CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Sagittarius 1

Tomorrow People 17

False Positive 51

Green World 63

Destroy All Monsters 83

Sleeper Wave 101

The Cliffs at Marpi 117

frannycam.net/diary 133

General Grant (2004–) 159

Bereavement 163
The land surrounding the house is state forest. A dirt road climbs farther up the mountain, where paint-stained bark indicates the direction of hiking trails and orange signs warn off hunters. It is into this wilderness that he has run away. Seven o’clock in the evening. While they were arguing (again) about the surgery, the baby vaulted over the rail of the playpen, as if it were a hurdle to be cleared. They heard his hooves scrabbling on the rubber mat but were too late to see him jump: tucking his forelegs up, hind legs flexing and thrusting, body tracing a parabola through the air; then the earthward reach of the forelegs, the tucking up of the rear hooves, the landing. They shouted his name in unison. When they reached the sunroom, they saw him bounding out the door. Upper half, human half, twisted in their direction; a look of joy and terror in the infant’s eyes. But the equine part would not stop . . . Now he stands in the trees, hominid heart thundering in his chest. Though the twilight air is cold on the bare white skin of his torso, it can’t touch him below the waist: his hindquarters are warm
under a coat of dark hair. He hears his mother call. “Sebastian!” A flick of the tail, the shuffle of hooves. As he bounds deeper into the maze of trees, night’s first star appears in the ecliptic.

The first fear blazing through her mind: someone with a rifle will mistake him, in the mist of dawn, for an animal. No, Isabel thinks. Dawn is ten hours away. We’ll find him before then. We’ll hear him crying long before that. We have to. Hardly April. The temperature still hypothermic at night. Even if he wanders for a mile, in this silence we’ll hear him. Except that his cries, until today, have been so very faint . . . She herself can scarcely speak. When she calls for him, his name seems to catch on spikes in her throat and come out torn. She stops. Sweeps the flashlight through the trees. Listens. All she hears is her husband’s voice. Much stronger, more certain than hers. Still, he sounds far away. Each time Martin calls Sebastian’s name, he sounds a little more distant; and Isabel feels a little more alone in the dark. It seems very wrong to her, in these moments, to be frightened for herself. But she is. A sense of the future washes through her like the memory of a dream, vague and unreliable but sharp nonetheless—an impression of a place she will be one day. Dark, solitary, cut off from lovers and children. She is thinking only of her baby. Where he is, how to reach him. But every thought of him feels somehow like a thought about herself. As if there’s still a cord strung between them, a useless cord that links them but doesn’t keep them connected. She stops. Listens. Sweeps the beam through the trees. There’s a burning in her chest as the light catches on two yellow eyes. Too big by far, this animal. But in the moment before it bounds across the road, darkness and hope conspire to let her see exactly what she wants. For one blessed moment, it’s him. Then it’s a fawn darting into the forest—with its mother chasing behind.
Martin could see, for a short time, the other beam sweeping up the dirt road and his wife's figure delineated in an auroral glow; but the space between them is widening—trees, darkness—and the light seems, from where he stands, to be going out. “Sebastian!” he shouts. He's careful to keep his voice free of anger so his son will not misinterpret his intentions. I don't want to punish you, I just want to help. He does not feel panicked. Worried, yes. Scared. But calm, clear enough to wonder if he might be succumbing to a state of shock. Probably he's been in shock for months already. He and Isabel both. Each in their own way. It's getting darker. Just since they've been out here (can't be more than four or five minutes), the sky has blackened enough to begin showing stars. The buds on the trees haven't opened yet, so the view to the firmament is clear. Martin only glances up; but that one glance is enough to remind him just how much space there is, in heaven and on earth, to get lost in. Again, he calls out. Hears only the clicking of crickets and the wind chime reverberations of traveling starlight. Then, noise from up the road, where he thinks his wife is.

“Is it him?” He waits for an answer. “Isabel?”

“A deer, I said.”

She sounds shaken. Her voice already tinged with grief.

The boy sits on the couch watching the eyes of the cartoon characters bug out on the television and their tongues unfurl like party favors. Through the cotton of his pajamas, he tugs on his penis. He's three years old. He has never been alone in the house before. Although his parents sometimes threaten to leave him here (if he doesn't hurry up and get dressed or hurry up and get in the car), and though tears sometimes spring to his eyes at the thought, he always understands that the abandonment is not really going to occur. Yet here he is now. Left behind. At first, he
was able to hear them calling his brother’s name. Not anymore. He can’t hear anything now. He has touched the remote control and made the voices on television go away. Now he can’t hear anything but crickets marching closer and closer in the dark.

