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Rambling Through the Heart of it All

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RAMBLING THROUGH THE HEART OF IT ALL

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

DANARA WALLACE

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
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December 2014


We hereby recommend that the thesis of Danara Wallace

Entitled *Rambling through the Heart of It All*

Be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.


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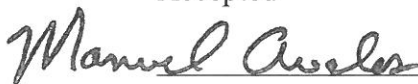

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ABSTRACT

Rambling through the Heart of It All is a collection of short stories crafted with special focus on the experience of living where Midwestern agriculture and industry seep into the low hills of Appalachia. Each story is set in rural Ohio and offers a glimpse of characters seeking to understand their individual identities while interacting in small-town communities. Poverty, Christian faith, heritage, isolation, loss, determination, nature, family tradition, and relationships tangle through the life of each character. While male characters are vital in each story, my own existence in a traditional, male-oriented, rural community has compelled me to consider the way women live both independently and dependently in this culture where roles remain defined and often static. It is not with judgment that I present stories of Ohio. I seek to share the tradition of the place and people I know best, people who wake up daily and journey to the steel mill, fracking well, grocery store, classroom, and milking parlor. People who wake up with full hearts and empty stomachs, and some with empty hearts and full stomachs. These are stories tucked between the rumpled hills but illuminate hearts with aspirations and disappointments common to all.

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I would like to thank the insightful and kind faculty of Stonecoast for giving my work their consideration. Sarah Braunstein enthusiastically invited me to Stonecoast and was so kind to read my final thesis. Elizabeth Searle is like a positive energy bomb, and her mentoring helped strengthen my writing. Aaron Hamburger showed me that sometimes the voice we'd like to have is neither the most authentic nor the most beautiful, a lesson I learned with reluctance. Ted Deppe kept me motivated, and I am indebted to him for his generosity, attention, support, honesty, understanding, and photos of puffy sheep and rippling tides. He encouraged me to be myself in my writing, my funny, quirky, sensitive, sad, hurt, poor, strong, curious, overwhelmed, uncertain, determined self. This guy is kind of a big deal. Seriously.

Then, I have these relentlessly loving friends. Melanie harasses me when I want to hide in my turtle shell. Wanda gives me unconditional love when I think all of the good feelings in life have evaporated. Alana reminds me of things I often forget—open your heart and find your breath. Laurie tells me it's all worth doing, and I'm starting to believe her. My boss and coworkers, Shasta, Andrea, Bonnie, and McKenna support me through every venture and demand stories of my shenanigans as their payment. And when days are long and sunlight short, Lady Dog puts her head on my knee and tells me that none of the thousands of ways I may fail in life matter to her because the most important words are bone, ball, and let's go. Dog never lies.

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PREFACE

When I came to Stonecoast, it seemed that everyone had a novel or ten in progress. Other first semester students discussed their writing work ethic, their views on writing life, their perspective on the most important dynamics of their work, and how equally stressful and important their writing was. If they weren't writing for themselves, they were surely doing it for the world. I expected to be discovered as the single shameless person that January who posed as a writer. Any minute, a faculty member would slip a noose at the end of a pole around my neck, and I'd squirm like a captured street dog. Worse yet, someone would realize that I had no idea what "in medias res" meant, had spent no time considering "world building," and had never heard the "show don't tell" refrain. Those other Stonecoasters wanted to read in public. Voluntarily. Feeling like a misfit among misfits, I folded my arms across my chest, watched, and listened.

That wasn't the first time I felt that way. I was born near the banks of the Ohio River, born into a place where the oil money dried up one hundred years ago and the only flow left was from people's sewer pipes into Duck Creek. I played with black snakes on the kitchen floor before I knew what they were. Everyone ate at "greazy spoons" and complained about "Warshington." And I rolled to the gospel waves reverberating out of tent revivals in those tight hills of Appalachia. My mother's rheumatoid arthritis rendered her bedridden many days, and my father, a minister, worked a second job as an auto body man and a third fixing cars at home to resell. My three older siblings dragged me around like a doll. We moved every few years to start over at another old, dying

church in fading towns around eastern Ohio, my mom saying, “We can’t go back to visit. It’s against the church rules.” I guess the United Methodist Church didn’t want little girls to have friends.

When I graduated from high school, I had applied to one large state school, one private college in Ohio, and a private college in Kentucky to appease an adult friend. I prepared to move to Otterbein, the most expensive of my three options, on the edge of Columbus. It was my chance to squeeze into the herd of sororities and fraternities. Still, my adult friend kept urging me to look at Berea in Kentucky again. Driving down through those hills, it all felt like a return to that time and place where I was born. Another girl on the fringes of existence riding the line of poverty for whom some choices could mean success or a life of working fast food. That wasn’t where I wanted to be.

Berea was the most exclusive school I’d applied to, and I would receive a full-tuition scholarship like every student who attended. For Berea, you had to be smart and poor. I sat down with the dean of admissions at Berea, and he told me that I had been offered entrance based on an essay I wrote about my grandmother. She quit school in eighth grade by mandate of her parents to help with her ten siblings. She raised her own children while working in a factory. Fortune didn’t favor her when she was forced to quit school, when her third child was stillborn, or when shrapnel killed her oldest son in Vietnam. Yet, my grandmother, tempered by poverty and adversity, earned her GED over forty years after leaving school. It occurred to me that Mary Pallaye earned my scholarship at Berea, and all I had to do was relate a portion of her story.

In that moment, sitting in front of an admissions officer telling me that I should be proud to be a first generation college grad, I realized that my writing could take me

somewhere in the world. And it did. I studied abroad for a semester and two January terms while at Berea, worked labor positions in food services and the Language Lab, and dwelled in an environment in which no one had to be ashamed of their family's socio-economic status. I waited a long time to apply to a master's program, returning home to take care of ill parents and chipping away at my small study abroad loans from college. When I sent an application to Stonecoast, the only program to which I applied, I hadn't published or finished any extensive writing work. I had worked in a steel mill and then at a tourism bureau in Amish Country. After one faculty member accidentally called me three times to tell me I should come and made me concerned that I had been the only person to apply, it was Sarah Braunstein's irrepressible enthusiasm over the phone that made me think I should try, try this venture far from work and home. Again, writing was my vehicle.

I thought I would be moving away from my isolated little town, if not physically then intellectually and emotionally. When I went to Stonecoast and started to find what vision I had to offer through stories, I gradually recognized that what was unique to me was a view of life in this place, on the fringe of Appalachia on the fringe of poverty where the living that occurs is gritty and tough. And now, coming to the close of this particular educational experience, with a measuring cup of life experience mixed in, I think that life is not so clear as I had perceived at eighteen. Working as an executive or working at Walmart, neither equates with success or failure. Work is hard no matter where it is performed. Stories happen in every level of society with every kind of people. But I know and want to share these stories of the people and place where the rust belt bubbles into Appalachia.

When I wrote my essay for admittance to Stonecoast, it was the first time I thought carefully about authors who had influenced me. The three I wrote about, Lloyd Alexander, Elena Poniatowska, and James Still remain important to me. They were the sparks that kindled this flame. While Alexander opened a world of adventurous possibilities and made me love reading and Poniatowska pushed me to reconsider the hazy lines of truth and fiction, James Still provoked a desire to chronicle the experiences of a place and a life with the detail of a study. I can never be the recorder of Appalachia that Still was because I'm not from his Appalachia, but his appreciation for nature, culture, and people keeps me honest as a writer. His *River of Earth* is my touchstone.

As I honed my voice and found my deeper connection to writing through my history in my home in the rural Midwest, I discovered experiences with writers that were like gasoline on this little spark. Ray Bradbury may seem an unusual inspiration for the Midwestern writer, but many of his short stories juxtapose a world of his creation against the experiences of Bradbury's own past. When I was flying home from my January residency in Ireland, I downloaded *The Martian Chronicles* for fun reading. My third semester project would be focused on some aspect of place, I had already decided, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* would be one of my foundational examples of how place in fiction shaped the narrative. Sitting in the airport in Philadelphia, I read Bradbury's own words in the preface to *The Martian Chronicles* that he had created his own sort of Winesburg, a view of the distorted humanity straddling the gap between a failing Earth and an expanding Martian colony. Bradbury's vision moved beyond the limits of known place, but he still recognized the value of place in his tales. In comparing the books of Anderson and Bradbury, I saw that both considered themes of

isolation, loneliness, and search for meaning through relations. Eudora Welty, in her essay "Place in Fiction," wrote of the fiction author, "...place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view" (781). This applies to Anderson writing about rural Ohio in 1919, Bradbury exploring the transition of Earth's citizenry to Mars in 1950, or me crafting short stories of ordinary people in challenging circumstances in 2014.

My introduction to Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty in the last two years has been illuminating. Both of these skilled short story engineers relied on their life experiences in the American South to create memorable characters in interesting circumstances. In O'Connor's essay, "The Regional Writer," from *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, she discussed the impact and importance of place on a story or book. "Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community" (53). She argued that the writer is not that caricature who exists in loneliness outside of society. Rather, the writer is an individual familiar with the structure and tenants of a community and with the unique ability to set that perspective into words for others from within or without that experience to assess. Welty supported that view, writing, "Fiction provides the ideal texture through which the feeling and meaning that permeate our own personal, present lives will best show through" (782). My own writing has led me to agree with those assertions. But I also would add that the writer takes the unique role of both insider and outsider. The writer does exist within a community but also takes the role of observer, which often places one on the edge of that community. It's that perspective

from the edge, that ability to see inside the community and beyond it that gives a narrative power.

Both O'Connor and Welty were well-rounded writers who crafted short stories, novels, and essays. The most meaningful interactions I have had with them beyond their essays on writing fiction rooted in place are through their short stories. Flannery O'Connor used setting and place masterfully to expose the inner-mechanisms of her characters. While her stories have the strong flavor of regional place, even the artificial construct of a doctor's office became an explosion of ego, religion, racism, mental illness, poverty, and social strata in "Revelation." O'Connor managed to so carefully engage place that the foibles existed in characters rather than in region. Through O'Connor's construction of setting, I immediately recognized that the main character, Mrs. Turpin, was at odds with her surroundings, in conflict with her community. When she returned to her farm from a doctor's office waiting room, she grappled with her own understanding of her position in the world. O'Connor weaved the setting and place, all of the characters and interactions, so that the reader might have a magnified view of this self-righteous woman, who seemed loathsome but had actually never had cause to question her perceptions of herself in her society until that moment in that waiting room in that rural South of the mid-twentieth century. Mrs. Turpin's place shaped her into a creature who viewed every class as a lower class because of her belief in being morally superior. O'Connor was able to transpose values and characteristics she recognized from her life experience to characters in a story to illuminate a situation of frame of mind for readers.

In “Why I Live at the P.O.,” Welty used the experience and knowledge of Deep South culture to spin the humorous tale of a Mississippian family’s discord causing one daughter to move into her place of employment, the post office. The story occurred in China Grove, Mississippi, and Welty invoked her familiarity with nature, social customs, and vernacular to flavor the story. Though real families dwell somewhere on the spectrum between normalcy and complete dysfunction, Welty’s portrayal of this Southern family was intentionally hyperbolic. Through the portrayal of a particular family in a particular place, Eudora Welty was able to prod both conventions and absurdities in rural Mississippi culture. The greatest thematic element of the story is the family’s willingness to ignore unpleasant, outrageous realities in order to maintain their identity as a family. That theme transcends place, but place holds this story.

For myself, I continue to feel a close connection between my words and my existence in Ohio. It’s not something I research in a book. Instead, my material originates in conversations I overhear at the Dollar General or IGA. “Nobody’s got my name. I keep it off the Facebook and all those lists. Can’t trust people.” I waited in line to buy nail polish remover while the gruff old veteran explained to a giggling twenty-year-old girl. “That’s why I keep my rifle hanging over the front door. I do. Just in case. That way, we can all get to it. Wife’s a better shot anyway.” I wonder what it’s like for the Amish woman who walks into my office in bare feet in November, never looking up from the floor, and stands ten feet behind her husband. My friends and coworkers tell the stories of tragedy, a five-year-old falling into a boiling cauldron of chicken broth while his mom is canning, another little boy toppling into a grain bin and suffocating when someone turned the auger at the bottom and the grain rushed down. And there are the

funny and obscure encounters from my own life, like a flying trip down the country lanes with my friend Wanda to visit an eighty-year-old Amish healer, Fur Al, and then walking out after into a lawn of fifty Amish people jamming to gospel hits. Learning to polka because it seemed to be the best way to recover from a breakup and was, in fact, one of the few social engagements I could find within driving distance to my house. I see stories everywhere around me, and I want to write them. It is not in judgment of my community. To me, it is a love song in minor key. A tribute to tenacity and waking up every day to life beneath this hazy sky on the slopes of these hills where weather often dictates more of life than legislatures. Bradbury, Anderson, O'Connor, and Welty all used their intimate knowledge of a community to write short stories that created my admiration for their artistry and writerly prowess while also expanding my view of the world through their view of the world. That is what I hope to offer through my own stories.

When I began my Stonecoast term, I hadn't thought of myself as a writer of anything in particular. At the Stone House, questions flew at me like bats out of a cave. Fiction, CNF, Pop Fic, or Poetry? Novel or short stories? Published? I tried to answer like I knew what I was doing, but my interests and experiences varied. Also, I didn't know what I was doing. I told people I was working on a novel, which in truth amounted to the pages submitted for my Stonecoast application. In my spare time, I had been writing non-fiction essays and had traded some writing for review with a friend's husband. I crafted long and ridiculous emails of my awkward life scenarios for the amusement of coworkers, waiting to hear my boss laugh from her office. How was I supposed to classify that? If no one was going to kick me out for being a fake writer,

what would I write? I'm not sure that is a question most writers could answer concisely. What will I write? Maybe it depends on the day.

I have spent my semesters at Stonecoast focusing on that novel project, and it has developed into a story of hurt, loss, and resilience that I hadn't expected. It is a long-term project that continues to require my attention and patience. Also, in the span of the last two years, through working with encouraging mentors and broadening my literary tastes and consumption, I have come to love the short story form. When I was in Ireland, Claire Keegan spoke to us about the short story. Her own knowledge was so helpful and insightful. Her ferocity in maintaining an identity as a short story writer demanded that I pay attention to my own interests in the form. Her remarkable stories were proof of her passion. While I contemplate the novel, short stories continue to form in my head and flow into my keyboard. The most compelling and influential works I have studied these last two years have been short stories, linked and independent. Bradbury, Anderson, O'Connor, and Welty. The brevity of short stories excites me. It's like a bank robbery; get in, and get out. Leave the alarms to sound behind you. Ted Deppe, my mentor of the last two semesters, often reminds me of Claire's lesson that the short story begins with an incision in time. It is the telling of a big story over a little time in a small span of pages. The challenge of finding power in those pages and riding a narrative arc can be daunting. And thrilling. There is so much more to learn, and I think at times that continuing to write both my worst material and my best is the only way to pursue the challenge.

