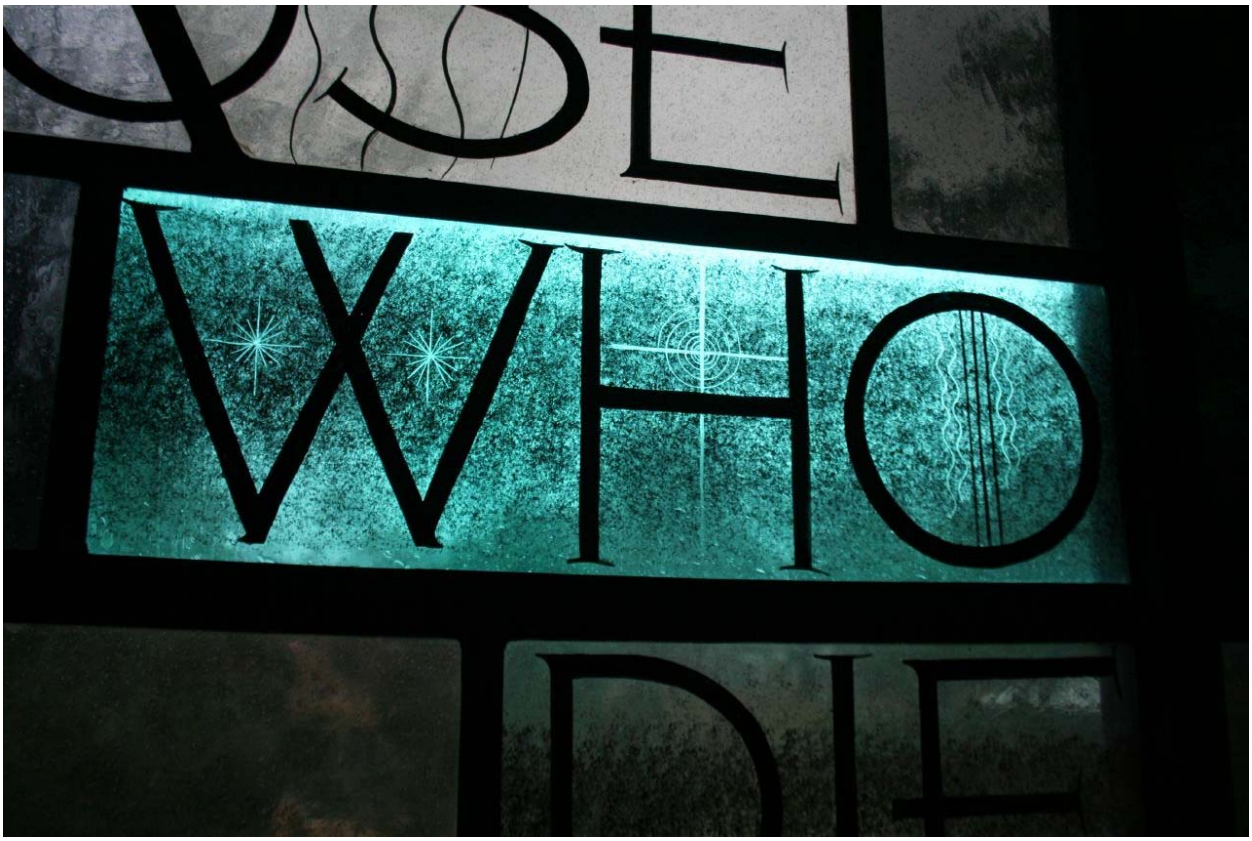
The Story of William



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The Story of William is the story of how my father ceased being my father. One could say my father became, instead, the father of this story, the Story of William. I do not hate this story for taking my father from me and making him its father. It is on account of the Story of William that the story of who I am could begin. Most of the stories that people claim to be their own are only continuations of their fathers' stories. One could maybe say that the Story of William is the father of my story. Throughout my life, I have made countless conjectures as to how my father came to cease being my father. A significant portion of the story of who I am is about how I came to invent the Story of William. I did this for myself. It is a collection of all my best guesses. The Story of William unfolds how I presume it must have happened, or how I presume it might have happened, or should have happened. I cannot demonstrate any part of it to be factual. I have not corresponded with my father. I am not in the Story of William, not at any point. Not even a telephone call. I am not bitter that it has to be this way. It is better that it is: without any solid, unmovable fact upon which to predicate the Story of William, I am left unhindered to imagine my father doing whatever I like. Just as he, unhindered by his obligation to my brother, my mother and me, is free to do or imagine for himself whatever he likes. When I see my father in a dream, it is never just a dream of my father. It is my true and real father speaking to me in the dream and embracing me. It is he every time because it cannot be anyone else, even though who my father is in the dream—that is, his appearance and manner—often changes. I normally don't recognize the faces but that does not matter. There is no one my father couldn't be.

