She curls her hand around the black of the receiver, her fingernails nearly scratching her face, smoothed and drawn and red and glossed. The blue vase matches the walls, tulips bloom in high contrast. Tulips. Tulips. He sweats. In the parking lot, he had heard the steady clacking of a woman's high heels against cement, coming closer and closer, but he had quickly out-paced the sound and turned a corner. The clacking had followed, making the turn as he had, he had turned, hazarded a glance, turned to see a woman, dark hair, eyes hidden by sunglasses, a black blouse opened loosely at the throat, khaki shorts. Stretching downward from those shorts–legs, long legs, all the way to the high heeled shoes. He'd felt a sudden and inexplicable fear, a fear focused on the V of her blouse, on a yellow tulip. He'd fled. Her arm stretches to the vase, her fingers coil around the stem, draw it from the vase. He had forgotten her by the end of the day. Later, he'd bumped into the woman from behind and he'd bent, instinctively, to the pavement to retrieve the tulip from the crush of feet. Yellow petals against the cool gray concrete. Her lips had parted. He'd flushed with terror and fled. She inhales luxuriously and offers him its scent. Her lips part to speak into the phone.

We used to drive the back roads at night, just driving because they were the only place we could go without the intrusion of parents or people. There was an air of mysticism about the whole area at night, certain places had different mystical events linked with them. There was a dirt road where we would sit and drink. That was the home of the corn monster. The road ran between two corn fields and strange things would happen that could only be explained by the supernatural. The apple orchard, the haunted house, and the covered bridge were all places that harbored strange beings as well. But that was all topped one night when we found this valley, a valley we never found again, though, believe me, we looked. As we drove down this valley, I began telling this story about school. It was like talking into a deep silence the way he sat there, staring out the windshield, still against the passing nightscape. When I paused, he began speaking, picking up my story where I left off, telling me events that happened to me when I was eight hundred miles away. Suddenly he stopped speaking. We looked at each other in mute apprehension, syncopation. The valley had come to an end and we were faced with a T in the road. We took the right because it was the direction home, but the road curved back and around, over a series of bridges with condemned signs. He began telling me about this dog he had when he was a kid and how he hated it. The windows were rolled down for the air, it was a warm night, and he had his elbow resting half out of the car as he went on about how awful this dog was. We were moving slowly, the road was bad, hardly a road at all with all the pot holes. Ahead, we saw a barn. Out of nowhere, a German shepherd lunged at his arm. I hit the gas, nearly blowing the springs out trying to outrun that dog over those holes. When we finally hit the pavement, we stopped for a moment to regroup. He was whiter than I'd ever seen a body. All he said was damn. That was it, damn. Not another word for the next two hours as we tried to find our way back to a road we recognized. In those two hours we must have seen six or eight dogs. Their eyes flashed red in the glare of the headlights. I was never so happy as when we got back to the city. I know it sounds like a dream, but that is what actually happened. I still drive out every summer, driving through the night, driving just to find that valley. But, you know, it's just disappeared.

He wakes alone in the bed, the room bathed in the hazy glow of four a.m. On the wall, mottled light from the window and the shadow of a tree blowing in the wind. For a moment, the shadow comforts him. It takes him back to when he was small, when the willow in the front yard caught the street lamp at night and whispered to the wall. The moment passes. This room, this light, this shadow disturb him. He is not in his childhood bed. This is her bed, fifty-four floors above the ground in a time when no willows grow. He falls to sleep again, taken by mottled nightmares, climbing one tree after another, falling from one tree after another, his father cutting one tree after another. The crack of splintering wood. Dead branches. How empty the house feels after such a razing, so stark, so lifeless. Branches ablaze in the night. He escapes though a window, escapes the cries of his parents and lies down on the basement floor, so cool, his head next to the drain. Water gushes up and carries him away. He wakes again, throws the covers from his body. The room is bathed in the hazy glow of four a.m. She reclines on the chaise, on the other side of the room. She is bathed in white as she speaks into the phone. She sees him rise, wide-eyed and startled. I am your guardian angel, she says, softly, into the phone. He sinks back into sleep, the terrors outside held at bay, while she clicks her nails in the hazy glow of four a.m.