Writing takes courage, like a lot of things life. It is difficult, taxing, and stressful. It is also fun, liberating, and gratifying. I started Stonecoast because I needed to find forward motion in my life. Writing has always offered me that. Writing isn't some

amorphous creative concept I pull down from the clouds. There might have been a time I thought it was. I thought it was more gift than work, more talent than craft. This writing comes from me. It is mine to draw out from within, untangle and weave or reweave as I choose. Yesterday, as I stood watching kids from my old high school marching band walk past the county courthouse in a parade, I almost cried for a past that has dissolved without my permission. I turned and walked up the alley while the gray October clouds scudded by. Stopping by a food stand, I waited a moment. Then I moved on with my fresh funnel cake and said to myself, “Funnel cakes are salvation.” But the truth is that writing saves me, draws me out and propels me forward. Writing that I labor over and craft. Funnel cake is a close second.

I find myself in an incredible transition in my life, and I don’t know what it means to my future. My current job in tourism marketing requires that I write increasing amounts of creative content, which I enjoy. At the end of a long day, sometimes I’ve spent all my words and intellectual energy telling people that Ohio’s Amish Country is a fantastic memory-making capital of the world where one can simultaneously eat locally made cheese while quilting in the back of a buggy as an Amishman sings hymns in PA Dutch. Everyone should be rushing to plan their vacation because I’m pretty good at selling fantastic memories. Finding the time and prioritizing my writing life continues to be one of my most important focuses. I intend to submit more stories for publication. That isn’t how I measure my creative legitimacy, but it would be awesome to achieve that goal—repeatedly. While I commit to keeping this writer writing, I would ultimately like to continue my education with a Ph.D. in English in order to align my life to support my interest and passion for language, particularly writing.

Feeling out of place is where my artistic statement as a writer begins, but it ends down the road a piece. I had told myself when I left my job and ill parents behind in Ohio that there was no stopping me. Intimidated in Maine, I told myself I could adopt the lingo, wild hair, hip shoes, and scarves of a writer. During my first residency, I sat in the Stone House with the other first semester students who would become my confidants and companions on this journey, each of them releasing trickles of anxiety about their work. Looking casual and faculty-like, Sarah Braunstein came in and occupied a couch. She asked us how the residency was going. I remembered talking with her on the phone and chameleoned into my chair like a little girl. She hadn't forgotten talking to me, though, and asked me directly how my workshop was, the first of my life. I didn't have big projects like everyone else, and I confessed that I didn't think I should be there. And Sarah, clothed in a complimentary combination of coolness and exuberance, said, "Don't listen to other people. They're full of crap." People don't often know when they say the things that get you through. Her words were important. I came to Stonecoast learn. I was there for myself and for my own writing. She didn't mean other voices aren't valuable, but that I couldn't judge myself on the terms of other people's lives.

I spent the majority of my teenage years between the covers of a Jane Austen book. Between classes, between discussions of *Dawson's Creek* and who at school had slept with whom and how they were really sixth cousins, I was hoping for an opportunity to call someone a cockscomb or a strumpet. Mr. Darcys, Colonel Brandons, and Captain Wentworths were few in the rural Ohio of my reality. Instead, I came into school each morning to a locker beside Reese Uhl, who'd spend the few minutes before class duct taping a new animal tail into his locker door and asking me to admire it. He was born

with a can of snuff in his pocket and mud on his boots. All he wanted to do was hunt, drink, and drive his truck through soggy cornfields. Reese accepted his nature, he honed his voice long before I did. I looked for an outsider's view, a better, more intellectual voice. When I went to Berea, a new understanding of my value in society and of great friendships developed. Nothing about my upbringing needed to create limitations for my intellect. Writing took me there, and I navigated with the support and generosity of faculty and friends. Stonecoast provided me a similar experience, a deeper understanding of my own values and a sharpened skill set to use in the world. Mentor and faculty support along with my own determination and the valuable input of my Stonecoast peers made this journey invaluable and inspiring. I'm not a writing misfit but a writer in a community of artists. With this experience, writing took me to Maine and Ireland, and writing will take me beyond. After two years of reading, writing, workshopping, and accepting criticism, I have found my own voice, I like the sound of it, and I plan to use it.

STAY

I turned onto Pleasant View Drive, my feet aching and shoulders slumped. The Bud distributor hadn't shown the day before. More than a few customers left me feeling surly and my tips bought two gallons of gas to get home. That's the way it was, and I had to take it as it came.

Sasquatch and Tino, who was really just one singer with an acoustic guitar, had finished the night with "Friends in Low Places," and it was a bonding experience among patrons that I wanted to scrub from my memory. When I saw the two kids crouched in the road near the carport, backs rounded to me, Garth Brooks and my shower evaporated. Red hair flamed against the night in my headlights, and a pale face turned. My heart thumped.

Slamming the gearshift, I started to get out.

"Jaycee? What's going on?"

Her pink Snoopy pajamas rippled in the breeze. She didn't face me. Adam rose and turned, lips thin and streaks down his cheeks.

"We have to get her to the vet, Mom. We gotta go right now."

I peeked over Jaycee's waving hair to see a calico lying on her side, still except for trickles of blood quivering with each spasm. Jaycee cupped a hand beneath the cat's head and caressed the body. I knelt.

Those two faces looked to me. There was no reassurance to give. Anymore, all I saw was the back of Jaycee as she walked away. Since Matthew's accident, she gritted

her teeth and stared out the car window. She plugged her ears with music and closed her eyes. She held her own hand. Now, she looked at me, and I had no answers.

That night, Gabe had texted. “I’m moving to Minneapolis. On the plane. I’m sorry.”

In the middle of a double shift, he sent that? 8:30 on a Saturday night, and he was leaving again. Leaving me without ever having come back. “What about the kids? What about Matthew’s 18th birthday?”

“I don’t have anything left to give.”

Jesus.

“Did you ever even love us? Aren’t we as important as your job?” You shouldn’t ask questions that you don’t want answers to.

“We can’t keep having this conversation. I have opportunities.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This is hard for me, too.”

I wanted to shake Gabe by the neck. I wanted to rub his nose in my mess of a life, and say, “Look what you did!”

“We’re taking off. Sorry.”

If I didn’t still love him, I would have hated him. The father of my children. The man of my dreams. I couldn’t wish for the plague. I hoped for herpes.

I looked at Jaycee stroking a dead cat. She’s just a girl. A teenage girl whose disappointments had already made lines on her face. No one defended her at school as the gossip circled. Adam either. He was already a little nerdy, if a mother can admit that. But then his brother, former football player, handsome and suave for a pimply teenager,

got in the car drunk with a drunk girl. Allison died as soon as she wrapped the old Pontiac around a utility pole. Matthew lived. Still breathed on his own at least. And these two kids endured all the talk and stares. No one to rescue them. No one to explain to other unformed brains that shit happens and there's no reason why. Adam looked to the cells and the nuclei for answers while Jaycee crouched over her journals, and they deserved something better than this. They deserved a loving father and a brother who really lived. They got late night texts from Gabe and meek smiles from Matthew on the best days. And a stray cat run over by a neighbor.

"I'm sorry, guys. She's gone." Jaycee didn't look away from the cat, but tears dropped against the orange-splotched coat.

Adam rocked in, "Probably organ damage." He scooped closer to his sister, keeping his hoodie drawn tight across his stomach. He stayed close to her for a minute, then he reached out and lifted her hand from the cat. Like he used to do when he was a toddler, he rubbed the back of her hand against his cheek, felt the softness of his big sister against his face. Then he tucked her hand into his jacket, and I saw two small, furry heads wobbling out from the zipper.

"I named the black one Andromeda. Jay, what'll you name the tiger?"

Cats. Two kittens. How could we afford two kittens when I couldn't afford two kids? How would I deny two kids two kittens?

"Dolly Parton." Jaycee lifted the kitten out and held her close. I didn't ask why. The little kitten wriggled and mewed while Andromeda snuggled into Adam.

"She's got spunk." I smiled and reached. Jaycee rose and padded into the house, her bare feet unflinching on the gravel.

Adam repeated, “Probably organ damage. Likely brain trauma.” The same words we heard from a doctor in the emergency room. It had been both for Matthew. And a broken femur.

Adam slipped away like a thin shadow. I stroked the cat in the beams of my headlights. Probably organ damage and likely brain trauma.

Scraping across the aluminum steps and dropping it into the cracked clay pot, I scooped black potting soil with my hands. The other pot’s shattered pieces held a rustling grocery bag in place on the step along with the five trampled petunias. I patted loose dirt down around the only unsmashed petunia. It still held a flower up to the sun, pink and joyful.

I rested back on my haunches. There. One pink petunia in a clay pot. I turned it a little so only a hairline of the crack showed. Wiping a forearm across my forehead, gritty dirt scratched my face. A long exhale took air away from my lungs that I didn’t know I’d been holding. There. A nice little flower on our steps. I wouldn’t be defeated by stupid kids. Flowers are beautiful. Everyone likes flowers. That’s what I had told Jaycee when I asked her to pick a pack of petunias out. She had groaned but studied them harder than she did the college-aged boy leaning at the garden center register.

I rooted in the bag and pulled out two of the least trampled clumps. I dug a spot in the pot with my hands and patted them in. Maybe they’d sprout and grow again. Always hope. Can’t kill hope.

Watching my hands tamp the soil, I remembered that this was how I liked my hands best; dirty because that's what they are made for. Getting dirty. Made for work. The callus between my thumb and forefinger always toughened in spring from weeding the flower beds at our house. At the old house. The fingerprints would shrink and prune. Dirt gathers skin same as water. Gabe used to tease me about my man hands each summer as I held my hoe and shuffled through rows of beans and peppers. Thistles never punctured my fingers, even when I yanked them without any gloves on. Now, the calluses at the base of each finger smoothed into my palms as if they'd never known more than one clay flowerpot and the underside of a waitressing tray. I used to love my hands in a life I used to have. A life with ten acres and a century farmhouse. A life with more jobs than a woman could do in a day, but time to rest away from it. A life where neighborhood kids didn't break your flowerpots just because they were bored.

I rubbed my palms into my jean shorts. I can make this work. I know I can. You're strong, Maryann. You don't need Gabe, and you don't need a house in the country. The sun rises here just the same. Up and down every day. Breathe in and out.

I stood up and grabbed the grocery bag of clay bits. Backing away, I thought the doublewide looked pretty nice. It was the biggest house on this south corner of town. A few pieces of siding cracked off into the gravel surrounding the little lot. The rent was cheap, and the kids had their own rooms. I told Jaycee to stay away from the pot smokers in that shack by the community mailboxes, and she rolled her eyes. Even I knew a well-rolled blunt wasn't enough to entice a young girl into that dump. At least not my girl. We even had a carport.

Rocking back on my heels, a low breath wheezed behind me.

“Mrs. Hawkins. Hi.”

She looked at the house as she sucked another drag from a Misty Light almost down to its filter. A huge brown sweater dangled over her thin shoulders, and the housecoat beneath wafted in the slow breeze. Gravel gritted beneath her house slippers.

“You can dress a pig up any way you want. Still a pig.” Wiry strings of silver hair stood out against the sun.

I squinted at her, holding my hand above my eyes to try make out her expression. The same stony face she usually presented. She flicked the cigarette away and turned to go.

“I’m sorry?” She was old but generally made sense. A few times I had driven her to see her husband, Ray, at the nursing home where Matthew stayed. Ray’d had a massive stroke last year. He stared at the ceiling from his wheelchair, arms and legs twisting with time, mouth moving without words.

“You ain’t special, honey. We none of us is special.”

“Mrs. Hawkins, I don’t...”

She shuffled on toward the block of mailboxes at the end of the street. The shutter on the trailer across from me slammed into the siding as the wind wavered.

“You waste your money on as many posies as you want, girl. In the end, nobody gives a good goddamn.”

There might have been more, but I didn’t hear it as she shuffled away and my vision blurred. I dragged a filthy hand over my streaked face. That hand I didn’t even know anymore. I heard the pot shatter on the gravel as I yanked the screen door open too

hard and wide. The bag of clay shards clattered when I dropped it next to the yellow refrigerator and sank. A piece of cracked linoleum pinched my thigh, but I didn't move.

How could she say that? How could she say that to *me*?

The bottle tipped against a hairbrush, Jaycee's red strands tangled there. 1 mg. Take one-half tablet as needed. I knew the instructions, yet I wanted to feel the pills in my hand. All of them.

Water ran over the lip of the plastic cup, dribbles distorting smiling dinosaurs like T. Rex. I twisted the faucet knob. The drain gurgled, and I couldn't help staring at that orange bottle. One-half. The pills skittered and shifted as I lifted it. Holding my breath, I pressed and turned the lid. The pills tumbled into my hand.

The sweet relief of Xanax. Blue, oblong jewels of calm. Those little saviors lined my palm, forty-one and a half of them. Uniform and dented in the center so that even in the blurriest haze of sobbing vision, I could break one and choke it down. Maybe I didn't always break them. Maybe I'd swallow two. And sleep. Like I'm dead.

For such tiny bits of medicine, they were so heavy. Like little lead balls. I looked up to the mirror and wondered who I saw. The first tears trickled, rolling into sunken spots, crowding from crow's feet to laugh lines, until they washed to my chin. Electric thoughts crackled. "Why just take two? You don't have to feel this." I dropped the pills. They scattered across the linoleum and mixed in with cat litter crumbles on the floor. I reached for the hairbrush, and whacked it against my thigh. Again. Again until heat throbbed in my leg.

I tucked the brush into the back of the basket behind my makeup bag. A car revved and squealed past outside. Someone shouted behind it. Probably Mandy, the twenty-something neighbor with four babies and three baby-daddies. Odors of sulfur drifted up the sink.

“You can’t do this to yourself, Maryann. You’re okay. Everything is going to be okay.”

My cell buzzed and shook the toilet lid. Jaycee for the third time. If I couldn’t hide from myself, I couldn’t hide from my teenager. Play practice would have been over for an hour already. With a yank, I pulled the hand towel from the bar and scrubbed it across my face. I smiled into the mirror until my face hurt, and rubbed the redness of my cheeks into some uniformity.

“It’s all okay.”

I looked at the pills, but instead of picking them up I stooped and popped a half into my mouth before slopping it down with water from the dino cup. If the kids saw the pills, I’d say the kittens needed an intervention. No one would doubt their ability to pop a bottle cap even though one of them placed a poop next to the bathtub every morning. They had solid determination but questionable depth perception. I suspected Dolly Parton. And a Xanax might have done her good.

I grabbed keys from an end table and walked out the door. I tried not to think of Matthew crying in his bed at the nursing home. His air mattress had come unplugged and deflated. I didn’t know how long he had lain on a metal frame before I stopped that afternoon. No nurses had called me. No nurses had checked on him. But he was fine, I

had to remember. I had to be a mom to my kids. All my kids. Jaycee couldn't wait to be picked up.

Three miles out of town and getting closer to the high school, I noticed the bears working their fiddles on my pajama pants. It felt like there was sandpaper on the backside of my eyelids, but I couldn't think of it then.