Night is nearly done falling. Isabel thinks momentarily of Kaden, back at the house. She has never left him alone, unless you count the time she accidentally locked him inside with all the keys. After breaking in through the bedroom window, she found him sitting on the kitchen floor playing with the salad spinner. She thinks: he can take care of himself. Then her mind returns to the woods and her fears to wild animals. Raccoons, owls, black bear. What is her baby to these creatures? A peer, a brother—or an unknown encroacher? Isn’t it all about territory, the cruel mathematics of the food chain? It occurs to her suddenly that this is all her fault. If she hadn’t refused after the ultrasound to believe what the screen showed them; if she’d consented to the operation after the birth (at which point she could no longer deny the truth); and if she hadn’t brought him out here, just today—only hours ago, they’d climbed this very road. If she hadn’t shown him the world in all its openness and wildness. What happened today, what’s happening even now: doesn’t it validate the position she took from the very beginning? Her mind flashes back to the first appointment with the orthopedic surgeon. They hadn’t even left the hospital yet. The baby was in neonatal intensive care; and there she was in that waiting room, with the magazines fanned out on the tables, those airbrushed cover photos, those mirages of flawlessness. Back in his office, the doctor told them their son would never walk. To increase the slim chances of ambulation, but mostly for the sake of anatomical correctness, he advised the removal of the two forelegs...
You mean amputate?
Mmm.
Is that . . . necessary?
Depends, Mrs. Avery, on your definition of necessity.

Martin leans against a tree and feels that some balance is tipping inside him. He closes his eyes, opens them again. Sees plainly, as if it’s something caught in the beam of his flashlight, the futility of what they’re trying to do. The baby could be anywhere! Abruptly, he starts back toward the house (remembering, all at once, his elder son). He intends to call the police, report a missing person. Then decides, with equal impulsiveness, against the idea. What kind of description would he give? How can he explain when he himself does not understand? Even the doctors can’t make up their minds. The diagnosis changes every week. Spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy as the cause of the musculoskeletal deformity; the body hair most likely the result of a condition called congenital hypertrichosis; and the extra legs—they don’t have a clue. A genetic mutation, or the vestiges of a twin who failed to fully form. The fact is, no one knows exactly what’s wrong with his son. No one knows what he is.

“Sebastian!”

His voice sounds, to his ears, less controlled this time. It’s a fact that he, the father, is the cause of this situation. Had he responded differently back at the house, the baby would never have leapt over the rail of his playpen, knocked the back door open, and run away. A knife blade twists in his stomach. Suddenly, sharply, Martin is aware of his conduct. Out here, under the stars, he isn’t sure if it made any sense at all . . . My son stood today. My son walked today.

Kaden walks down the hall, crying. Saying, “Where are you, Mom?” He knows they went out the back door. Still, he looks for them
in the house. He goes to the bedroom first and speaks into the
darkness. Gets no answer. He doesn't know where they've gone,
yet their absence is part of a pattern. Kaden let his brother out
the back door. His brother ran outside. His father ran through
the door, his mother ran through the door. They have all disap­
peared into the night.

I let them out, he thinks.
Me.
I wanted to see my brother run. My brother is a horse.

Isabel's foot slips. The ground is sloping upward. She realizes
she's wearing sandals, and this pathetic detail pushes her to sob.
She feels a surge of confusion. Not new. She's been feeling it—a
dreamlike gap in logic, a page missing from the book—ever since
the night he was born. There is a name for what he is. Why can’t
she think of it, why can’t anyone think of it? After the delivery
(which had been both easier and more difficult than Kaden's), she
had not seen Sebastian right away. While she'd lain in the bed, her
body light as a soul, a phalanx of nurses had spirited the newborn
away. Nobody would answer her questions. Not the midwife. Not
her own husband, who claimed to have seen nothing in the confu­
sion. He sat beside her, worrying with his fingers the plastic wrist
bracelet printed with his name and the name of their son. He took
her hand, but wouldn't look at her. The lack of eye contact, though
unnerving, allowed her to maintain a kind of distance. As if they
were back in birthing class, watching a video about complications.
As if the situation were purely hypothetical, a scenario invented
for the purpose of instruction . . . Neonatal intensive care. First,
a lobby with a nurses’ station and a smaller room off to the side
equipped with sinks. Isabel could not, for the life of her, figure
out how to turn on the water. There were no handles on the