The Story of William could start, though it needn't have to, with my father driving through a wall of South Minnesota darkness. Headlights from the opposite lane will strobe over his face. His skin will be sallow and papery because of age and smoking. I imagine my father's hair to be thinning about the forehead, just as mine is beginning to do. He will nod in and out of sleep as he drives because he has resolved not to drink coffee. My father will understand that he has difficulty sleeping in hotel rooms

and that coffee would exacerbate the problem. My father will know that he sleeps best in his own bed, the bed he shares with my mother. Our home back then was in the western suburbs of Chicago. On the night that the Story of William begins my father is away doing outside sales calls. He was a sales representative for several HVAC manufacturers and traveled in the hilly region surrounding the Mississippi River, selling parts. On this night, my father will drive to Rochester, Minnesota and stay at a chain hotel outside of town. Once in his room, he will hang his shirts and remove his shoes. He will take a shower with the water turned up hot enough so that it slightly hurts him. He will dry off using only a hand towel which he brought himself and carries in his suitcase. He will save his bath towel to spread over the bed so that he does not have to touch the sheets. My father will rest his head on the pillow he sits on all day in the car and drift to sleep listening to soft jazz from the 24-hour weather report on TV. My father's sleep will be fitful and mostly dreamless, except for a few brief periods when he will witness images of people and their surroundings. They will form in his mind and then dissolve, as if he were passing by them in a car. In one he is a small boy trying to woo an adult woman. In another he is released from prison after several decades of incarceration, but he is syphilic and dying, so the freedom is hollow. In the next dream, my father is installing ductwork in a country church. He is a young man again, working for his Uncle Lyle. The sheet metal feels oddly gracile in his imagined hands, like a very thin and fragile strand of thread. Like thread, he does not sense that he is grasping it. Were it to fall from his hands he would, unless he were looking at it, be totally unaware.

My father will forget everything the moment he wakes, and he will rise from the strange bed unchanged. He will dress himself in the same clothes as the day before and drive to Faribault, Minnesota to call on a canning factory there. It will be a dark day at the end of April and the wind will be blowing. My father will be expected to climb up onto the factory's roof and examine a malfunctioning heating unit with plant maintenance personnel. He will suggest the purchase of several parts and offer a price quote using a three-ring catalogue he fetches from the trunk of his car. The plant technician will be dubious of the offer, thinking that my father is only a salesman and not properly qualified for diagnostic appraisal. The technician will state that he is going to want to speak with an engineer about the heating unit before he makes any purchases. My father will interpret the technician's hesitancy as lack of knowhow, and he will foresee himself once more being recalled to Minnesota, to this same canning factory, however next time it will be winter. The technician and his crew will have botched the job, and my father will have to do the installation himself with negative four-degree wind-chill blowing

on his face and hands. As the technician speaks into his office phone to his superiors, my father will make mocking note to himself of the man's obscene girth. His shapeless abdomen will be crowned by a rack of meaty shoulders, a discreet trace of some lost time when the technician had done physical labor or maybe had been an athlete. My father will pass his eyes over the technician's face, perceiving all at once, as if looking at a portrait, the red forehead and straw hair, the doorknob nose with pockmarks, the round grin and the crooked chimp teeth behind it, the large, durable bifocal glasses smudged with grease and the tiny eyes inside them, darting like fish in a bowl. When the technician sets the phone down and begins to speak across the desk, my father will have to look directly into these eyes as the code of his profession requires. There is something about sustained eye contact that exhausts him.