A Subaru Outback loaded with kayaks crept in front of me. My phone vibrated again, and I looked for a way around the adventurous tourist. I wanted to tell him that this was no place to vacation. Don't they have rivers in Massachusetts? My friend Kelly visited me from Cleveland a few years ago and announced as soon as she got out of the car, "Did you know that there is corn growing right next to the road? I mean right there!" It sounded like an accusation, like I didn't understand the perils of corn. She swore there were cattle on the loose with no fence to contain them. Are there cows in Massachusetts? Probably not renegade cows.

This guy braked over every hill, and I suspected he didn't even know he was in Ohio. Ohioananoiskatucky. It's all the same until elections. I'd like to drive through New England or California one day in my boss's Frankentruck. It has a little piece of every truck manufactured plus some twine keeping it roadworthy. All American. All Ohio. I can see myself chugging through Boston in that, doing forty-five so no parts fly off and hit a free thinker.

Peeking around the side of the Subaru, a blur of orange catapulted for my windshield as the driver slammed the brakes. I swerved left toward an oncoming semi

grill and yanked back right. I heard a thunk and pop. My gut somersaulted as metal scraped and the world outside of my car was a blur of light and color.

When everything stopped, the Outback driver, who was actually a youngish lady in a broomstick skirt and no shoes, was standing at my window crying. Her partner scratched his beard and tried to recover the kayak from the roadway. What the hell?

I opened the door and got out, afraid to see the front of my poor old Taurus. She was talking with her mouth and hands as he dragged the kayak around and mumbled. A kayak-sized divot pocked the hood, and the Ford emblem from the grill had abandoned ship. The windshield had already been cracked, but I drove it anyway.

I turned to the woman, and she grabbed me by the shoulders.

“We are so fortunate, you know? Every day, we are so fortunate.” She pulled me into a tight hug, and I noticed that her husband felt less fortunate about the state of his river craft.

“Crazy stuff happens, and I don’t know why. But the universe brings us together. You just have to be grateful.”

Standing next to the road in my pajama pants with my battered car and vibrating cell phone, wondering what had happened, I said, “Yeah, you just have to be grateful.”

I slid the card through the machine more slowly. Sweat beads collected and rolled down my back. The machine beeped, and the checkout lady said, “It says you got no funds. Have another way to pay?”

I heard the shifting feet and sighs behind me. A kid wriggled up between his mom's cart and the candy. He wrapped his fingers around a candy bar, and his mom barked, "Put it down or I'll beat your ass." The bar thumped back into the box on the shelf.

"Um," I breathed as I fumbled for my purse. Keep breathing, keep breathing. "There should be money on there. It's the first of the month."

The cashier, in her faded blue polo shirt with a crinkled collar, looked at her register. The blankness of boredom sagged her lips. I met her eyes, and her face softened. "I don't know, honey. Sometimes these electronic things don't work." Yanking from beneath the counter, she pulled out a stack of bags and began hanging them on the carousel.

I gripped the plastic of my Ohio Direction Card. The bags of my week's-worth of groceries heaped in the cart. In my wallet, a ten and a five and three pennies. I cleared my throat and swallowed.

"Can I just take the bread and milk and a can of catfood, please?"

The cashier sauntered around the counter. It was the staggered movement of a grandmother working a long shift at Walmart on welfare benefit day. She pulled the bread and catfood from a bag and thumped the milk jug to the counter. Sidling back around to the register, she muttered, "Don't worry about it. Leave them groceries in the cart. Maybe you can come back this afternoon."

She didn't smile at me, only licked her lips while voiding the sale and re-scanning my three items. The kid behind me squawked. His mother repeated, "I swear to God, Dillon. You wait till we get home to your daddy." I glanced at Dillon to see who was

going to get the worst of the beating, himself or his father. His mother was handing him a 16 oz. Mountain Dew from the refrigerator case while she clutched a cell phone in the other hand. Turning back, I passed over my cash and accepted the change without looking at anyone else. At least that mom could afford pop. I searched for pride in my common sense, but common sense wasn't feeding my kids this week.

Pointing to the cart, I whispered to the cashier, "There's ice cream in there."

I shoved my change into the purse and made for the exit doors as fast as I could. The old man with bowed legs who greeted at the door from the seat of his rollator walker told me to have a good day. His cowboy boots parked crookedly, arthritically on the tile, and that's all I saw of him.

"Maryann? Hey!"

My stomach tightened. Ruth from church. I hadn't been to church in two years. Not since the benefit dinner for Matthew's surgery. Why would I go? People act like they don't blame you when your husband leaves, but they do. They wonder what I did wrong, how I disappointed Gabe. I wonder, too.

Ruth, like a hawk sighting prey, swooped in and hugged me. I resisted, but her embrace tightened. All of her wrapped around me.

"Hi, Ruth. How are you?"

"Fine, but how are you?" She backed away to scrutinize my face, her wiry fingers capturing my chin. Wild curls wafted around her head. That crazy hair foretold rain. Thin and shrewd, her face turned up closely to mine. So petite and wearing those

icy blue eyes. She had the kind of body that was all angles, like wire coat hangers stuffed into skin. But I felt the warmth of her intention. I nudged her fingers away from my chin and stepped back into a divot in the asphalt. It brought me an inch more level with her face.

I brushed pebbles around the little pothole. When I saw a pink sock peeking through a hole in the side of my sneaker, I pressed my feet together. My hands held the single grocery bag and milk, and I had no other distraction to help me fidget away from Ruth. My gaze crawled up from her shoes to her face. She looked like she fell out of an L. L. Bean catalogue. Neat and appropriate, except for the wild hair. Maybe my sneakers gave me the air of a starving artist. Or maybe I looked like a bum.

Ruth turned her face away in that moment. “You know, we never forgot how you took care of mom when she fell in the church basement.” She swallowed and smoothed an eyebrow. “It was...”

“Oh no, it’s okay. No big deal.” It had happened years ago. When you see an elderly woman tumble down five concrete steps and no one else is around, what do you do? After calling an ambulance, I held her hand. Her pelvis was shattered. Seems like we should have prayed. What would we have asked? I rode to the hospital with Alice Knowles and stayed until her son arrived. Ruth was in Florida at the time.

Alice talked that night. About a man she had wanted, and a baby she hadn’t wanted. She had gripped my hand tighter. She didn’t love her husband the way she should have, but George was the one man who’d take on a wife carrying someone else’s baby. Only one time she got a little too close to that Baker boy from the farm up the way, but only the once. A little tear had slipped over her lashes. The goose bumps on her arm

when Robbie Baker touched her were prickles of shame and sin, and she didn't forget it. So she devoted herself to her husband's farm until some nights her exhausted hands curled into tight balls like they'd never open for work again. She hated butchering hogs. Felt like a piece of her died as they bled out. She had looked away from me. She did it though. Because it was right by her husband and right by her kids. She'd dreamed of dancing, before babies stretched her hips. Once, her husband found her swirling barefoot in the hog blood across the concrete before it snaked down the drain. That slap on her face cleared her vision. He was sensible. She had nodded her head a little. She hardly knew what to do when George died. It was the shock of his accident that had kept her from crying like she should.

Alice had said a lot of things that night in the weird state of consciousness that holds a person between full life and full death. She got pneumonia after two weeks in the hospital and died. I never told Ruth and hated that she brought the incident up every time. It wasn't anything to do with me. I was witness. That's all.

"Someone told me that you left the bank. What are you up to these days?"

Fired. I was fired. Family Medical Leave only lasts so long. "I'm a hostess at The Tavern. By the courthouse? Better hours."

She nodded, brushing a steely-gray curl from her face.

I schlep booze for old men and hillbilly meth heads. Ever been to The Tavern at midnight on a Saturday, Ruth? Leslie from the Feed Mill has her conceal carry license, and as long as she handles the drunks and leaves me a five, she can rub against my thigh all night. Manager told those kids from Killbuck to keep the hard stuff out in the lot, so he picks up the needles at the end of the night. If I hear moans in the bathroom, I hold it.

Whatever it takes to get Jaycee and Adam on that bus to DC for their school trip, I'll do it.

Bitterness settled into a hard lump in my throat. I wouldn't say those things even when they rolled like marbles on my tongue. None of this was Ruth's fault. Not Leslie's or that guy everyone called Beef, who always grabbed the closest ass and yelled during last call that the only thing fatter in this county was his junk and his joint. It's always hard when it's nobody's fault. A stack of tips and a bath were all the cleansing I needed anymore.

Ruth shook her head and adjusted the purse hanging on her elbow as her chin quivered.

I wished I had kept walking. Should have pretended I didn't hear her call my name.

"When I think of everything you've gone through, everything you do, Maryann." She stared right at me, reached for my arm, then brushed her hair back instead.

I had a friend who said to me, "Your life is so terrible, and I can't do anything to help." And he cried into the telephone. Here I am living it.

"How do you go on?" People ask with a cocked head and then a slow nod to resilience when I mumble some response. I don't know the answer, though. You watch your husband fold his dingy undershirts and walk away with them and without you. You watch your oldest child atrophy in a nursing home bed and cry in pain. You watch your other two kids sacrificing food and experiences and innocence to love their crippled brother and to love you and to try to keep believing in themselves when their dad left.

You watch little pieces of your heart crumble to dust. Hopes, faith, and dreams that just fall into the air like motes. Then tell me how I go on because I don't know.

"It's okay, Ruth. Just keep on keeping on!" I hated that I said that.

"Oh, this darn menopause." Ruth wiped her eyes with a sharp knuckle. With a faint smile and exhale, she looked around and said, "I was crazy to come down here first of the month. Walmart on welfare day? Ugh. What were we thinking?" She touched my elbow and a little snort escaped her.

"Yeah, I don't know." I backed away.

"Well, John needs his meds, and I'm out of wine, so I better get to it. You take care, okay?" She leaned forward and squeezed my forearm. "You're so brave. I don't know how..."

I turned my back on her before all the words had fallen out of her mouth. Fat raindrops pelted the asphalt, so I jammed my hand into my sweatshirt pouch. I jerked a key out of my pocket and tumbled into the car in a ball of groceries, wind, rain, and hurt.

I twisted the key in the ignition, and the car coughed. Then, it sputtered and roared. Grim clouds rolled in from the south, and trees rioted in the wind.

After the radio honed a signal, Elton John proclaimed that he was still standing. I thought about Elton, in his giant glasses, putting his head in a gas oven while despairing over love that would never be reciprocated. My love slammed the door and left me with three kids. Elton John didn't have to choose between Great Value brand milk and Smith's local dairy. He didn't have to choose happy, fed kids over sad, factory-farmed cows. He didn't have to choose a shit job and Medicaid to keep a son with brain trauma

and metal holding his leg together in the nursing home. Elton just had to choose glasses that fit in the oven.

“Fuck you and your damn clothes, Elton John.” I beat my palms against the steering wheel, and the song faded into static. I shifted into reverse and then drive. Job and Family Services. I drove two miles uptown, and parked outside the brick building. Adam would be so disappointed about the ice cream left in the cart. I had to get my welfare benefits straightened out before my evening shift at The Tavern.

Not until he was zipping his pants in the back of a Ford Explorer did I comprehend what happened. I should have guessed what he hoped would happen when he told me his 10k times and sequence of promotions. Instead of thinking, I drank the line of tequila shots he shoved toward me. The front of his pants found the back of mine no matter where I was on the dance floor. It felt gross at first. Sweaty palms together, we stumbled in to the parking lot. Giggles were the only complaints out of my mouth. Most women would have sobered up real quick when he said, “You aren’t on your period, are you? This upholstery... I mean, you know. Truck’s almost a classic.” I felt queasy from more than tequila as I wrestled twisted panties from the floor mat and back up my legs.

Every Saturday seemed the same. Fighting with Jaycee, visiting the nursing home, and serving at The Tavern. Saturday nights were okay, though. People half-recovered from a workweek, feeling a little tipsy by 11:30. Feeling like generous tippers by last call at midnight. Cash was better for me when Stevie wasn’t working the bar. I

wanted to tell her to try working a bra. A low cut top and a cool night, and the guys from Byler's Lumber were throwing fives at her. My lined b-cups deflated in the presence of Stevie's unnaturally perky bosom and raspy voice. I didn't have the will to fight for tips that night. I smelled like a French fry, and my feet felt like lumber as the evening dragged.

Christina Miller had come in alone but spent most of the night wedged between two oil and gas workers from Texas. If their accent weren't enough to reveal their lone star status, their swagger was. Texas could keep her horny men. If Mad Dog McDowell hugged me for looking like his daughter, I could live with it. I knew his story—a crazy ex-wife, hair like a smashed opossum, and diesel VW. Those Texans with their F-350s, muddy boots, and fast, bold hands were the reason I kept pepper spray in my apron. Just give me a reason, I'd think when they'd run fat tongues over jagged teeth. Christina threw her hair back and the bright bulb from a brown and gold Tiffany-style light glinted on glossy lips. Skankier girls trailed through the bar every night, but Christina knew how to get drinks for free and drive home alone when she wanted to at the end of the night. No kind of man intimidated her.

In cropped tops, skinny jeans, and fake leather boots, I wanted to be Christina, to have her ability to walk out of the house like that and feel like a lady. She had already been on her own for ten years, and her eleven year-old, Jazz, made the honor roll every grading period. She told me that one kid at fifteen was enough to make her realize she needed to get her shit together. A GED and classes at the Kent State branch in New Philly got her a good job in the Clerk of Court's office. She managed life, wrestled and managed it.

My friends had all gone. I had been the one who'd get out of Small-town, Ohio. Instead, they settled into the maple-lined streets of Cleveland Heights and Upper Arlington, the classy crusts of Cleveland and Columbus. I came back here, to plain crust. I used to visit them, drink wine, and talk about high school losers or religion. I supplied the local scuttlebutt, who got a job, a DUI, pregnant. It's hard to be friends with some people when all you have to share are your own hardships. Christina'd seen me curled into a ball in the driver's seat after work one night. She didn't knock, and she didn't ask. The passenger's side door clicked open and the car shifted as she plopped in next to me and waited to hear what left me huddled alone under a flickering streetlight on a Thursday night. The exposed belly rolls, chipped front tooth, and giant hair didn't look the same to me as when I'd first met Christina. Or maybe I finally accepted our equality. There's still poorer white trash to the white trash.

"You smell those guys? Swimming in cologne. Jesus." She squeezed between a stool and the bar. Looking back at the men, she smirked. "Or should I say Hay-sus?"

Her nodding head and big eyes were asking me if I got. And yeah, I got it. For the mother of a half black daughter, her cultural sensitivity was questionable. Maybe mine was, too. Can you call someone half black? Probably the nicest thing people would call Jazz around Killbuck or Glenmont.

"You coming to the Legion?" She pouted like Anna Nicole Smith. I had tried not to watch that Lifetime movie the night before. Anna was a simple girl who resisted taking her clothes off for *Playboy*. The drugs and the alcohol were more than she could comprehend, being such an innocent country girl. Sharky men took advantage of her.

She was just a lady who loved her kid and needed a way out of a Texas titty bar. Every woman's a victim on Lifetime. A victim of life.

I ducked behind the bar and pretended to study the three bottles of whisky there. The stories that circulated about the American Legion made me cringe, and I worked in a tavern.

