except now it's worse 'cuz his dad's turned them upside down and around. He looks at Jakey like what happens next is up to him—little, sad, not-brave Jakey.

"Go on, Jakey," his dad says.

He shakes his head. He looks behind him, to back there, to where?

He turns around. His dad is on his stomach sliding beneath the fence. He stands up on the other side and wipes the dirty wet off his pants. "See that?" he says. "Magic."

He squeezes himself together. He closes his eyes and slides under, toward his dad. He stands up muddy on the other side and keeps his eyes closed. When he understands his hands and head are still connected to himself and not sitting on the grass, he opens them. He's standing on top of a little wet hill. Down below is the zoo. The animals cry *woot-caw-woot*. The sky's getting lighter. This place isn't scary shapes but actual things: a squirrel running to hide way up in a tree; his dad walking down the hill with his briefcase, to stand in front of a rose-colored wall. The grass is almost as tall as Jakey, and he runs all around in it. He kicks at a coke can; he tries to catch a flower in a tree. He hears the long sound of his dad calling to him, *heeyyoooo*. He's waving. Jakey runs down the hill like something's pushing behind him, like if he doesn't get down there quick, the burning, good feeling will go away forever.

His dad lifts him up and sits him on the wall.

“You see that down there, son?” he says.

Jakey turns his head to look. Down there is walking a beautiful tiger, back and forth between two trees.

“Yeah,” Jakey says.

His dad puts his briefcase on the wall. He pops it open. Inside is a jar of peanut butter, a jar of jelly, a loaf of bread. This shiny little knife.

Jakey breathes through his mouth at the strangeness of it all.

“You hungry?” his dad asks.

He shakes his head.

“What about him?”

Jakey looks at the tiger down there, walking. He wonders what it’s thinking. What it wants? There’s that turnaround thing again, and because he doesn’t want to do the wrong thing, he says, “Maybe.” He thinks about it—he squeezes himself together—and says, “Yes.”

His dad clicks shut the briefcase. He’s holding a sandwich. Jakey looks at his dad—stopping for a second at the *wee-oohh* of his Adam’s apple, not so much going *wee-oohh* now as *whoa, whoa, whoa*—and his dad looks at him, too, like he’s trying to figure something out.

What? Jakey wishes he understood, he wants to understand. His dad winks.

And then he leans way down over the wall and dangles the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from his shaky hand. “*Tiiiiitiger*,” he calls. “*Tiiitiger*.”

The tiger’s not looking. He’s walking up and down like he doesn’t hear them, like he doesn’t care.

“What if he’s not hungry?” Jakey asks.

His dad keeps calling *Tiiitiger*, *tiiitiger*. Jakey turns away for a second ’cuz there’s this cluster of white clouds way up in the sky. Like the sun is hiding back there. He looks up there until his eyes hurt and then looks down at himself. He’s forgotten that he’s wearing his pajamas, and this seems kind of funny. His dad is calling *tiiitiger* and telling Jakey to say it, too, like *tiiitiger* is more than a word. His dad is up on his tiptoes, hanging way over the wall, crying *tiiitiger* all by himself. Jakey decides he doesn’t want

his dad to be crying all alone. He squeezes himself, lets himself go. He turns and calls over the wall, *Tiiiger, tiiiger*, too.

And would you believe what happens next: the tiger looks at them with his head to one side, kind of funny-like. Like he's saying, in a silly accent, *May I help you? Is there something that you need? "Tiiiger, tiiiger,"* he calls while his dad dangles the sandwich. The tiger walks away like he's forgotten something behind one of the trees. And then he turns around, real fast, and runs at Jakey and his dad. His dad drops the sandwich and pulls them both behind the wall.

Up there, the big orange ball of the sun rips through the sky. The tiger comes leaping over.

His dad is holding him so tight that Jakey can feel the heart through both their shirts, beating *badoom-badoom* to his own *thump-thump*. The tiger lands in front of them. He licks his two front paws. Then, he turns around to face them both. Jakey laughs. He's sure the tiger's saying, *Good morning, no problem!* He's sure the tiger's telling them something—*Hey, okay!—he must have told them something* 'cause never in the history of tigers has a tiger been posed the question: What does a tiger do in the suburbs? The question is more literal than existential. Where does a tiger go?

He has lived ten years behind that rose-colored wall, pacing back and forth, and doesn't it feel good to stretch his limbs into the unusual? The unknown. He passes the monkeys who are screaming something he can't understand. The ducks in the pond are squawking at each other. He walks up into a weedy hill and pokes around there for a while. He tries to eat an old coke can, but it must not taste very good because he paws it away. Up there in the weeds, he might be thinking about the old jungle country he came from—the stink of a crabapple tree in bloom might remind him of a Flame Tree—but he walks around the weeds like none of this matters. He is carefree and cool. He yawns. He is tiger-in-the-moment, tiger in the dew.