My father will leave the canning plant failing to sell anything. He will sit in the parking lot for a while with the heat turned up high inside the car, and he will try to calculate in his mind the futility of driving to Platteville and calling on a client he has there. Later, my father will be pumping gas at a large station off the interstate. Smuggling itself in between the petroleum fumes and the diesel will be the faint scent of moist turf. It will be the first hint of spring to greet my father that year. With the pump still hanging in his car's gas tank my father will walk out beyond the pavement and the trucklot, onto the soft, newly thawed soil. He will take off his shoes, and his socks will become cold and damp. My father will be struck by an impulse that some feel during the changing of a season. It is the urge to be out in the fresh air, to witness this change and to memorize it. One is not necessarily filled with this urge because the change of the season is stirring or scenic. One feels compelled to be present before this change because it is fleeting. And one carries around inside of himself so many memories wed to the same week or two from past years, which, without it being asked for, are triggered by the weather. My father will give up on trying to sell anything that day. He will drive to the river and go hiking in the woodland just off the bridge. His wingtips and slacks will become caked with mud. He will try cleaning them in some standing water near a little spring but will accomplish very little besides making his feet wet. My father will hear the singing of strange tropical birds migrating through the area. He will see them hopping in the branches of the still-budding trees. He will see the early blooms of the marsh marigolds and the little bloodroots. The mosses will seem almost to be glowing from the spring rain.

Somewhere in the forest, maybe at the edges of a gully draining out into the Mississippi River, my father will discover a vast colony of morel mushrooms spread out across the woodland floor like

carpeting. My father will understand what he has found. He will remember his mother cooking several his brothers had found when they were children. He will remember (falsely) their tasting like mild and tender fish. My father will take an armful of these back to his car, intending to bring them home for my mother to cook. Then he will decide to make several more trips using his briefcase as a basket. Not even a fraction of the mushrooms will have been picked by the time my father has buried the entire backseat of his car in them. He will unload stacks of pricing catalogues, sample parts, books of sales receipts, promotional hats and key chains, and a small space heater from the car's trunk and leave them at the foot of a naked beech tree. My father will work through the night collecting morels and dumping them into his Dodge Stratus. By morning he will have filled it almost completely, leaving only room for him and his suitcase in the front seats. My father's car will smell like dark chocolate and woodchips. His hands and wrists will be covered in chalky slime. He will sleep for a while in the mushroom fumes and dream of taking our family dog for a walk through dense wilderness.

My father will take his mushrooms from town to town along the river selling them out of his car in grocery store parking lots. He will charge ten dollars and let people take as much as they can hold in two hands. In two weeks my father will have made over eight thousand dollars and have to throw out still another fifty or sixty pounds that will have spoiled. The interior of my father's car will be soaked through with fungal oils. He and everything he has with him will stink of ammonia and mold. It will make his eyes water when the windows are rolled up. Yet this demonstrable filth will not affect my father. He will be seduced by the miraculousness of what has happened and forget himself completely.

When he returns to the gully to collect more morels, he will find the forest floor this time to be empty. The mushrooms will have vanished. My father's heart will beat heavily and a bitter panic will come over him. He will crawl on his hands and knees over the earth. He will not find a single mushroom. Instead my father will find beneath a mulberry bush three old buckskin pouches filled with civil war-era coins. The discovery will at first fill my father with fear. He will suspect that he is being tricked by someone. After waiting for nearly an hour and calling into the forest, my father will take the coins. He will drive to La Crosse, Wisconsin and sell them to a coin dealer for two thousand dollars. He will return to the gully again, and this time he will find six pure-bred golden retriever puppies playing in a patch of fern. My father, a salesman, will sell the puppies at a fair profit. Next, he will find parked in the gully three expensive foreign sports cars. The cars will be immovable, but, after purchasing a ratchet

set in town, my father will remove rare, difficult to find parts and sell them to mechanic shops specializing in foreign car repair. In effect, my father will, as salesmen say, be "working all the angles".

It occurs to me that the story I have imagined is unrealistic. It more closely resembles a fairy tale than what would have actually happened to my father to prevent him from coming home. But if instead of finding a seemingly magical gully near the banks of the Mississippi my father went to work for a successful telemarketing agency specializing in the sale of gourmet cuisine, collector coins or non-standard autoparts, the resulting story would be virtually identical. The springs from which these stories emanate originate in very different places but eventually find the same stream. Were my father to reenact the abandonment of his job repeatedly, under those same circumstances, the stories would all be different with each iteration, but, as exponents of my father, they would share some familial likeness to one another.