"Girl, you need to get out for a night." Christina leaned over the bar to grab my arm, and the oil guys from Texas grazed over her backside like cows in clover. One of them sidled up next to her and slid his hand in her back pocket.

"Jimmy, I will punch you in the balls if you don't remove your hand from my ass. I am not nearly drunk enough for that shit."

Jimmy laughed like it was all harmless flirtation. Flecks of black chew wedged in his teeth. He rubbed a hand across his chin stubble while his friend squealed.

"Fuck you, Enrique."

They started trading the insults of half-drunk men who know they're going back to their rooms at the Comfort Inn for a night of Buds and pay-per-view. Christina appeared not to notice at all. She kept her dark blue eyes on me and frowned her pouty lips.

"Listen, Maryann, I know it's hard." Her voice hushed but sailed through the din of the bar. "Nobody's judging. Even if they are, who gives a shit? You deserve better. You deserve fun. I will make you have fun, goddamn it."

She slapped the bar, and I laughed. Once we had drinks in hand and mingled into the dim and noise of the Legion, I figured she'd never notice me slip out to go home after a few minutes.

“One drink. I’ll have one drink.”

“That’s my girl! I always say, the best way to get over one is to get under another.”

She pivoted around to the squabbling Texans before I could say another word.

She must have introduced me to this guy, but I don’t remember. His name was Mick or Mike. Maybe Jamie? Oh, God. I don’t do this. Moms don’t do this. Squirming beside me, Mark (Jason), adjusted his jeans and sighed. My lips tasted like alcohol, and his breath smelled like it.

Last I saw Christina, she was telling a couple of twenty-one-year-old jerked-over Amish boys the value of an education. Their sunburned faces, untucked polos, mother-made jeans didn’t convince me they were leaving their salvation for a girl like Christina. They might put family values on hold a year, though, to listen to Skynyrd, guzzle PBR, and cozy up to some girls who shave their legs.

My underwear felt twisted and wrong. So did my head. It lolled back against the seat while I squiggled my butt as demurely as a drunk woman can. The greenish glow of the console melted into the back seat, and somebody like Tom Petty whined out of the speakers behind me. “American girl...” I think that was me mumbling.

“That was nice.” A hand rubbed my stomach and another pushed into my hair. His whole tongue tasted like vodka.

I fumbled for the door handle. “I think I’m going to puke!”

He reached across me, opened the door, and shoved me out. I fell to my knees on crumbled asphalt behind the grease dumpster of the Mexican restaurant. Had I put my pants back on? It didn’t matter because I heaved so hard that vomit squeezed out my

nose. Took a minute to realize someone's hand on my back holding my ponytail down. The world around was black but unbalanced. I dragged myself over to a curb and slumped against my own knees.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just go on home. Leave me. I'll be fine." My eyes closed tight against the night and Mick/Mike's face. I leaned back to curl up under a rose bush. The gentle swell of rosy perfume lulled me to rapid dreams.

"I can't leave you here. I'm not that kind of guy."

"Why are you being so loud?" I rested my face on the cool concrete curb. "Am I wearing pants? Because if I am, you don't get in them again. Serious." It all made some sort of sense, like curling into the mulch behind La Palma. "Serious. Like a heart attack." But that Jamie or Mike guy was irrationally loud and asking too many questions. "Moms don't do this kind of stuff, okay?"

And then my cell phone rattled across the nightstand as my brain throbbed against my skull. Sun filtered through the broken blinds. Squinting around, I saw that it was my bed, Dolly Parton curled into the pillow next to me, and I pulled the blanket over my head and looked at the phone. That was the first time I thought about Gabe in a day. But he would interrupt my hangover. I pitched the phone out from under the covers, waited to hear it slam into the dresser, and squished my head back into the pillow.

A muffled voice called flight numbers in the background. "I'm coming home."

It wasn't even a question. Like it wasn't a question when he left. "How can we make it work?" That's what I had asked. "I don't see a future for us. I'm sorry," Gabe had replied. "Gabe, please. Why are you leaving? What about the kids?" Questions were all I could think of. "I don't know what to say. Sorry." And before he walked out the front door with his suitcase, he cried and hugged me. Like it had all happened to him. I stood with my face pressed against the storm door glass while his silhouette drifted down our lane and disappeared over the knoll. Then, the car popped up over the next hill, and I walked out to the porch, the cold leeching into my feet. I heard the tires crunch and slide in the gravel of the crossroads. The transmission shifts rolled over the acres of chopped cornfields. I didn't know when he was really gone. It was like a rainbow fading. You're still standing there just looking at rain clouds.

Over a year had passed, and seeing his name on my phone made me panic sometimes. People asked me about child support like it was their business. I'd smile and say it was just a little time apart. A little time to find himself. A little time for me to lose my house and job, to support three kids, and to become acquainted with the ladies at Job and Family Services. A little time for him to discover what he wanted in life. A little time for me to discover what was necessary to live. Time, I'd told people, was all we needed until they were telling me time was all I needed.

I stalked him on Facebook. Snooped, clicked on friend after friend. He took a girl to Lake Tahoe to meet his sister. She looked like me—the girl, not his sister. Younger with a face that required less make-up and a body that needed less clothing. But the long brown hair, dark eyes, freckled cheeks, all like me. How did her laugh sound?

Did she press fall leaves into books and stay up with feverish kids? Did she iron his shirts and wrap her finger in his hair?

I had no reason to hate “Rachel Boisson” from Minneapolis, and it made me miserable. She posted memes of kittens and babies. A pediatric nurse. There she was dressed up as Alice in Wonderland for Halloween. At Christmas, when the bank was foreclosing on the house and the kids opened gifts from Goodwill and Dollar General, there she was giggling in footy pajamas by her tree. Her family and friends, more than I had, telling her she looked beautiful. Gabe, “Too adorable.” Bile had burned up my esophagus.

Some days, I didn’t care where he was, who he was with. Only hoped he felt lonely and miserable. Then, I’d wake up one morning and need to see what life he was living without me and his kids. He never mentioned “Rachel Boisson.” The kids, he told them how he missed them, and after the phone calls, they’d squint at me like I held them captive in the desolation of Ohio. I only answered the phone and passed it to the kids, but he’d text me every time, “It was good to hear your voice.”

“Maryann? Did you hear me? I’m coming back.” More flights being called and conversations adding to the din behind him.

My tongue found a jagged molar and rubbed it while the windows of the car fogged. I tried not to breath. Flashes of the past spilled through my brain like a box of old photos. The first time he kissed me behind a little Italian place near campus. His face when a nurse dropped Matthew into his arms. His hand on my hand on the beach at Lake Erie. Matthew, Jaycee, Adam, and Gabe collapsing in a heap in the snow at the bottom of the hill, the four people I loved most laughing and waving for me to come

down on a half-busted sled. Then more than visions. The way Gabe smelled and sank into the grass after a day in the woods clearing brush and brambles. His low tone every time he said he loved me. Hugs that lasted too long. Somehow, the present changes the past, decays it a little.

“Coming home to where? What are you coming home to?” The tremble in my voice made me angry. My steering wheel cover flaked, and I dug a thumbnail into it. There was already a trail of indentations from my nail along the side.

Gabe had wanted to move to the peace of the country, he’d told me after three dates. “We should find a place,” he’d said. I delivered Matthew at the beginning of my senior year at Kent State and couldn’t finish student teaching. Gabe said, “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you. We’ll make the life we want.” We stayed in Kent while he finished his MBA, and I waitressed. A marriage at the courthouse, some ratty apartments, a job he hated, and we found our life back in the community where I’d spent a part of my youth before my parents died. There were a lot of reasons I didn’t want to come back – people and memories. The kids needed air and fields and freedom, Gabe exclaimed. He was seduced by the stars, by the bright flow of the Milky Way. His words and the crickets and the sky all worked on me. I saw a star streak through Cassiopeia the January night we toured a ramshackle farmhouse, and it seemed important to have my family here. His professor parents had taken him to Berlin, Paris, and London, the settings of my fantasies. His summers in Cape Cod sounded sweet. He sailed and ate seafood while I ran through cornfields, worked at Dairy Queen, and dreamed of the world. This place, this rural Ohio, must have been a diversion for him. Until it wasn’t anymore.

“My home is wherever you and the kids are.” He sighed. “Everything has just been awful. I don’t want to bring you down, but this has been really hard. This flight has been total shit, and they lost my laptop. How does that happen?”

A flock of mottled pigeons drifted from the courthouse to an antenna at the police station up the street. When had I stopped dreaming of London and Paris?

“I need to be with you guys.”

What was I supposed to say to that? What was I going to say? Again, I had nothing but questions.

“I don’t know what to say.”

I hung up the phone. It rang again, and I threw it on the passenger’s seat before getting out of the car. My shift at the Tavern started soon, but I moved down the hill and through the thin strip of woods to the bike trail that wound along the creek west of town.

Frail flakes twinkled amidst misty rain, and I hadn’t dressed for the first cold snap of fall. It had been seventy degrees the day before. The frost of my warm breath blurred the path, but I kept walking. Balling my fists, my fingers had no feeling. That was nice. I saw myself spreading across the asphalt with my clothes in a heap beside. Nothing to feel but cold.

A shape in the gray dimness moved. I walked forward. Thin legs and a long neck, pale brown. I saw her then, the little doe. She swiveled ears like satellites toward me. Rich, dark eyes and shimmering nose turned, too. She should understand that humans are dangerous, I thought. I shouldn’t ask her to believe anything different because it would cost her life one day. Every year is the same, bloody lumps of mangled deer bodies on the road. Glassy eyes and tongues lolling in the back of trucks. My feet

pounded the asphalt as before. But still she turned away from me to gnaw bushes, and my resolve dissolved into the shifting leaves and running river.

With only a few feet between us, I stopped. Along her side the fur notched, maybe where a bramble tore at her, and I think we'd met before. A few months before when the white of youth still flecked her back. Lowering her head, she twitched and stepped forward. I had wanted to be numb with cold, and there she was all senses. For an instant, I stood bare even with all my clothes on. Bare before the doe and the world. I saw again. I saw the golden-leafed beeches and the black squirrels. A hawk cried, and the low thicket smelled like moss and decay. The wind, which always whipped along that trail, had calmed a little as it puffed from the west. With another step toward me, the doe turned into the bushes and disappeared with a flick of her tail over the white rump. I stayed to grasp what had happened, to make it make sense, to make it make life make sense. Someone barked, "On your right," and whizzed past on a bike. Then two more came behind him.

I couldn't feel my hands or feet when I made it back to the Tavern, but some small fire still burned inside. Home. Gabe wanted to come home.

I had already circled the parking lot three times but had no idea what kind of car Gabe drove. Backing into a space that faced the entrance, I watched the early bird crowd walk, limp, and roll into Bob Evans. After smoothing her husband's hair with a licked hand, one old lady slapped his arm with her purse and marched in alone. He laughed and tucked his shirt in. That must be what life is like after fifty years together.

A cup of decaf. That's all I'd order, and I'd cross my arms while Gabe said he was sorry. When he asked if I had missed him, I'd arch an eyebrow, rub my chin, and say, "Do you miss Rachel Boisson and her twenty-seven-year-old boobs?" Not cutting enough. "Do you miss your three children? How long since you hugged your teenage daughter and tickled your little boy? Remember your oldest son who wears adult diapers, eats pureed food, and claps for the Muppets?" Too bitter. What were the right words to make the last year and a half wash over him? To wash over him like acid.

No one resembling Gabe had walked into the restaurant. Thinking of him inside, smiling at waitresses and tapping his spoon against a chipped coffee cup three times before resting it back on the table made my skin prickle. Sweat collected at the base of my back, and my thighs squeaked against the car seat. My skirt felt too short like the space between Gabe and I. Why had I agreed to see him?

"You don't owe him shit," Christina had said when I told her he wanted to meet.

"I told him he can't come to the house, but he is the father of my kids."

"Being a father and making babies are different things. I have a father of my kid, and I told that junkie to fuck off ten years ago." Christina cocked her head and pursed her lips, and I guess that meant she was tough.

"It's not that easy." I had hoped she'd find a convincing argument so I didn't have to see him. But it wasn't there. "We're still married. The kids miss him."

"Jesus, Maryann."

"Coffee. I told him coffee in Wooster."

"And you're going to tell him that he's a creep who screwed you *and* your kids out of a stable life?"

I had wiped down the bar for the third time before either of us said anything.

“Girl, I support you. But I’m telling you, you are making this work on your own. Manage this life on your terms.” Christina had walked around the bar and hugged me. “You don’t need him.” And then she had walked out into the dark alley to smoke.

The half-dissolved Xanax in the bottom of my wallet had seemed like a good idea when I was in the parking lot. But the calmness made the whole scenario seem worse.

There he sat in the corner reading a newspaper. His hair was grayer and short. He’d gained weight.

“Hey!” His chair knocked back against the wall, and he hugged me.

“You have a beard.” He’d always told me beards were for lumberjacks and hippies.

A faint blush rose as he stroked his chin. “Yeah, you know. Grew it last winter in Minnesota, and everyone seemed to like it.”

Who was everyone?

I pulled a chair out and sat down. The sleeves of my jacket constricted around my arms, but I kept it on. Gabe’s slit of a mouth moved, lips and teeth, babble and smiles. I noticed how small his eyes were, like little blue beads. The proportions of him were all wrong. Everything on his face looked too small for that head. Freckles. He’d been in the sun. Lots of gray hair. “Everyone” had probably told him it looked distinguished. It looked old. I knew where he used to hide his Just For Men bottles.

The waitress, a dumpy, colorless middle-aged lady who'd probably been barked at nightly by her boyfriend to bring him another brewski, sidled up to the table with her notepad and smiled meekly at Gabe.

"Did you want something to eat? I had a couple of eggs while I was waiting since I'm in training for a half-marathon." Looked more like he was in training for a marathon of *Night Court* and eating Cheetos on the plaid couch in his parents' basement.

"Uh, could I get a stack of chocolate chip pancakes with extra syrup and hash browns? And a large coffee with a pitcher of cream, please."

"Wow, you're..." Gabe looked at me and then at the waitress.

"Oh, and could I also get two sides of bacon? Thanks." Take that, Gabe! I hoped he knew he was paying for that breakfast. This is for you, too, dumpy waitress. Double bacon. Cheers!

"You must be working out, too, Maryann." He paused. "You look great."

"Working. I'm just working. Double shifts." The chlorine taste of the complimentary water floated on my tongue.

"Well, something's sure paying off!"

"Do you think so?" I remembered Christina's offer to drive up at any point during breakfast and knee Gabe in the groin.

He talked so much. I didn't know what he was saying but kept staring at his face so he thought I did. Stuff about his job, how unreasonable the management had become and a trusted friend, who I didn't know, telling him that he needed to get out of there and find himself. A weekend hike on the Appalachian Trail in West Virginia revealed so much to him. Revealed what was important in life. But he knew he had to improve

himself if he was going to mean anything to the world. He'd told me how awful his life had been when he said he wanted to come home. In the span of a week, his universe was sparkling-magical again. Maybe I was trying not to hear what he was saying, but the words kept going into my ears.