6 {sagittarius}
faucet. She wondered then if she was dreaming, anaesthetized in the operating room; or still in the birthing suite, drugged even though she’d forsworn the drugs, and now she was hallucinating, succumbing to one of the adverse reactions that their birth-class instructor had warned them about: I can’t breathe, I’m going into allergic shock, my heart is slowing, slowing, stopping. Suddenly, magically, water gushed from the faucet. Her husband’s foot was depressing a pedal on the floor. Then they were going in. The unit was one large room, very quiet, full of incubators that made her think first of aquarium tanks, then display cases, then—because they were wheeled and curtained—of something else she couldn’t quite put her finger on. The babies she could see were tiny, impossibly small, blue and mummified. Sebastian was not one of these. Not premature. Despite the debriefing with specialists, she didn’t yet understand what he was. Was there no word for him, or simply no cute word, no word that didn’t invoke a darker age? She was afraid, but relieved to feel, underneath the terror, crushed and barely breathing, but there, there, a desire to see him, a longing, whatever he might be. They neared his incubator. Positioned in a secluded corner of the room. The curtain was drawn. Monitors overhead displayed fluctuating numbers and jagged inscriptions. Under an impulse that upset her stomach and wrung her heart the way feelings of romance had when she was younger, Isabel moved closer. Yes, she had already fallen in love with him, with the idea of him. She’d made a space in her mind and heart, and now he would step into that shape and fit it perfectly, fill it perfectly. She reached out a hand and pulled open the curtain.

He thinks: my son walked today. Any other parent would be filled with a clear and simple happiness. For Martin, it is all too much. He had come home half an hour ago, with a bottle of red wine and the honest intention to start from scratch. No made-up
minds, no sides. They would talk, really talk. Work things out together. Figure out what to do. Then he walked in the door and his older son grabbed him by the hand and pulled him back into the sunroom where his wife was waiting and beaming with joy; and then he saw the reason—the baby was standing, standing on all four feet—and he couldn’t understand why, but his spirits simply collapsed, and all his hopes seemed like a fantasy compared to the concrete fact of the creature in the playpen.

He’s standing, Dad.

I can see that.

Not only that, said his wife. He can walk. He got up in the meadow today, on the grass, and walked.

Like a foh-wul, Kaden said.

A what?

Dad, a foh-wul is a baby horse.

He’s not a foal.

Isabel continued: He fell down at first. But then he did it, Martin, just like they said he wouldn’t.

Martin looked again. No illusion. Surrounded by the trappings of any boy’s infancy—a floppy blue teddy bear; a plush baseball with a jingle bell inside; a mobile of the solar system, its planets swaying in a lazy orbit—their disabled son was standing. Eyes wide, hands clapping, he bounced on his four legs, hooves scrabbling on the polyester mat. Martin walked over to him and placed a hand on his head, and said, We can’t let him do this.

Why not?

He’ll get used to it.

She smiled uncertainly. I don’t see what you mean, she said.

Yes, you do.

I don’t actually.

He’ll get used to standing like this. We won’t be able to break him of the habit.
Standing isn’t a habit.
Okay.

Nose picking is a habit. Thumb sucking, she said, tears coming into her eyes. Christ, even today? Even this? I don’t understand you.

No kidding.

How can this be anything but wonderful?
It’s only going to make everything harder. The longer we wait, the harder it’s going to be. For all of us.

He slipped past her, taking pains to avoid brushing any part of his body against hers. She followed him down the hallway to the stairs. Leaving the two children behind.

You just wish he’d go away, she said too loudly.

Untrue.

Not just half of him. All of him.

Kaden remembers the back door. Wonders what he’s doing here, at home, when the rest of them have run away. Back in the sunroom, he stares at the empty playpen. The mobile of the solar system hangs frozen in the darkness. His brother had set it whirling when he jumped. Jump, Kaden had whispered. Down the hall, they’d been saying, Go away. All of him. Kaden opened the back door. Go, brother. Now the boy feels a heat, like a candle burning in his belly. He feels for his sneakers in the pile of shoes beside the door. Pulls them on the wrong feet. Steps into the starry night and onto the road.

Suddenly, she thinks, The meadow! Of course. That’s where he went. Is now. A realization so sharp, so visual—she can see him, a four-legged shadow tracing a lazy path through the grass—as to make her feel clairvoyant. Isabel starts to reach for her cell phone,
to speed-dial her husband and tell him where to meet her: she’s confident enough now in a happy ending to laugh at the impulse. She runs back down the road. Seeking out the trailhead with the flashlight beam. The memory of the afternoon speeding a dizzy spin in her head.