So, to tell what could accurately be called the Story of William, I must begin always with who William might be, and hope the story resembles the man who engendered it. As I've said, I know close to nothing about the man besides the residual trace of him that is left in me. There are times when I construct the Story of William for myself, and I do not use one of the unrecognizable faces that briefly arrive in my head and then drift away. I put myself in the shirt and tie, staring out through the windshield into the South Minnesota night. I have my father do what I would do. In the past, when I was a child and I was confused and hurt over my father's leaving, it would have been impossible. My sympathy for my mother and bitterness over our ruined household would have kept me from seeing my father as anything other than a monster. But I am grown now, and I have my own shaded urges and secret vulnerabilities. I can understand someone building up his life in a way that he can't sustain; and that by leaving, you're really just getting out of the way as it all finally collapses.

Were I driving through the Minnesota night—or more correctly: if I were my father, driving through Minnesota, selling parts for industrial furnaces, I would rent a room at an inexpensive hotel near Rochester. I would hang my father's shirts and take a hot shower. I would sleep on my father's bath towel so as not to touch the bed because I am very cognizant of germs. I am not sure that I would travel to the plant in Faribault that following morning. If I were capable of committing an act as

unspeakable as discarding my own family, I do not suppose that I would be absolutely mindful of my appointments. I doubt there would be any boundary I could not just casually ignore. The world would seem completely permeable.

I would let the appointment pass, and I would lie in the hotel room bed all day, long after checkout, watching daytime television. I might take another shower. Afterward, I would stand at the mirror and shave my father's mustache right off of his face. If I felt hungry I would order a pizza and eat it while watching game shows. I might sleep again, then awake at ten or eleven at night. I would get in the car and drive to someplace to find the company of someone who is not my wife or children. This being Rochester, Minnesota, I would maybe go to a Flying J truck stop, simply because it is one of the few places in town that is still open. I would sit at the red and orange diner counter and smoke cigarettes. The counter would arch to form a half-circle so that the other patrons and I would be facing each other. There would be only a few of us: two men sitting at the head of the circle talking, about fishing I gather; another man, sitting alone, wearing sunglasses in his hair. He might try to insinuate himself into the conversation of the other two by claiming to know the fishing spots they are talking about. He would make his own pronouncements on the fishing in these places, which the men would acknowledge but carefully avoid responding to. Lastly, there would be a man sitting at the far end of the counter opposite from me whom none of the other men would bother to acknowledge. He would be older, black, with bushy salt and pepper hair put into a baseball cap. The skin of his face would appear to be pulled very tightly across his skull. His would have large, brass-framed glasses with slightly tinted lenses. What of his eyes that could be seen would look bored and drowsy. He might be reading yesterday's newspaper and smoking. I would watch him across the counter, but he would pretend not to notice me. Finally, after twenty five minutes, the man would get up from his stool and walk around the counter. When he does, I would turn my father's body on the stool so that his back rested against the counter. I would uncross his legs and splay them. As the man passed by I would look directly into his face to see if he might make eye contact. He would. He would briefly glance, expressionlessly, into my father's eyes and continue to the men's room. I would wait a bit before having my father follow.

The man would be standing at a urinal. I would take the urinal next to his and pull my father's penis out through his fly. My father would be unable to urinate, so I would have him just stand in place, looking down. There would be nothing for a while, but then the man would half turn his head, not quite

looking in my direction, and he would ask my father, "You been up in the shower yet?" I wouldn't know right away the correct answer to this question. The man would say, "Fixing to take me a shower, I think." He would begin to finish at that point. He would walk to the sink without flushing the urinal and he would wash his hands. I would have my father do the same.

"I wonder if they're as ugly here as at those other places," the man would say, referring to the shower stalls. I would tell the man that I had not been to the shower yet, even though I would have washed my father's body meticulously earlier that day. The man would ask me if I had brought my towel. I would tell him, yes, even though I would have none.

We would climb the stairs to the shower room. It would be empty except for someone in the very last stall at the end. The floor would be covered in orange tile with a cream-colored vinyl overlay running halfway up the walls. The room would be dimly lit with florescent lighting, much of it burnt out. It would stink of mildew. The man would fleetly undress and step into one of the showers stalls. I would hear the water fall onto the tiled floor and begin removing my father's clothes, folding them neatly on the bench that ran along the wall. The man would leave the door to the stall open and look at my father as the water washed over him. His body would be thin and boney, somewhat short. He would still be wearing his glasses. It occurs to me that being in this situation, about to share intimacies with a strange man, might fill my father with fear and nervousness. If my father were like most people, he would not permit events to transpire in this way. But the father I imagine in the Story of William, my father, would welcome the agitation. He would be filled with giddy panic. He would feel life rubbing against him like a magnificent, unseen fish brushing over his calves in the open ocean. And inasmuch as intimacy with my mother would have felt to him like being covered in a lead blanket, this man in the shower will make him feel free and naked. I would have the sensation of nakedness thrill my father. I would take the glasses off the man's face and step into the shower with the man. He would wrap his arms around my father's rib cage as the warm water fell on our heads. My father's cock would harden. The man's would not. He would kiss my father's neck and chin very softly, as if he were kissing a woman. He would not kiss my father's lips.