Who was this man across the table from me? Who was he that I had cried for him, remembered embraces from him, missed him? His tiny eyes and rapidly-moving mouth. What did he ever hear?

The waitress slid my plate of pancakes onto the table. Even though she was serving me, her eyes stayed on Gabe. I think he winked at her as she backed away.

"Listen, Mary Dog." Pet names? After all this, he dared to walk into Bob Evans, not order pancakes, and use my pet name? He'd say I was like a prairie dog the way I'd pop down under the blankets and back up. "Do your Mary Dog," he'd beg. A little piece of bacon stuck in my throat.

"I don't know what it is, but we are meant to be together. You know, a family. Everything had gotten so hard after Matthew's accident, and it was like you checked out on me. I thought I needed something more, but I think I can do this now. I'm going to put this family back together because it has just gone off the rails." He reached over and put a fork into my pancakes. Tugging a little bite free, he smiled at me. Crumbs quivered in his beard.

"I'm leaving." The chair refused to scoot against the carpet, so I slithered out with my purse.

"Is it time for your shift already?" He tried to stand, but I kept moving. "It's still early."

I had meant to say, I'm leaving you. I wanted to turn back and add that. "I'm leaving you, thief of pancakes and happiness," and I'd shove a piece of bacon in my mouth. Instead, I fled. The words just weren't there until I was ten miles down the road.

Gabe's text: "We're at Matt's. Stop up."

If the "we're" included my kids, someone would have to hold me back. None of the nurses or aides greeted me as I marched back to Matthew's room. Coming to the end of the hallway, I prepared to fling open the door and spit in Gabe's face. The door was already open, though. They looked over at me, Jaycee, Adam, Matthew, and Gabe, all smiling, pizza in their hands.

"Hey, Mom!" Adam trotted over and pulled my rigid body into the room. Matthew squealed. "Dad picked us up early from school. We just put in a movie."

I sat down where Adam positioned me and accepted a piece of pizza. Adam and Jaycee sat on the end of Matthew's bed, and they were all laughing at Adam's silly faces. Gabe leaned over.

"You haven't answered my calls or texts. Hope this is okay."

"It's not okay. This is not okay." I hissed so the kids didn't hear.

"What else do you want from me, Maryann? You want to go to counseling? I said you can do that. Just relax."

The air in that room thickened so that I couldn't breathe it in.

"I came back because I want to be with you guys. I missed you. I want to see my kids grow up."

“You could have seen your kids every day for the last year and a half. You had a family this whole time.” My cheeks felt hot. “While you were finding yourself? I was here.”

“Do you want me to feel worse than I do?”

“Yeah. I want you to feel like you fucked everything up. I want you to feel like you can’t keep putting one foot in front of the other because every goddamn day is exhausting. I want you to feel the anger of your kids because you are the one they see each morning. And I want you to feel the crush of failure when you walk away from your minimum wage job with shit tips.”

I was shaking and crying, and I still wanted him to feel the hollowness of knowing that you have few resources and no one in the world to rely on. Alone in the dark every night. Anxious in the day to just make things work. Exposed and bare and worthless.

The kids were looking at me. Everything they wanted seemed to be in that room. I had no great future. Only hopes for theirs.

“Hey, hey. Come here.” Gabe forced me into a hug, and buried myself between his shoulder and the wall because I didn’t want the kids to see me.

“I told you, we’re going to be a family together again.”

I wanted to leave, to walk out and feel like there is nothing but possibility. I’m the one who stays. I reached for a tissue in my purse, and felt the smoothness of a little pill in the bottom with my change. I stuck it in my mouth and swallowed while dabbing at my eyes.

“We are going to be a family, Maryann. It’ll be the life we want.”

Gabe squeezed me as I tried to move away. I tasted the pill dissolving in my throat, and Gabe pinched the little roll of back skin where my bra met my ribs. The kids whispered across the room. Does someone always have to sacrifice for the life *we* want?

THE MOUND

That summer slithered away like a snake in the tall grass. I was scarce-aware of its movement before it disappeared. Few long days lingered before sweaters, books, and chalkboards consumed my time. The last Tuesday of liberation, my eyes burst open as the sunrise oozed across my bedroom floor. My legs swung out of bed. The thrill of fresh awakening bunched my calves as I tippy-toed to the window.

Pressing my nose to the eastern window glass, I surveyed the only street in Homer. The waking world staggered into daylight. Beneath the towering maple, the Messengers' crusty cur yawned and stretched near his fading dog shack, ambling over the hard-packed earth with languid interest. A gold tabby and a gray tom I called Blue darted into holes beneath the Carriers' porch. Feline songs of love rang out. The church steeple rose in conversation with the wide-eyed windows of the old, brick elementary school across the street. The street curved south, exposing a cluster of faded houses and trees devouring the sidewalk. An elderly town, the spry years left behind.

I pulled a half-clean t-shirt over my tangles and cinched baggy shorts over my hips before the blur of sleep winked away. Remembering when Mr. Carrier threw a newspaper at Jameson's head as we stole through the night, toilet paper streaming from a dogwood behind us, I smirked. Confidence grew in my rumbling gut. I knew I would conquer that day. With Jameson, I would.

As my sister groaned in the top bunk, I clattered down the stairs. Lazy teenager. Before my mom could think beyond her morning Earl Grey, I shouted, "Going to meet Jameson!" I shimmied into my lace-less canvas sneakers, the backs bent down to

accommodate my lengthening heels. Too bad, I thought. The pink and purple hearts made them so cute. I could not imagine when my feet found time to grow during that summer.

Impatient, I whisked dew off the cracking bicycle seat with my hand. Jumping astride while running, I nearly lost control at the end of the gravel drive. I didn't though, which, I estimated, made me an expert rider. Mr. Harrington waved as I streaked past. His tiny bikini bottom bounced beside the gold behemoth of a car he had spent all summer waxing. I nodded back while smiling at his infirm body. Bike chain whirring and pedals clacking, I felt lucky not to be Mr. Harrington. I felt like a singular gust in the drifting morning.

Down the hill and out of town I rolled to the iron bridge. Stashing my bike against a buckeye tree, I descended the soft rut to the creek. On a bulging limestone beneath the bridge, I perched. So anxious to begin that day, now I inhaled the damp air and slumped against the ferned bank behind me. This was the spot, the moment I liked best. That brown creek tumbled over shoals and charged onward. I withdrew a foot from my sneaker and dipped it into the cool, shady stream. I imagined pieces of me winding between fields and slopes to join the force of the Ohio down south. Silver minnows darted into the dapple sun. Masking the minnows in dark again, the canopy of leaves shifted in the stiff breeze. Crawdads waggled into the shallows to my left. The might they felt in those pincers made me marvel. Beaver works crossed the stream just beyond, but they slept every day that I appeared. Unfortunate. I thought we could be friends. A toilet rested comically against the beaver stumps, like it knew it didn't belong but made

the best of the situation with its bright porcelain. I closed my eyes for a minute, feeling externally out of place like the toilet and internally bound to all that existed there.

I heard the whir of wheels on the bridge and popped up.

“Dang it, Jenny! Where you at?”

I jammed a damp foot into my sneaker and struggled up the slippery bank. “I’m here, Jameson! Jeez. Where you been?” Hands on hips, I arched a brow. It was all part of our reluctant friendship. Girls don’t like boys, and boys don’t like girls.

Freckles flecked Jameson’s face so thick that they nearly connected. A blue and tender bruise bloomed beneath his eye. His dad didn’t take very good care of him. As each season shifted, they moved on to wherever Jameson’s dad found work. The Hagers had needed someone to milk, mend fences, and pick up slack during the growing season when Jameson and his dad happened through. They’d stay until after harvest. Come November, neither Jameson nor I knew where he’d live. Jameson told me a few stories to unburden himself, but I swore not to tell. I didn’t ask about his cheek. I knew why it was there. His dad didn’t need any other reason besides big fists and a scrawny son.

“C’mon.” He jerked his head away as I lowered my eyes.

Freedom tasted like dust on my tongue. It plumed from our wheels on the gravel road as we sped. I hazarded a glance sideways. Smooth and young again, the furrows fell out of Jameson’s brow.

Coasting down a narrower lane, we dropped our bikes to discuss the plans we’d been organizing over the entire summer. I leapt the ditch and leaned against the fence, plucking the fuchsia flowers from the top of an ironweed. I squinted down the road. Black-eyed Susans shook their heads. Before the swelling woods at the end of the lane, a

magnificent old house poised majestically. The paint wore thin, but meticulous scrolls and trim encircled it.

Mrs. Skinner in her cronehood lived to maintain her home and make children quiver in their shoes. Her face like a working of cobwebs, her shrewd, glinting eyes slicing through me, I knew her from church. My mother forced me to hand Mrs. Skinner a Christmas card one year, and I swore the skin of my hand she touched burned like fire. Her house was not our target, though.

Rising like a gargantuan anthill, the forbidden mound behind the house beckoned. That mound called my name each day, like a gasp delivered by the wind. I couldn't discern who declared stepping upon it was forbidden, but in my eleventh year of life, surveying the woods and fields from the peak of that Native American mound was my greatest ambition. Mystery surrounded it as thickly as the unmowed grass and wild flowers sprouting from the cone. Jameson and I often eyeballed it from this distance. The first day he asked me to ride bikes with him, and I abandoned crying Amanda Ross on the playground, we received a sign. Arguing over whose bike was superior in the very same spot on that lane, a red-tailed hawk wheeled in a tight arc over the mound as we gaped. With a screech, that hawk's talons struck at the earth, and he carried something away in his westward flight. This welded our bond, Jameson's and mine. Our feet would feel that mound before the end of summer.

"I heard Justin McDougal picked a flower off the side, and he had nightmares for a week. And then, Joey Bishop kissed Allison Strong on there one time under a full moon, and an Indian warrior came right out and chased them with a tomahawk."

Jameson nodded, his face earnest. "That's true."

“You are full of beans, monkey brain.” I dismissed him with pursed lips. My eyes told a different story. A person could not touch the mound and leave untouched. Of that, I was sure.

Jameson pushed our bikes into the waist-high grass in the ditch. He pulled a piece of timothy and stuck it between his teeth. Twisting my purple flowers between thumb and forefinger, I rested my back on the fence post. Jameson stared into the pasture with a stony face, sun mingling with his bruise and freckles.

“Like we planned,” he said.

A puff of butterflies winged through my stomach, but I nodded. The approach and escape plans required Jameson’s expertise. I had spent two days researching mounds in central Ohio and Native American activities. There appeared to be no precedent on how to approach a mound and not be singed by the fire of the spirit world. However, after deducing that the mound likely contained either Tecumseh or Blue Jacket, I believed I could sway angry native spirits to my side. I was of this land, too. If my research carried me a little farther, I may have discovered that my beautiful mound predated those men by many centuries. Details are for adults. When my pile of library texts failed to provide a precedent, I turned to the Bible. Up to that point of my life, the Bible served only to prolong my agony while my father banged his fist on the pulpit each Sunday and waved the book before a glassy-eyed congregation. An Old Testament-style sacrifice would likely suffice.

Jameson and I hopped the fence and crept toward the house. The fence guarded the east side of the lane, and the house imposed on the right side. My straining ears caught only the beat of my heart. Cottony airplane trails disappeared as we ducked into

the cover of the oaky woods. Startling chipmunks but never cracking a twig beneath our feet, Jameson and I circled the property. We edged up to the frontier of the woods, Mrs. Skinner's backdoor visible and the round mound like a large earthy breast to the left of her house. My breath caught. I had never been so close. Mrs. Skinner's windows permitted the late summer swelter to enter, and the backdoor hung wide open. Her garden was half obscured by the mound. My nerves sparked like electricity.

"You ready? You have the sacrifices?" Jameson's blue stare implored me to be steady.

Rubbing sweaty palms down my thighs, I hissed, "Yes."

He signaled with his hands. He told me Chuck Norris did it in his movies when we were preparing. I didn't know. My brother watched Bruce Lee. Together, we inched into the sun. "Go!" Jameson shouted but my tan legs already beat like sparrow wings against the earth. Monarchs and painted ladies launched from the flowers as we tore through the high weeds. Hoping not to damage their delicate wings but determined to achieve my goal, I squinted against them.

Fast as a rabbit and reaching the mound ahead of me, Jameson scaled its angle. I hesitated, the shape of this unknown, untouched thing looming against the sky. Not noticing my wavering courage, Jameson kept climbing. I stepped back. Should I touch something sacred? Back again. Biting my lip, I doubted, leaned away. As the doubt swelled and flooded, I thought I heard Jameson call my name. I plunged against the side of the mound, legs churning, heart throbbing in my ears. My treadless sneakers slid against the grass. I clutched clumps of daisies trying not to lose ground. Thudding against the hillside, damp grass rubbed and burned my knees. Jameson gained the

summit, and his hand wrapped around my forearm, pulling me up. Feeling the closeness of the generations to love this land and seek that sky, I threw my arms to the heavens from the pinnacle as my chest heaved. Jameson shouted, “Waaaahooooo!”

“Hey, you dirty kids! Get down off a there! Hey!”

As the shrill bark echoed, I dropped my hands and looked down. The smile sank from my face as I beheld Mrs. Skinner in her housecoat standing between cabbages. A picture of the grim desiccation of time, her face crinkled like old leaves as she hacked out angry warnings. A gun lay at her feet, and weed tufts dropped out of her fists. Her eyes glinting in the sun, I felt the heat of fear and shame, not of exertion. Worried for more than my soul, I wheeled around to flee. Jameson caught my arm.

“No! The sacrifice. You have to!”

Mrs. Skinner’s spine curled as she reached for the weapon beside her trembling legs. Yanking the supplies out of my pocket, I plopped to my knees. The cold jaggedness of a stone punctured the skin of my shin. I did not look at it.

“Great spirits we honor you with these gifts from our land. Accept our offers, oh heavenly ones, and remain in your sleep as we leave. We feel the sacrifice in our blood. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.” I placed the wadded paper beneath our offerings: one Barbie doll, two pieces of Bazooka gum, Jameson’s yo-yo, and five curled one dollar bills. Just for good measure, I also threw in a ring my mom bought me from the five and ten store. I pulled out my matches. Striking an entire clump of them, the paper curled and smoked. “Do your part, Jameson.”

“You old bat! You don’t own the whole world!” He shouted down at Mrs. Skinner whose gun pointed squarely at him.

“Do your part! Do your part, or we’ll be cursed!” I snapped, thumping his thigh with my fist. Still kneeling on my aching shins, I inched toward the sharp edge of the mound.

“We honor you, dead ones. As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be. World without end, amen. Amen.”

The paper crackled, and Barbie’s face melted into a freakish grimace. Mrs. Skinner squeezed the trigger, and BB’s flew. Jameson threw himself in front of me. I tugged his shirt, and we skidded down the opposite hillside. All the sharp details of moments ago blurred as I struggled to find balance.

“Run!” Jameson pushed me ahead. While I raced to the dark cover of the trees, he crowed, “You couldn’t hit a barn, you old biddy.”