She hadn’t been sure, earlier in the day, if the ground of the meadow would be dry (the last of the snow had melted only recently), yet the world wore the beckoning look of spring. She packed a blanket in the backpack and managed to get him into the front pouch, his forelegs through the two extra holes she’d cut in the padding. All through the winter, Sebastian had confirmed his doctors’ expectations—sleeping excessively, communicating only through weak cries, showing little interest in his surroundings—but now, in the outdoors, he observed everything with wide eyes and squawked like a tropical bird. How beautiful to hear! Isabel felt a strength bubble up from deep inside her. We can get through this, she thought. All of us together. As she carried him through the woods, she felt strangely blessed. As if this improbable child, as he appeared right now, was the fulfillment of some secret wish. They found the meadow golden with sun. The flaxen grass long and dry enough. Isabel freed the baby from the carrier, laid him down on the blanket. Immediately he started struggling. A seizure, an allergic reaction? She was about to sweep him up again and rush down the trail, back to the house and the telephone, when she realized there was something methodical, something conscious about his movements. The knobby, hairy legs stretched and slipped, stretched and slipped. Then the bones momentarily straightened and locked, and his body almost lifted from the ground. He tried again. Again and again. To hoist himself up. To balance. The closer he got, the more violently his legs trembled. So frail, she thought. Like they might snap under his weight. Scary; but she gently urged him on, supporting his
underbelly with a hand. She shaking too—and feeling, too, that she was rising somehow. It took an hour, maybe more; yet the day was far from over, the sun still warm and high overhead when she heard herself say, in a broken whisper, Look at you, little man. Look at you standing up.

Now, searching for the trailhead, she again feels weightless with thanks. Yes, everything’s going to be alright. She calls out to her husband. “Martin! Can you hear me?” But a vehicle, a pickup truck, is coming down the mountain, tires rasping against the dirt road, columns of halogen light careering through the trees and blinding her as she moves out of the way.

Martin can barely admit it to himself, but his wife is right. He does sometimes wish the baby would disappear. Not half of him. All of him. Now it’s happening. And if they don’t find him—if they do and it’s too late . . . His mind projects a scene: his return to the house in the gray light of dawn, exhausted and empty-handed. It comes to him like a psychic flash, crisp and definite, this picture of himself. Followed by another that’s simply unbearable: their second child dead on a carpet of last autumn’s rust-colored leaves. Not the first time he has imagined such a thing. Ever since the doctors started talking about life expectancy, Martin has been fighting off dark imagery. We can’t be sure (they say), we need more neuromotor assessment, and intelligence tests are a year away, but physical deformities this severe suggest associated malformations of the brain; and if the muscle disease is degenerative, as it almost certainly is—well, it’s only a matter of time before it reaches the heart, which is, in the end, just another muscle . . . What would be worse? Losing the boy tonight (just a baby, five months in the world and already gone from it) or losing him thirteen years from now? No, he doesn’t want his son to vanish. He just wants him to be normal. He wants fatherhood to be free of pain and paradox.
Suddenly, his hands are breaking a fall. Fucking rock, fucking root of a tree. He hits the ground, pant leg tearing on something. Kneeling now on the forest floor, ankle possibly sprained, he becomes aware of an open space ahead. Dark, but lighter than the woods.

The meadow.

For a moment, the father can hear something in the grass. A tiny voice. Musical and human. Very small, very clear. There—then gone. Cancelled by the sound of a car or truck bounding down the mountain road.

Kaden feels his way along the road. For a few yards, before the trees get thick, the night is like a picture in a storybook: the road faintly glows, but on every page it gets a little blacker. The boy stops, looks back. Focuses on a window of the house pulsing with television light. Figures out, finally, why his feet are hurting. He sits on the rocky dirt. Taking sneakers off is one thing; trying to put them back on in the dark is another. He remembers one time in the car (he had no brother yet and his seat faced backward) seeing through the window a girl with dark glasses and a long silver wand that showed her where to go. He needs a wand. Without a wand, he will never, ever find them. He holds a sneaker up to the sky, eyes squinting and blinking. Slowly, the object comes clear to him. The red stripes, the contour of the toe. Not until the light grows bright enough to reveal the terrain of the road and to make the trunks of trees leap out from the forest does Kaden wonder about the source of it, turning his head, imagining that such radiance could only come from a friendly, enchanted star.