You might allege that what I am describing is a sexual fantasy which I am imagining simply for my own pleasure and that it has nothing at all to do with my father. You will say that I am tainting the Story of William with my own particular fascinations. It is true that I take pleasure in imagining such

things. But this is why I tell the Story of William, because it satisfies me to do so. I see no reason why the story's being unpleasurable should make it any more plausible. I could never tell the Story of William dispassionately and would never want to. It would mean so much less if I did that. And it would fail to reach places which my father might truthfully be.

If I found myself living the life of my father, married to a woman from whom I had to hide, with children to whom I would never be able to explain myself, I might escape with the man I have just met. I would tell no one because it would be better that way. The man would say his name is Gene, and I would tell him my father's name. We would sleep together on the little bed stuffed into the back compartment of his semi truck. Each day my father's limbs would be cramped and painful because of the bed. On the road, Gene and I would speak very little. Gene would turn the radio on and listen to sports talk. In South Beloit, he would stop at another truck plaza and teach my father how to pump diesel fuel. In Chicago, we would pass the exit my father takes when he is returning home. I would say nothing and watch the off ramp fly by.

In the Story of William, Gene and my father would travel through many states. I would have my father think of his old life and our family infrequently. I would construct a scene in my father's mind in which his car, which would still be sitting at the edge of the Flying J's parking lot, is getting broken into by several truckers who will notice it is abandoned. They strip the dash and open the hood to steal the battery and the alternator. Others would steal more parts out of the engine before the State Highway Patrol finally has the car impounded. My father would imagine this, and it would not bother him. He would feel relieved.

As Gene and my father drive further south, they would become more distant from one another. Throughout the trip, I would have my father renting hotel rooms for them to stay in instead of trying to squeeze into the little bed. The rooms would always have two beds. In a hotel outside of Atlanta, Gene would wait for my father to go to sleep and then move to the second bed. My father would wake the next morning and find him there. Later that same day, I would have my father complain about needing to stop and use the restroom. Gene would go on driving for almost another hour igoring him before finally pulling off at a rest area. The drive leading off the highway to the little privy would not be constructed to accommodate large semi trucks. Gene would have to abruptly downshift, causing the gears to grind. He would curse at my father as he tries to maneuver into the tiny parking lot. Once

stopped, Gene would grab hold of my father's shoulder as I have him slide out the door. In a heavy voice, which would seem to come out of his throat, Gene would command my father to stay while he went to the bathroom first. My father would not argue. I would have him sit in the passenger seat as told, holding it in. In what would seem like almost ten minutes, Gene would emerge, and I make my father jump down from the truck hurriedly and pass Gene without looking at him. He would sit on the toilet smelling the fetid odor of Gene's leavings still hanging in the air. Once finished, I would compel my father to reach inside the old metal dispenser for toilet paper. The roll would be missing. I would stand with my father's pants still at his knees and peer over the stall door, looking to see if there was paper towel by the sink. I would see then that Gene had removed the toilet paper from the dispenser and placed it on the ground next to the door. I would have my father waddle across the room, slightly bent over, pants still around the knees, to reach the roll of toilet paper. I would wipe my father while still standing and throw the wad of soiled paper into the garbage. As I do, my father would hear the hydraulic hiss of the truck's brakes disengaging. Then he would hear the engine rumble in low gear. Without washing my father's hands, I would pull the restroom door open (the handle still wet from Gene) to show him the truck pulling away. I would have my father yell to it and halfheartedly jog alongside, but Gene would not be paying attention. The truck would merge onto the highway and disappear.