Turning, I saw Mrs. Skinner squeeze one eye closed as the other squinted down her gun. She proved him wrong as BB’s pinged against his behind while he zig-zagged out of the yard. Laughing like a fool, he crashed into the woods and grabbed my hand. No longer containable, laughter bubbled out of me as we lunged through the trees. Briars caught at my limbs, but I didn’t stop. We raced out to the pasture and up the lane to our bicycles, giggles erupting between ragged breaths.

As danger shriveled behind us, we walked our bikes down the road while clutching the achy stitches in our sides. I wanted to ride, but Jameson said we should let the old lady know we were not afraid. The sun gilded the open fields, and cicadas hummed a late summer song. Pulling it from the handlebar, Jameson took my hand again as we guided our bikes toward town. His sweaty, rough palm felt uncomfortable against mine, like the same sides of magnets thrust together. I let him hold on, though. Defiance

made his face handsome, like a grown man. That memory of Jameson's face drips in my consciousness sweet and sparse as nectar from August honeysuckle.

LEAH'S CONFESSION

Leaves clattered along the sidewalk, the same November gusts pushing on me. Light bubbled out of the church vestibule doorway. The golden luminance dissolved at the top step, diffusing into the unforgiving steel of deep autumn gloom. Thin piano notes trilled and sank into the wind. It should have drawn me. The warmth of the sanctuary. The chill of my bone. Chattering like little monkeys, the kids nudged past to race up the steps.

My little Jacob scrunched his face and shoved a finger up his nose while a gaggle of khaki and polo clad boys chortled near the entryway. Understanding the weight of salvation and stupidity of little brothers, Naomi cast a grave expression in my direction before she offered a stern, steady hand to the greeters. Miriam Weaver. Hiram Dowel. Both greeters softened their mouths into upside down smiles of pity, chins puckering. Miriam whispered to Naomi. A hard smile fractured Naomi's face, as she smoothed her dress marching into church.

Fat snowflakes fluttered from the clouds, eddies of wind spreading them carelessly. One fell on my nose and the sheen of wetness clung to my skin. With each step, the cold of the cement leached into my feet. I felt brittle. I stood at the bottom step, the bitter bite of the metal rail aching my palm. Shuffles of children, music, and Sunday cheer rollicked through the church. My heart throbbed.

"Why, Leah! You don't even have a coat, you goose! What on Earth?" Rachel Hostetler tugged me around into the hard pressure of hug. Her mittened hand rubbed my

back. Jagged coat buttons like fangs poked into my breast. Rachel gave the kind of overly supportive hugs that hurt.

Her husband Jack, studying the ridged concrete of the steps, sidled past holding the hand of their five year-old, Nevaeh. Eyes protruding and a thin crown of white hair wisping, Nevaeh turned in the stiff puff of her coat and scanned me with the unreserved judgment of a child.

“Oh, Leah! We are certainly glad to see you. That little Jacob of yours keeps us in stitches. I told Miss Naomi that she must have the patience of Job, sure enough.” Miriam’s withered face expanded into a smile so wide I could see her bridge glittering. The wind nipped at her chestnut tufted wig. Very little passed Miriam’s beady eyes without being seen.

Tugging free of Rachel, I found only one route open to me, to squeeze between the greeters. Miriam nodded to me as a gust lifted the six-inch gray straggles Hiram used to cover his bald patch. With a quick gesture, he smoothed the hairs across his barren and bulbous cranium. I looked at Rachel to be polite. Her auburn curled locks held firm around her angular cheeks. The curved arch of her brows hugged eyes the color of dying embers. Looking as if she had just finished a bowl of crushed blackberries and sugar, her round mouth pouted sympathetically. A shiver waggled up my spine. A mitten extending, Rachel patted my back again. I bit my cheek, remembering how ugly that little Nevaeh looked passing by with Rachel’s husband.

Taking a church bulletin from Hiram, I slid into the darkness of the coat rack. I peeked into the sanctuary. Sitting erect, Naomi thumbed through her Bible in our usual pew. Strands of strawberry waves clutched the shafts of light, and I recognized again that

Naomi would be pretty. Never beautiful, but always pretty. And unyielding.

Mennonites don't dwell on the lives of martyrs, but Naomi possessed the necessary zeal to die in a blaze of passionate faith on the piers of accusing heretics. Born a few centuries too late. Or reborn. The sharpness of my incisors pressed my tongue even though I hadn't said anything. I was no Anabaptist, reforming martyr.

Empty sanctuary pews revealed that the cold had kept many of the older folks at home. I wished it had kept me at home. Paul said it was my duty to come. The Biblical Paul said a lot of asinine things about women. Submission and whatnot. My Paul said as many and acted out more. Tears burned behind my eyelids.

As the nails of my left hand dented into my palm, Jacob shot past. My right hand flew out and hooked his elbow like a hawk grasping prey. The instinct of a mother.

"Ah, Mom! Let go." He wriggled and squealed too petulantly for a seven-year-old. The freckles across his little upturned nose and the bluest eyes turned away from me. Sandy blonde hair spiked his head. I smoothed it down, and it leapt up again defiantly. Everything about Jacob reminded me of Paul. I guess you don't have to like someone to love him.

Rachel wrestled the coat off of Nevaeh, static enlivening the little girl's sparse hair. While she was distracted, I curled my shoulders forward and walked quickly between the rows of pews. The November cold still prickled my flesh and chilled the marrow. Searching for our spot alongside Naomi, I steered Jacob by his shoulders.

"Jesus, Mom." This burst out of his mouth as the pianist paused to shuffle music beneath her lamp.

Teeth clamped, I tightened my grip on his upper arms and shoved him until he stumbled. A sharp resistance halted my progress.

“Don’t you dare take the Lord’s name in vain, boy.” Ada Mast leaned from her next-to-the-last-row pew and wrapped her claws into Jacob’s forearm. “Do you know what he did for you?”

Ada’s pinched grimace angled toward mine. Her bun wrapped so tightly at the base of her neck that all of her effort went into dragging her features back toward the center of her face. I don’t know what she saw when she looked at me, but her fingers unwrapped from Jacob’s arm. He drew away from her as if she were filthy and bumped against my legs until we found Naomi.

“Jacob, sit down and color,” Naomi snapped.

She pulled a book and baggy of crayon nubs from her fuchsia purse. I could see the little mounds of her breasts pushing against her cottony dress. The hem fell an inch too high above her knee. Already so adult for a girl of eleven. A Barbie head poked out of the purse, and Naomi shoved it into the depths when she followed my gaze.

With Jacob settled and Naomi prim, I unwadded the crumpled bulletin from my hand. *Hope Springs Mennonite, where Jesus’ love abides and guides.* A man in ivory robes cocked his head and looked out from the front of the bulletin. A little lamb tucked beneath one arm, his staff rested loosely in the other hand. The verdant meadows rolled behind him to untamed rocky cliffs. Dangers to his sheep, no doubt. I studied the face. Really studied it. Deep brown eyes held serenity like it had been harvested and stored, shadow of a beard, waving dark hair contrasting with light skin. No answers revealed themselves from that rendering. It reminded me, though, of my childhood.

I had kept a similar-looking framed picture of Jesus in my underwear drawer. One night, when fear of death gripped me and a Cabbage Patch Doll was not support enough, my mother told me, in her wise, assured tone, that I should look at that picture and then look into my heart in the deep dark of night. She said I would know I wasn't going to die. She said God would write my end in my heart, and Jesus would protect me. She also said that angels had shown themselves to my oldest brother at the bottom of the staircase. If I was good and right with God, if the timing was as it should be and my heart rested righteously, I might see the same. When the shadows crept across my bedroom floor and the only sound was my breathing, I prayed to Jesus that he would never reveal himself to me. I couldn't take it.

Our pew bounced forward and back again. Alma and Esther Swartzentruber positioned their bulk behind us with the ruckus that surrounds the hearing-impaired and ungainly. Esther's proportions were not well suited to sliding down upholstered bench rows. The prelude, a rendition of "Breathe on Me Oh Breath of God," resounded. I tried to listen to the music, shoving my bulletin beneath a thigh.

"If some women worked a little harder in da home, der men wutn't be looking elsewhere."

"Some a deez men would look anyway, Esther. But I tell you, you got to keep da family together. I know if women wasn't spenting halfa der time working and talking, it'd be better for da family. It's da woman's responsibility to hold 'em all together. Her job is home for her husband no matter his wanderings."

My blood felt filled with daggers dragging their edges all the way back to my heart. The clip of Alma and Esther's Pennsylvania Dutch accents grated against my ears.

I envisioned them behind me, a pair of old toads, warty and dry. They had searched for a more progressive living away from their Amish faith and now represented the most conservative faction of our modern Mennonite church. They maintained their dresses, doily head coverings, and pious judgments. Esther's husband sat on the elder's council. He'd have heard Paul's confession, might still be hearing it. The little doorway behind the pulpit. They'd all be behind that doorway, that group of men listening to all the ways I hadn't kept my husband satisfied at home.

As Rachel paraded Nevaeh toward the front, I considered that maybe Alma and Esther weren't wrong. It had been hard to take off the weight when Jacob was born. I had been bedfast the last trimester. I didn't cover the gray anymore. Makeup took too much time in the morning, especially since I needed to drive the kids to Valley Christian for "a particular kind of excellent education," as Paul said. Paul, he had lost his hair and had a paunch. When he rubbed me with his scaly elbow in bed, my skin crawled. But it was just guy stuff. Chubby, flaky-skin guy stuff that I needed to ignore.

Looking down at my khaki pants straining at the waist and my scuffed brown clogs, how could I think there was any other outcome? Lank bits of hair drooped onto my beige Land's End sweater that almost seemed like a luxury when I bought it three years before. A little pinhole at the bottom of the sweater eyed me as I eyed it. I knew there were black circles in the hollows above my cheeks and that a front tooth had shifted to slightly overlap the other tooth. I sank into myself. Wrong on too many accounts to answer for.

My life hadn't always been about Paul and the kids. I hadn't always designed my life around sales on 2% milk, meatloaf recipes, and soccer. I used to run in college, at

OSU. My ass was great, and I knew it. I had perky little breasts. I read poetry at open mics and debated Sartre as if I understood. My voluminous brunette bob vibrated with confidence. Girls wanted my butt. Guys wanted to touch my butt. I let a few of them do it. I had already declared a linguistics major with a minor in French. Then, I met Paul tailgating with friends.

Paul exuded confidence and self-assuredness in between drunken episodes of streaking and vomiting. Though his arrogance and immaturity annoyed me, mutual friends forced us into the same situations. One night, I found him crying in the unisex bathroom of a dingy Ethiopian restaurant on High Street after meeting with friends. He confided that he had talked with his father that day. Not only had his grandmother, a little doily-wearing conservative Mennonite lady who volunteered at a food pantry, just been diagnosed with colon cancer, his father also issued a dictum that Paul would transfer from the joints and booze of Ohio State to Bluffton, a private Mennonite college in the flat fields of northwestern Ohio. He and I walked home together that night and talked until the sun kissed the horizon. He rested on me in a hug, and I felt strong. We saw each other again and again. As the weight of his grandma dying and the whip crack from his father cut into him, Paul settled in to a calm and kind man with dreams of travel and family. And he needed me. No one had needed me up to that point. He needed a rock.

At the end of the quarter, I thought that someone calling me at 3 a.m. to cry, someone asking my opinion on history essays, someone trying to wrestle my belt buckle loose, must be love. I modified my life goals of the Peace Corps followed by a return to OSU for a PhD to a nondescript English degree from an obscure private college and a

nebulous future in rural Ohio. Paul wanted me. I wanted to be wanted. We went to Bluffton.

Across the sanctuary, in the middle row, seated at the end by a purple glass window, Paul's mother Deborah stared straight ahead to the cross on the altar. Dim light filtering through the window painted her face the color of a spreading bruise. Her mouth turned down like a lemon squeezed inside and mascaraed lashes starred her wide eyes. The form-fitting blazer and turtleneck seemed to make her spine look that much straighter. A doily on her bun and a khaki ankle-length skirt. Deborah was beyond reproach. People had talked about the infidelities of her husband, Junior, for years. She came every Sunday. Never blinking. The curls of tendrils around her cheeks always held as tight and the polish on her nails never chipped. Yet, there she sat, knowing her son was confessing the same crimes to that group of elders, even to her husband who sat on that group. Maybe not the same. Her husband hadn't screwed an eighteen-year-old Amish cleaning girl in a client's home he claimed to be showing to potential buyers.

A throb in my head synced with the thump of my heart. An eighteen-year-old Amish girl. I could be resentful and angry at the girl, but she was a child to me. She should have been to Paul. I must have been blind. Two months ago, he had forced me into the back of our minivan parked behind Garver's IGA. He pushed my hand down his pants and groaned in my ear. It was better than the dry and infrequent sex we both labored through at home after recorded Cavs' games. What would he even find stimulating in me? What could he find to stimulate?

But an Amish teenager? They had been caught on the freshly laid Berber carpet of the living room by Paul's client, Rita Miller. Rita's carpet had been defiled, so I

couldn't resent her setting the gossip-works in motion. The thought of Paul rubbing his splotchy chest and modest manhood against an Amish girl's innocence clenched my stomach. Maybe she'd been down that road to intimacy before, but I still could not imagine her complicity. She left her church, I'd heard. Left her family for a compact car and long nights serving ribs and flirtation at Damon's in New Philadelphia.

Beneath the giant rumps of the Swartzentruber ladies behind me, the pew groaned. My cheeks burned as I lowered my head to stare at the carpet, red with flecks of gray. Any minute, Paul would walk out of that room behind the pulpit with all those men. Everyone would know that he had been forgiven. Forgiven. Confessed and forgiven by the power of men.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned before thinking. Constance Swartzentruber, slight and fox-faced, moved her mouth close to my ear. She wrapped one hand over the seatback and one around my shoulder, holding me close. She had married into the Swartzentrubers. Her husband, a rogue in the family, portrayed Johnny Cash at local events.

"How you doing, honey?" Her head pulled back just enough for the sharp eyes to rake my face. "I told Willis I would hold my tongue. He's setting up in that room, you know." She nodded toward the pulpit. "Shoot, if Willis don't know I'm a fibber after these 48 years..." A wry smirk bent Constance's mouth. "Leah, I'm just going to tell you this. There are hard times in a marriage. There's hard times and things worth fighting for. I know you got the kids." Constance pulled away, her nostrils flaring before she leaned in again. "There's other things worth fighting for, too, gal. You just

remember who you are.” Constance leaned so close the fringe of her steel-colored bangs rubbed my ear. “Remember who you are, Leah.”

Constance’s words echoed in my ears even though she had released me with a pat to the shoulder. The prelude droned on. Jacob fidgeted next to me and Naomi slapped his leg. The whine of their bicker could not compete with those words ricocheting from hemisphere to hemisphere in my brain. The memory of my face in the mirror that morning, pale and tired, filtered in behind the resounding words. It sounded simple. Remember who you are. Had I ever known?