She glimpses the trailhead (the little tin marker, stick figure with walking stick, nailed to the tree) and hears, at the very same
moment, the panic of wheels going into a skid, treads clawing violently at dirt and rock, then the collision—crush of metal, bleat of a horn—and the harmonics of breaking glass. Isabel freezes. Same as when she wakes in her bed, having heard something that may have been nothing. Running down the road now is like all the times she has moved through her home in the dead of night. This is something, this is nothing . . . Isn’t that also what she told herself in the days after the ultrasound? On that screen, they had seen the ghost of an impossible fetus. Six limbs. Two arms and four legs, each foot badly twisted and missing toes. She saw the images with her own eyes (the technician had printed enough pictures to fill a scrapbook). She heard everything the doctors said in the days afterward about how and why and what to do about it. Still, a patchy fog obscured her vision. Static broke on her ear­drums like ocean waves. A few months later she reached for that curtain in the NICU, fearing suddenly that she might be about to suffer a crippling blow. But no. As she pulled the curtain aside, her body felt no shock from without, only a sweet confirmation from within. Not like other boys. And not entirely human. But why all this grave talk of abnormalities and deformities, when anyone can see he is exquisitely formed? A beautiful boy from the waist up, and from the waist down, a beautiful horse . . . Now she runs, as on a tightrope. Each time she blinks, a film of tears spreads evenly over the surface of her eyes, and through this aqueous medium, the light down below (dim; one headlight bulb must have burst on impact) looks like an aura suffusing the scene of the accident. No, no, no. A voice in her head, hers but not hers, keeps saying the word, as if refusing to find something horrible is to omit it from reality. When she reaches the foot of the hill, feet skidding, her lungs crumple and contract. No room for air. The truck is sunk front-first in a ditch at a forty-five-degree angle, rear wheels in the air, hood reshaped by a tree trunk. The driver, ejected from
his seat and halfway through the windshield—lower body in the cab, upper on the glass-spangled hood—isn’t moving. “Oh God,” the mother says aloud. Then starts calling for her baby. Shining the light into the ditch; into the trees; finally onto the road, where it finds first a tiny red-striped sneaker, then her other son, her human son, sitting in the dirt, staring, mesmerized by the wreck.

Though Martin hears the crash, he is also deaf to it. In the peace that follows, there seems to be only one sound in the universe: it comes from the heart of the meadow. “Uh-boo-boo-bah. Uh-foo. Uh-bah-bah-bah-bah-bah.” Martin can see him—a four-legged shadow moving through the grass—and as the father emerges from the trees, the sky above the child expands. Not the first time he’s been out here after dark. Last summer he made love with his wife under this blown-glass sky. Still, the place feels like a new discovery to him. Never has he seen a thicker spread of stars. Beneath all those dots of light, the baby continues to murmur in a private dialect. When Martin comes within a few yards, he stops and whispers:

“Sebastian.”

The boy turns—neither startles and runs off, nor comes rushing into his daddy’s arms. It’s as if the parent has been present all along, as if there’s nothing extraordinary about the situation. Again, he thinks, My son is walking. Only this time, the idea, the sight of it, gives him a shiver of amazement. He crouches down and watches. He watches his strange son walk. Emotion twists once more like a knife in his belly. If up to Martin alone, the surgery would have been performed long ago. The forelegs lopped off. After that, an operation to alter the angle of the femur and another (involving the imbedding of metal hooks and wires) to straighten the spine. Six weeks in a cast. Then laser hair removal. Genital reconstruction. The doctors call it medical necessity. He
can’t stay like this. He will never walk. He never will—But he is. Ever since the birth, Martin has been praying he’ll wake up. Wake up to find that the world is really a mundane place. Now, under the zodiac sky with this infant, he sees the absurdity of the notion; and with a trembling inside, he thinks to turn away from it. The insight seems part of the night, part winter and part spring, something he can breathe in and keep breathing in. Very slowly, he stands and moves closer. Places a hand on the boy’s body, on his bare back, the root of his spine, where soft white skin grades into a coat of hair.

He will fall asleep now: here, in his father’s arms, long before they reach the house, before they come upon the accident. Breathing the sweet fumes of pine needles. Feeling through the father’s flesh the warmth of flowing blood, which is his blood too. When Martin starts to run, Sebastian’s eyes will flutter open. He will glimpse the light, the vehicle, the body slumped over the hood. But he won’t remember. He won’t remember and he’ll never forget the night he ran away and his father brought him home. It’s the kind of impossible story that holds a family together. You tell it over and over again; and with the passage of time, the tale becomes more unbelievable and at the same time increasingly difficult to disprove, a myth about the life you carry.