My father would have to walk along the shoulder of the Interstate for several miles. The wall of scrub brush and cottonwood on either side of the road would run unbroken until, through the trees, a railroad bed would appear. I lead my father to it and have him resume along the tracks until they arrived at a town. I would walk my father through the little neighborhoods exhausted and covered in road dust. Groups of black men gathered in the doorways of vacant shops would watch him as I march my father up the main street. I would find him a hotel in the middle of town and rent a room there. It would take little effort to imagine my father's life in this town if I decided to leave him there. He would rent an apartment on the main street, maybe above a lawyer's office or a fabric store. The apartment would have no air-conditioning, and at night, conversation and cigarette smoke from the men congregating on the street below would float up through the open windows. After several weeks, my father's credit cards would stop working. I can see him calling the company and find out that my mother had had them cancelled. The incident would suffice as an indication from my mother that she had accepted that their marriage was over and that she did not care to have real communication with him

again. Outside of divorce papers that my father would receive later that year and the garnishing of his paychecks for unpaid child support, my mother would henceforth cease to exist for my father. He would find a job selling and installing car stereos. He would be successful on account of his ease with strangers and knowledge of the product line. He would make the store successful and his job there would be secure. In the evenings, I would have my father entertain the occasional guest—an intermittent assortment of loud, drunk women and quiet men—in his tiny, sweaty apartment above the lawyer's office. I would make sure to have my father take them up the fire escape in the back alley rather than through the front door, opening onto the street. I could amuse myself thinking of how the married women in town would regard him as an aging bachelor and perfectly harmless, while, in secret, he would be carrying on regular relationships with their husbands.

I see my father living a comfortable life in the Georgia town, should he have decided to remain there. And it would certainly have allowed for the Story of William to resolve neatly, if my father would have submitted himself to living mildly. It is what I would have done. But I do not believe I could presume to think that my father would do what I would do. I do not suppose that my father, after leaving his home, would immediately want to seek a new one. I know that he would not, because, unlike me, my father was never left behind. While it may have been my father's inclination to flee his household, mine is to rebuild it wherever I go. It is probably true that whatever account I would provide of the Story of William beyond the point of my father's departure would be utterly unreliable. I could not go forward imagining the intricate twists and contingencies of a wayfarer's life. When I try to look deeply—or perhaps not deeply at all—into such a perfectly directionless future, the eye I use to see down the dim corridor of my father's life closes. In attempting to trace my father's wanderings I become lost myself and am constantly having to go back to the beginning. I reiterate the Story of William countless times, each attempt being slightly different from previous attempts but none being radically different from the others. I will always be incapable of reaching beyond myself in the way that I must. In the end, I will have no other choice but to let my father go.

There is a vision of my father that visits me from time to time that seems uncorrupted by my fraudulent Stories of William. In it, my father is a sedentary and contented man, just as I want him to be. He is driving through the Minnesota night, but he is not traveling to meet a client or coming home

to see us. He is driving home, but it is not our home. He arrives and is greeted by a family, a different family. The woman is pretty, like my mother, but better dressed and she is wearing makeup. There is a boy who is the son of my father. He is younger than me, more delicate. In his face I see happiness that I have been denied. I see my father raising this boy. I see him teaching the boy to drive a car when he is a teenager and comforting him when he is small and has an ear ache. I see him taking the child to a ball game and the child becoming bored and asking to leave. I see my father coming home drunk in the early evening and telling the child how much he loves him. I see this family—this woman, the boy, my father—eating dinner together at the table on a beautiful July evening. I see my father showing up for only two of the boy's varsity basketball games. I see my father lying down in the grass, propped on his elbow, and the boy resting on his forearm, and I see them like this, watching Forth of July fireworks. And I see my father telling the boy, when he has grown to be a young man, about me and about my mother. The boy learns that my father had had another family before this one. Without bidding it to do so, the boy's imagination drafts false images of me. He asks my father more about us, but my father can provide nothing. The boy tries to find us, but we have changed our name, moved away. Without proper facts to satisfy his ailing mind, the boy fabricates his own Story of William. Like me, the boy will gaze into this story. He will find it unacceptably false. In it he will see only a reflection of himself. But maybe that is not what he sees, or what I see. Maybe what we are looking into, when we look into the Story of William, is not a mirror but a window. Maybe when I recount the story, the man I see through the windshield driving into the South Minnesota night is not be my father, nor I, but this boy who is my brother. And as he looks through the windshield, he might see my face and my hands on the steering wheel, driving into the South Minnesota night.