My hands rested atop my thighs, palms up with fingers curled. The wedding band on my left hand twisted so the small diamond glittered before me. I rubbed it back around with my thumb. I saw my legs and my feet and my arms and hands in the pew. Raising my head, my eyes rolled across the pews of neighbors, people who had been watching me since Paul brought me back to his hometown. The contrast sharpened on who I was not.

Remember who I was. Remember who I was not. I was not Mennonite. I could divorce five men, and I did not need the forgiveness of this church. My mother raised me to look at Jesus directly, whether I wanted to or not. She raised me to look at my own heart. I could not say where Jesus stood on the matter since I had begged him never to come to me all those years ago. But I was not this dried, crackled husk of a woman. I was not tones of beige and Creationism. I was not “small group” and women’s devotional. And the only things that made me brownies and cake-maker at home were all the mornings I spent eating batter from a glass bowl in a dark kitchen corner. I looked back at Constance. She winked.

I pulled the ring from my finger, then shoved it back. My lip tasted raw where I had held it between my teeth. I pulled the ring off again and dropped it on the pew next to Naomi. The kids had quieted with the decrescendo of the piano, but I saw the anticipation in their faces. They were waiting for Paul, both of them.

The floorboards creaked near the door of the room behind the pulpit. My stomach hardened. Ohio, with all her cows and corn, was not meant to be my final destination. Kids had not been in my plans until age 38. My breath rushed in and out. Not only was I in Ohio raising kids with an adulterer I considered a pedophile, I was sending my kids to a school with a limited, Bible-based curriculum. Naomi had explained the heresies of evolution two weeks ago, and Paul had silenced me with a hard pinch. We were paying for that education. Society might pay for that education. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jacob mouthing the words to the hymn the pianist hammered out and Naomi was tracing the illustrations of her Bible with an index finger.

And, all those good people around me. The good people going on mission trips, collecting Thanksgiving baskets for the needy, visiting shut-ins, forgiving the sins of the adulterer but never forgiving the sin of the wife who could not forgive. When Freda Jenkins divorced Steve, who had spent ten years meeting young men in dark alleys of Toledo, even her parents refused to talk with her. Marriage is for life. Only death severs the bond. And don't mention Cedric Jones, who joined the Marines. Maybe he'll come back and confess. God's love extends to all. This Mennonite congregation's love stops with the needy and the pacifists. All their good hearts with bad judgments and cul-de-sacs to salvation. This sanctuary was wrong for me.

With a jerk, I rose. The kids looked at me, surprised but disinterested. I nudged the ring on the seat toward Naomi and picked up my bulletin with the other hand.

“Wait for your father. He’ll be out soon. He loves you.” My voice sounded as foreign as a distant bell. My neck hair prickled as I felt the Swartzentrubers scrutinize me. It seemed easier to confront them now than to sit through the next 30 years with Paul beside me. Paul, who had ear hair. Paul, whose bellyfat sagged over his penis. Paul, who declared that my thighs turned his stomach and pretended to vomit while his kids laughed at the table. Paul, who smelled like sweat and cabbage. Paul, who fucked teenage girls who didn’t know there was anything better. There must be something better.

I strode up the aisle and out to the vestibule. The greeters Miriam and Hiram were preparing to enter the sanctuary.

“I’m leaving, Miriam. Make sure Paul gets the kids.”

“Leaving?” She thrust her neck forward to hear me better. The grin she had pasted across her chin faltered.

“Goodbye.”

I shoved the wooden doors open, and cold blasted into my face. I felt it roll into every pore, vibrate every hair. The fat flakes of snow had covered the ground in a thick, sparkling veil of white. The clouds lumbered overhead, heavy with the burden of late autumn snow. I walked around to the parking lot, reaching in my pocket for keys. Looking at the gold Town and Country with a dent in the bumper, I pulled the key from my ring and dropped it in the snow. Paul could have the van. He’d have the kids. I

marched over to his black F-350, “for work” he’d always said. I stood at the door only long enough to feel satisfied.

Once situated in the cab, I turned the key, and the might of the engine throbbed. Only when my frosted hands touched the wheel did I realize I still clutched the bulletin. I folded it over and looked at Jesus again. Jesus can forgive. Maybe I can forget. I placed it face-up in the passenger’s seat before yanking the gear shift into drive.

The truck edged out to the country road. The snow fell fast, like it was desperate to escape the sky. For the slight depressions of ditches, I made out the roadside. I shifted into four-wheel drive, and the keen of whirring axles filled the space around my body. The truck wheels slipped ascending Wild Cat Hill. Reaching the top, the road ahead looked no easier to negotiate. I was on it, though. Already on it.

It felt good, right and destined. The rumble of the truck. Snowflakes twisting and careering toward the whisking wiper blades. Dry static of the heater blasting my face. Even the accumulated haze of ice and slush obscuring the view from the windshield seemed perfect. Everything was falling apart but falling into place at the same time.

Even as her snow-crust red coat flamed against the white globe around me, I did not see the fox pausing in the road until the very last moment. And in that tick of the second hand, that beat of my heart, her eyes stared into mine, penetrating the space between. Gold and sharp, she looked into me. “For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” 1 Peter 4:17. The scripture lesson on the bulletin. The words broke in my head like the crust revealing soft bread.

With both feet, I stomped the brake. The truck bed shimmied and swung around. As I pulled the wheel left, the vehicle skidded right, hitting the ditch. I remember the face of Jesus fluttering before me as the contents of the cup holder clattered against the truck roof. The truck rolled to rest against the base of a tree, and I opened my eyes. Blood from my mouth streamed toward my forehead. Through webbing cracks in the windshield, the glow of a red body bouncing past prodded my consciousness.

“Am I right? Am I right with you, God?” I tasted the blood of my gums as the fox paused then pranced through the snow. My eyes rolled to search my heart.

The loud whine and vibration of a saw shocked me into awareness. My arms hung limply with my head dangling between. Voices yelled around me, and a woman wearing the dun colored gear of a volunteer fireman was trying to talk me into some sense of security, but her voice felt like needles in my head. Through a solid piece of unbroken windshield, I saw Paul standing with the kids on the roadside. Jacob twisted his head against Paul’s thigh. He should have been wearing his hat. The snowflakes, cottony and unmelted, clung to Naomi’s hair. She held Paul’s hand, her face warped into the straight lines and narrow lips of condemnation. Arms wrapped around themselves, Rachel and her husband anchored Paul at the side.

With all my effort, I moved an arm to wave. Mommy’s okay, I wanted them to understand. I’ll be alright, Paul. There are dinners in the freezer, and Jacob’s geography project is started in the family room. Don’t forget Naomi has dance. You have to wash her skirt. She won’t go without her wrap skirt. She’ll show you how to use the washer. And Tinkerbelle has a vet appointment. I sent all of those thoughts in a curl of my fingers, in a painful wave.

Paul was the first to turn away and Jacob with him. Naomi backed up, studying the wreckage of her mother and withdrawing. Rachel stayed. Her husband had retreated, scratching his scalp. Rachel watched. I blinked my eyes slowly and crinkled my fingers again. Don't go. Biting her lip, Rachel rubbed a mitten over her pale face. I blinked hard, and when I looked again, all that remained against the snow-blanketed countryside were flashing lights, diesel generators, and shouting firemen.

LEARNING TO RECKON

Thumbs stiff with morning grog and anxiety, Jim barely buttoned his shirt. But the argument he prepared for Louise seemed more certain as water streamed over his pink, fresh-shaved cheeks. Seeing loose skin jiggle in the mirror, he slapped his chin as if it would solidify his case.

Albert arrived with the first lavender shafts in the east sky, and, with the morning milking done and the herd pastured, they sat down to breakfast. Albert gobbled scrambled eggs, and Jim sucked his coffee. The one chair, with the cracked vinyl seat and little prints of daisies, had been empty since Mary passed. Forty-three years of marriage hadn't felt as long as the two months since she died. But for Mary, he would take his argument to Louise Ray. And for Albert.

It wasn't for Louise's hair that they called her a copperhead. Jim had encountered copperheads more often than he liked. They rarely struck unless provoked, but who trusted the slitted eyes and diamond heads?

Clearing his throat and stretching, Jim grumbled, "How's your ma, son? What's she up to?"

"She's sleepin' one off." Albert smacked a fly on his forearm. Rubbing away the fly body and mashing it with his toe into the yellow linoleum, he went back to his milk and funny papers.

Albert neared manhood in ways beyond a wispy shade of mustache and pimpled skin. When Beulah dropped in the stall a few mornings before and heaved with labor, Jim stroked her head, holding her firmly as Albert gripped the front legs of the calf to pull

it into the cool misty dawn. The little calf slid free but would not bawl after the long labor. Albert held his mouth over the calf's face and filled the new lungs with his own breath. Her chest would not rise. He punctured the calf's sensitive nose with a metal pick, and the calf's sharp intake of dewy air punctuated the short lull as Jim watched Albert work. Three breaths and the calf slumped against Albert, the sticky fluid of birth clinging to the boy's hands. Disappointment settled Albert's mouth, but he did not cry.

"Darn." Albert rubbed the calf's nose when a trickle of blood seeped from the puncture. "Some little fellers don't have a chance no matter how you try."

Strong as an ox, that boy, thought Jim. Gentle as a dove. Jim would keep him strong and kind. Louise had birthed Albert, but Jim would not settle for her to send the boy down to the quarry to work. He set Albert to mending the way-back, south fence and set his feet to the path leading to Louise.

So many years had passed since Jim ambled the trail in those woods that led to a little shack on a cleared hill. With each fall of his boot, he remembered the curious boy that dwelled within. Those oaks and elms, ashes and maples towered, and he marveled at their majesty as he had fifty years before. He scarcely crackled a twig beneath his feet because the secret and hidden lives of the woods are always worth glimpsing. Squirrels chattered, swinging on the limbs. Birds conversed, and poison ivy vines rustled over mossy logs. The sweet mélange of damp earth and honeysuckle swirled. Jim listened to his heartbeat, feeling like somehow everything made sense in that place.

The sweetness of a morning beneath that canopy could fool the mind but not the body. Jim caught sight of his own hand swinging, gnarled and veiny. The electric shock of pain streaked through his knees. He was no child anymore. A clump of giant

hemlocks, the fallen needles absorbing sound and releasing scent, guarded the end of the path. Shifting his shoulders, Jim stared through the trees to the pale, crooked-small shack. The old Ray place.

The air felt like Jim might grab a handful and wring it out. Thunderheads mounded on the horizon. With pants and shirt stuck to his body, Jim trudged through thigh-high grass, tufts and seeds collecting on his damp arms. Looking so much like her father, Louise Ray sagging against a twisted apple tree in hazy morning light.

Louise's back curled into the tree trunk. Her head lolled, mouth agape. A bottle, her tool and labor of choice just like her father, Old Runt, tipped in the grass. Ants marched along the lip of it, though Jim knew it would be bone-dry inside. The temporary and grotesque interest of watching a slumbering serpent settled on him. Freckles like Albert's dotted her nose. She held little of the sweet prettiness of her mother Alma, but she was not an unpleasant looking woman. Louise looked common, like an unremarkable, hardscrabble girl from the hills, Jim thought. Her brows drooped over her face like her father's, and her lips pouted full and thick. Purple puffs encircled her eyes. The breeze twisted strands of her black hair against the bark of the apple tree. Even on the hottest days of summer, a men's dirty work coat draped over her shoulders.

"Lookie what the cat dragged in," Louise croaked.

Quick to avert his gaze, Jim rubbed his nose. He'd never noticed the eyes twitch open.

"Louise. How do?"

"No need for your formalities here, Uncle Jim."

Louise swung her head around, the lazy motion at odds with her sharp stare she cast. She poked her finger into a nostril, twisting it, then rubbing the side of her hand over her nose. When she dropped her hand, Jim saw a long white scar crossing her chin.

“I didn’t come here for formalities.”

Louise rose, pressing against the tree for support. Flecks of bark sprinkled as her coat scraped against it. Her eyes, rarely blinking, never flinched from Jim as she pulled a wrinkled packet of Mail Pouch from the coat. She stuffed brown crumbles into her mouth, clenching them between her teeth before poking the mass behind her lower lip. She scrubbed her fingers against the smeared trousers, eyes remaining on Jim. As she shifted her coat to stuff the tobacco bag into a pocket, the pearl handle of a hunting knife caught the sunlight. Jim’s glance dropped to the handle for a second, and Louise Ray’s lips split. A trail of brown juice shot to the ground.

“Why’d you come here, Uncle Jim?” She drawled.

Jim twisted his thumb against his teeth and tasted the rust from an old milk can he had tossed on the scrap pile that morning. Spitting the little piece of flesh torn away, he replied, “I expect you can guess why I come.”

Louise yanked the knife from her belt and scraped it beneath her thumbnail. Watching the blade intently, she replied, “Maybe I do.” She leaned on the tree looking at her fingernails and breathing slowly. Every few moments, she’d adjust her chew, lower lip expanding and tongue maneuvering. “You know who I seen the other day?”

A woodpecker’s rappity, rap, rap echoed up from the woods. The faint scent of vinegar wafted from fallen apples, and the bees droned around, menacing but corpulent with late summer nectar. Louise’s eyelids sagged. Jim wondered if the alcohol still

roiled in her blood or if she prepared to wait on his miscalculations. That same sleepy look of her father dragged on her features. That same loose expression Jim saw on Old Runt's face just before he jumped into Jim's hog pen and stepped squarely across the back of the smallest piglet. He'd roamed in looking for money, and Jim had told him he ought to attend a job instead of the local saloon. Jim remembered the glassy eyes of the piglet as her little legs stopped churning in the air. Runt just walked away, reaching in his pocket for a rolling paper and his tobacco tin. Jim's neck prickled like the hackles of a dog. That was when he thought Louise had a chance at a better life, when Mary took her to Sunday school and mended her dresses because her father would have left her in rags.

"Christ, Louise! Christ!" Jim squeezed his left index finger under his thumb, and it popped. Forcing his shoulders down from his ears and clamping his jaws closed, he dragged a full breath in sharp and steady through flared nostrils. Albert. He thought of Albert. Smiling, kind, gentle Albert. Cow-naming, butterfly-chasing Albert.

Louise's face tilted toward him, sunlight dancing on her cheeks through the leaves. Her mouth moved into the slow teasing smile of a girl holding all the secrets a boy most wants to know.

"No, sir. Not Jesus Christ. I got things to say to him, though, if he comes round here."

Mischief and youth still hid in that face. Jim's heart opened a little to that girl, the same little one he'd picked up after she wrecked her first bike. The one he sat with after Denny Markle said she smelled like a skunk. Louise arched her neck, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. The round-eyed teenager who ran to his house in her bare feet

more than once because Runt had too much beer and not enough women at The Stag. She draped light fingers down her neck to the hollow where the throat joins the chest. Her fingers, long and thin, lingered in that indentation. A tiny pearl, the one Mary had given her on her fifteenth birthday, swayed there by her finger. She spat a stream of tobacco juice toward a wild daisy, and the flower drooped.

Her smile fell back to the hard lines and sagging brow. "That fat brother of yours come sniffing around."

"Fat brother?" Teeth clinched, Jim muttered, "Myron?"

"Mmmm. Yeah, round as a goddamn eight ball and dithering like a hen."

