

Start

~~as I chose a life for myself.~~ That close-twenty yards-and I can see the delicate latticework of the leaves, the texture of the soil, the browned needles beneath the pines. Twenty yards. Inside me, in my chest, I feel a terrible squeezing pressure. I try to smile, except I am crying.

At the rear of the boat Elroy Berdahl pretends not to notice. He holds a fishing rod in his hands, his head bowed to hide his eyes. He keeps humming a soft tune.

The little aluminum boat rocks softly beneath me. There is the wind and sky. I will myself overboard. I grip the edge of the boat and lean forward and think, *Now*.

I do try. It just isn't possible.

All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—I see a seven-year-old boy in a white cowboy hat and a Lone Ranger mask; I see a twelve-year-old Little League shortstop turning the

double play; I see my parents calling to me from the far shore, the American side; I see my brother and sister; the mayor, and all my old teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies. Like some weird sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines. Hotdogs and popcorn—a marching band playing fight songs. All my aunts and uncles are there, and Abraham Lincoln, and Saint George and beautiful Linda who died of a brain tumor back in the fifth grade, and several members of the United States Senate, a blind poet scribbling notes, LBJ and Huck Finn, the last surviving veteran of the American Civil War, and Gary Cooper.

I see faces from my distant future. My wife is there. My unborn daughter waves at me and my two sons hop up and down. There is a choir in bright purple robes. There is an audience to my life, a swirl of faces along the river, and I hear people scream at me, Traitor! Turncoat! Pussy!

I feel myself blush. I can't tolerate it. I can't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Canada has been a pitiful fantasy. Silly and hopeless. Right now, with the shore so close, I understand that I am not going to do what I should do. I am not swimming away from my hometown and my country and my life. The shore just twenty yards away and I can't make myself be brave.

It has nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it is. My crying is loud now. Loud hard crying.

Elroy Berdahl remains quite. He keeps fishing. He doesn't speak. He is simply there, like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he makes it real.

The old man pulls in his line, "Ain't biting."

He turns the boat back towards Minnesota.

End L

*[Tim climbs down and moves to in front of the desk.]*