So it doesn't occur to him that the barbed-wire fence might be serendipitous. What does he care about serendipity? About fence? He's not escaping. He's walking, if tigers may be said to walk as opposed to saunter, pad, explore. He leaps over the fence to walk around the parking lot. He sniffs the air. He squints his eyes against the morning sun. He feels the sun against his back, and he walks around to find a shady place where he might lie until the sun goes down. He comes across a car—a strange metal-box-contraption, if tigers might be said to think in terms of metal and box and contraption, but the car casts no shadow, and he's too large to slip beneath. He sniffs the car tires before he pees on one of them.

He walks across the parking lot, down the road that becomes the freeway. Behind him, in the zoo, the animals are still crying. Some cry higher-pitched than others. The further he walks, the more distant the cries become until the sound of cars speeding along the freeway drowns the cries. And at this point, he might be thinking of something else from his past, and it might come to him like a song because the sound of car tires whizzing across asphalt could be the ocean touching the shore before it slides away. It is a fact that where he's from lies beside an ocean, but what does this memory mean? Assuming tigers remember. But whatever memories he might have fall away the moment he walks up the freeway ramp and onto the freeway because here he emerges in another country. This country wipes out the others. Ahead of him, another ocean spreads, this one a vast and blue smog. The smog drapes itself over the house-rows, enveloping them in velvety waves. *A million drops of houses turned into one vast ocean*, the tiger probably thinks because he stops at the end of the ramp and looks out for a long moment before he walks on.

He follows the freeway. He appears nonchalant, which gives him a kind of swagger. The situation is, he must realize, peculiar—or strange, weird, unnerving, unique—and maybe he is scared. Because now he's in the

middle of it. Cars speed dangerously past, their horns blaring. Cars stop mid-lane, their drivers gawking. He walks past them and sees their drivers' shocked faces in the window glass. In one window, he sees his own reflection, if this is even what he sees, if he understands that in the glass he sees *him* and on the other side of the glass he sees her, and yet they are superimposed on each other, and she is shocked and crying. Can he understand the shocked and crying, the hysterical shaking of the head?

The tiger cries out, too. The woman crawls into the depths of her car.

He walks on, but now he must notice that the world has gotten louder. Now the whizzing ocean-sound of the cars is replaced by mechanical screaming in the sky. He looks up. Two strange birds hover above—helicopters—and if he doesn't know their names he must feel what they are, that they have something to do with him, these strange and fearful things. And what can he do but walk? Up ahead, two cars collide in glass and steel. Glass flies in the air and lands at his feet. He steps on a shard. Immediately, he feels the pain of it in his paw. Because of course a tiger feels pain. He limps around the smoking cars ahead. Around him, people are saying, *My god, my god*, and he either hears this, or, *wa-wa, wa-wa*, but does it matter? Because they are both, to him—somehow—the same.

He limps off the freeway, near where Alice is trying to reach the distant place. She's run so far she's breathless. The bottoms of her feet sting, and they hurt so bad she cries. She's run far enough that she's confused about where she is, but she understands enough of her surroundings to feel like she's gone nowhere, like she's been running in a circle: everywhere are more houses like hers with wooden fences around their small backyards and clipped lawns, violets. She hopes her fast running will get her to the distant place she imagines Jakey and his dad to be. She's not sure where this is, but she needs to get there, too.

She turns a corner. She stops and gasps because the street is lit up red and blue. There are police cars all around, policemen hanging from the trees like monkeys. One of them is crying into a bullhorn, but Alice only hears an urgent, *wana-wana, wana-wana*. And in the middle of the street walks this giant tiger. The tiger is walking toward her. Alice can't move. She feels the baby hairs rising on her scalp. Her toes and teeth tingle. The tiger looks her in the eyes, and that look zaps through Alice, from foot to head, before it settles in her chest. This look that says, *Hey, little girl—I know what you mean*. And there the look knots itself around the part of her that knows it all already. It knots gold braids all around that part, makes it heavier but beautiful, this crazy-beautiful tinsel-gaudy-stupid rope that could wrap itself round and round the whole world.

"Step away from the road," comes a voice like God from the sky. "Young lady, you're in danger. Step away from the road." The helicopters chop the air above.

And there comes this pop and a hiss, and the tiger, still heading toward Alice, stops. In one gesture, the tiger's eyes widen and narrow, and he lifts himself on his back feet. He swipes the air above Alice's head; he makes this beautiful pirouette before he falls to the ground. Not dead, just asleep—*Snooze, snooze*, he says. And during this—for one brief moment—Alice reaches out her hand.