Jim bit his tongue wondering what Myron Black wanted with her. Myron hated to be seen any place with "the wrong sort of folk." He hated even more to have to talk to them. Louise Ray was "the wrong sort of folk" to the crowd of "wrong sort of folk" Myron avoided.

"That feller thinks something of himself. He come up asking questions about the deed." Louise rubbed a thumb along the blade of her glinting knife. "Seems he has some interest in this fine parcel. Thinks he can turn a tidy sum logging out them woods. He's been round to all the neighbors, he said."

The sun illuminated the whites of thunderheads, but the foundation of clouds obscured to shades of grey.

"I told him you own them trees. For my part, this is my grandpap and daddy's place." A grin twisted Louise's face. "My knife mighta got against the door of Myron's fancy truck."

“He’s Mary’s brother.” It was all Jim could think to say. “Myron was Mary’s brother.”

“Nothing alike, them two.” Louise straightened from the tree.

She held her mouth closed for some time, letting the wind blow strands of dark hair against her lips. A cool draft flapped the front of Louise’s coat. Jim knew it would rain.

“Half the county says you killed the best person they knew, Uncle Jim. Say you put her right in the grave.”

“You don’t know a thing about it.” A fly tickled across Jim’s neck before biting. Jerking his head, Jim slapped his hand across the spot as the fly zipped away. He hadn’t given Mary the pills. Just the water. Like she’d asked.

“I don’t know why she stayed with you. She sacrificed all them years so you could fiddle with that farm.”

So many hours in the day. There are only so many, and he’d spent his life working them. Mary’d said that was what she wanted, that life had to be that way. Just like in the end. The cancer would take her one way or another, she’d said.

“Killing her might be the kindest thing you did.” Louise’s face hovered near to Jim’s, her lips forming a thin, stretched line over her teeth but for the bulging tobacco on the right side. “You didn’t know the good thing you had. You didn’t know.”

Jim tried to return Louise’s anger, but a tear leaked out and trailed down his cheek. Louise stepped back and spit, hitting the same daisy without looking at it. Jim left the tear to fall.

“Oh, hell, Louise.”

"I'm sorry about Mary." Raising a hand to rub her nose, Louise muttered the apology from beneath it.

"Mary loved you."

"Yeah, well. I didn't give her much but trouble."

"She loved a lot of folks not worth the trouble either." Jim paused. "She was sick, you know. Tumors." He added quietly to himself, "I'd a given anything for her."

"That ain't enough, is it? Loving somebody?"

"Louise, I want Albert. I, I want to help your boy."

"I know what you want. But it won't happen." Knife still clutched in her fist, Louise rubbed the back of her hand across her face.

"I want your boy to have a life. To have a chance of being cared for and making a way for himself."

"You think I don't care for him?"

"You don't give a damn about the boy. Never have. You've thrown him away a thousand times. Screamed at him. Beat him bloody..."

"You better shut your damn mouth, old man."

"Abandoned him for what? To whore around with trash and drink and vomit. How could anyone think you care for him? You're the fool, just like your father, and his father before him."

"Don't talk about Runt and Old Sully. I won't stand for it." Louise gripped her knife, knuckles bulging.

"You can't see the forest for the cotton-picking trees. You got something wonderful and you treat him like the scum in your teeth. Just like your father, beating

you and carrying on with every loose skirt in town. Your father was a rotten hound, Louise. He didn't treat you right, and you are doing the same to Albert. I can't let it happen." Jim squared his shoulders. "I won't watch you spoil this boy, selling him to the quarry to make you some whiskey money." Jim's hands shook, and he saw droplets of spittle flying from his mouth. "I will take that boy from you, one way or another."

Throwing her head back and tossing her hair, Louise's laugh crackled across the yard. Her face darkened as the storm front covered the sun. Her fingers massaged the knife grip, but she stared up into the apple branches. Rose-hued fruit clung to the tree though it was gnarled and twisted. The dirty blouse expanded over Louise's breast as she sucked in air and blew it up to the tree leaves. When she dropped her head, she spewed her tobacco at Jim's feet. A sparkling tear held her eyelash.

"You are some kind of savior, ain't you, James Roberts? That boy isn't of much account."

In that moment, Jim saw Louise plainly. Like that apple tree, cursed and beaten by each successive year, not understanding the sweet things borne from the knotted roots. Bare. She was bare to him as the day he held her fresh and squirming little body. "He means nothing to you. You can carry on and never think another second about him. I'll take care of the boy. We'll be just across the woods."

"Why? What do you care? You never come for me?"

She knew. She knew Jim hadn't loved her like Mary did. Too many times she seemed every bit her father's daughter, with her wan face and sticky, filching fingers. Mary had always held an open place in her heart for Louise Ray but could never love her enough. Louise carried the violent streak of her birth. Headstrong and fiery, marked

with the scars of her rage and the torpor of deeper grief. Jim held Louise's existence against her. Louise held her existence against the world.

"You didn't need me," Jim replied, though he didn't believe it.

"You're selfish as any of us, Uncle Jim."

Louise whisked the teardrop from her lash and held her green eyes on Jim.

"Maybe you outta think about what the boy is worth to you." Louise pressed the knife point against her thumb until a tiny bubble of blood swelled. Thunder rumbled in the southwest, and an apple thudded the earth when the leaves swished.

Jim's arguments, whether well-planned or impassioned, evaporated. He looked back into the re-formed, hard lines of Louise Ray's face and cracked his ring finger and pinky beneath his thumb. Left without words or curses, Jim turned and strode down the yard and into the wooded path.

"Send *my* boy home, Uncle Jim. He's got work at the quarry at five in the morning," Louise crowed.

When the fat raindrops pelted and muddied the path, Jim smashed his feet harder into the ground. He did not pay any mind to the rain. He did not startle at the thunder.

Rain spilled down Jim's cheeks, but he could see well enough to find his .22 on the front porch. He meant the next bullet to stop the heart of a particular groundhog by the springhouse, but maybe it had another heart written on it. Jim wrapped his fingers around the barrel and picked up a few extra shells to account for the weakness of his gun. He backed down the porch steps, checking the rifle. Sheets of white rain obscured the route, but Jim's feet knew the way as an old cart horse knows the lane to home.

The front door smacked against the frame, and Jim turned. In Mary's old, flowered apron, Albert stood on the porch. He held a crocheted oven mitt in one hand and the crank of a hand mixer in the other.

"Jim! I got apple dumplings in the oven. Come on in here before you catch your death!" It was just the thing Mary might say.

"Albert." Jim called the boy's name, and the void created by Louise, the place with no thought or words filled in again. "I'm coming, Son."

The front steps creaked as Jim climbed to the porch. He leaned the rifle into the corner.

"What was you going to shoot?"

"Thought I saw that groundhog out yonder."

"Jim, she's got little ones! I seen them the other day eating clovers. You can't shoot the momma. They need her." Albert looked back at Jim, eyes round and pleading.

"Criminy, boy! That darn hog is ruining everything." Melly cat, soaked and bedraggled darted through the closing door. She planted herself on the linoleum, beginning her bath with vexingly soaked front feet.

Albert stopped and faced Jim. "You promise. And take them muddy boots off."

"I'm not shooting a thing, son. Not a thing." Jim bent to untie his laces, and grumbled about the paw prints running along the hall to Melly's puffed behind in the kitchen. There'd still be a reckoning with Louise.

Jim dragged his boot across the packed-earth floor. He reached behind his head and wiped at the sweat. Clinging to the doorframe, he peeked in as Alma clawed into the quilt beneath her hips. Beads of sweat trickled down the slope of her forehead. Her eyelids strained, flickering open then squeezing closed. She pointed her chin toward the metal shack roof. Her neck arched, and she gasped then pinched her lips in a thin line.

She'd looked at him once, and he had darted his eyes away to the window. Watching her face again, he recognized the faint color of youth in Alma's sunken cheek, yet so much hurt had softened the hue. He remembered the young girl. Quiet. Sweet. The way she used to look up at him through long lashes, blushing, when Mary brought her home for Sunday lunch. Those few years ago, the subtle fullness of her body hinted at womanhood, but he thought her as innocent as a child. Many sweet things spoil over time, he thought. Jim pursed his lips, feeling awkward and distinctly male in that time of birth.

"Just breathe, Little Alma. Have patience. The baby will come." Mary patted a damp rag over Alma's brow.

Alma rolled her eyes toward Mary, and Jim recognized the look. It was the desperate, frightened search for refuge mixed with the comprehension that this birth was a bridge once crossed. Jim knew those eyes. The loss of one life from the Earth while simultaneously drawing forth the newness of another life was no mystery to him. A beam of sunlight formed a pale square on Alma's stomach.

Mary held the rag against Alma's head and clutched the girl's hand. Mary had clasped the girl's hand through two miscarriages. Never through a full-term birth. Mary had buried their own baby, and Jim thought her devotion to Alma some sort of contrition.

Contrition for nature. The muscles of Mary's face fell to a hard frown. The lines around her lips deepened into frustration. He knew when she had asked him to come, something was amiss.

"I'll be right back, girl. Right back. Breathe." Mary set the rag in a chipped washbasin on a rough pine stand next to the bed. She smiled at Alma, her lips drawn too tight.

"Don't go, Mary." Alma clung to Mary's hand, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. Her legs splayed and tensed. Her thin shift clung against the roundness of her belly, the only soft spot on her bony frame. A crow cawed near the window, his shadow slicing through the beam of light on Alma.

"Be brave, Alma." Mary looked into the face with stern assurance, and Alma nodded.

Mary grasped Jim's hand and took him out the loosely hung door. It knocked behind them. Alma's husband, Runt, snored beneath the apple tree, a glass bottle with not a trickle of liquid leaned against his thigh. Jim looked at the ragged, snoring creature, drool pooling at his thick lips, heavy gray eyebrows falling low over his face and beneath his hat. Soft hands curled like a baby's fists. Jim spat against the wooden slat wall of the shack.

"Jim, what do you think?" Mary wrapped her arms around her waist as if it were mid-January instead of July.

"Mary, you know what I think. That baby's twisted. She needs the Doc."

Mary rubbed the heel of her hand across her forehead. Her face stretched and curls sprang from her bun at odd angles. Her eyes looked straight into Jim's. Sad eyes. Pleading eyes. Determined eyes.

"Get the car." She turned to reenter the shack.

"What for, Mary? She needs the Doc."

"He's a fool boy, Jim. You know more about birthing than some freckled schoolboy from Cleveland. We are taking her to the hospital." A sudden gust rolled across the yard waving the timothy grass, but Mary stood firm against it.

"Mary, she can't pay. She don't..." Jim dug his hands into his pockets, watching his wife.

Mary turned to go back to Alma. She stopped, turning her head over her shoulder. Her lips set in resolution, she spoke, "Jim."

He nodded, knowing no protestation would sway her mind and that he agreed anyway. He strode down the hill-slope toward the path in the woods that led to the Roberts' Farm. The shack door squealed on a rusty hinge behind him. He stared ahead to the fringe of trees, but his anger bubbled like a flooded brook. How could a sweet child like Alma deserve this pain? His chest constricted. He pulled his hand from his pocket and rubbed his nose. A bluebird flitted into the apple tree. Jim neared Runt and smelled the bittersweet stench of grain alcohol mixed with sour urine and rotting apples. He looked down at the heap of a man, pulled his leg back and landed a solid kick to Runt's ribs. Runt wheezed and yelped, looking up at Jim.

"Goddamn!" Runt screeched clutching his side.

Jim bent and grabbed the man's shirt collar, wrapping some chin and chest hairs in his grip. He pressed Runt into the shaggy tree bark. The bones in Jim's hand felt near cracking. "You'd best be gone when I return." Jim's voice sliced through Runt's softness like a knife through bread. He dropped Runt like a sack of feed and stalked down the path. His lungs filled with the moist air beneath the forest canopy.

A few minutes later, Jim rolled up the road, dust clouding behind him and chips of gravel snapping under the tires. Black-eyed Susans bobbed in the rumbling wake of the Plymouth. Sun reflected off the long hood. Jim forced in the clutch and jerked the stick as the gears grinded reluctantly. A faint shape remained pressed in the grass beneath the apple tree. Runt was nowhere visible.

Jim snatched the door back and hurried in to Alma. Mary held a bundled quilt. Her face scrunched into more immediate concern. Jim scooped Alma without a word, and she moaned. He felt the dampness of her body against his forearms. She rested against him, limp and weak as a kitten. Her head pressed into Jim's shoulder, and she smelled of old sweat and grass after a rain. Mary ran around before them opening the back door to the Plymouth. Jim slid the frail girl inside as delicately as he could. She barely clung to consciousness. He bent himself over and backed out from the vehicle. Mary touched his arm and moved in beside Alma. Jim scrubbed the beads of sweat now spreading over his face.

"Please, God, deliver this poor girl," Jim thought as he skidded around the car. Jim rarely prayed. He dropped into the driver's seat, and the car roared. He tugged the wide wheel round and bounced out the yard to the road. The tires spun in the loose dirt.

Jim maneuvered the car over the country lanes as swiftly as he could. His heart raced along with the engine. His knuckles poked out of his hands over the wheel. Mary cooed, but he heard Alma's ragged breathing and sobs. He pulled on to the state road, still rough and rutted from wagon wheels and machinery. He forced the accelerator down.

They passed through town, whizzing past the churches, homes, and courthouses. A gaggle of boys on the corner pointed as the Plymouth zipped by. The nearest hospital was twenty-five miles away. Jim repeated in his head, "We're going to make it. We're going to make it."

He barreled into an s-curve, and Mary said, "Jim, pull over. We aren't going to make it. Pull over." He closed his eyes for a moment, then coasted into Woodman's Orchard alongside the road. The sun slanted through the rows of trees. He grasped the door handle hard and got out.

Mary jumped out. "Jim, you've got to look. You have to help her."

Jim wanted to walk out into the field of apples and pears while the sun set and the fireflies rose, but he walked around to his wife. "Alright, Mary."

Alma heaved. Her eyes rolled and she whimpered. She grunted, pushing down on her hips while clutching the seat. Then, she sank back and made no sound at all. Just hard breath.

Jim peered into the car. Alma's knees bent, her shift tenting over them, leaving her exposed.

"Oh, lord," Jim exhaled. He bent into the seat. He dragged a hand over his face for the twentieth time that afternoon, but he saw no way around it.

“Alma, I have to feel for the baby.”

Mary crawled into the driver’s seat, hanging her hand over the back and taking hold of Alma’s limp palm. Alma moaned.

Jim looked at Alma, but she was no cow. He couldn’t reach his arm shoulder deep and pat around her uterus. He bit his lip and did his best. Alma didn’t twitch. Jim felt a head. Alma grunted again and began to bear down. Jim waited. When she finished, he checked again. The child hadn’t shifted.

“That baby won’t come, Mary. I have to cut. Alma’s too weak to birth it.”

“Whatever you think, Jim.” Mary looked grave and pale.

Jim withdrew a pocketknife and pulled a thin blade out. Stomach constricting, he made the cut. He cut a little farther. Alma stayed still.

“Alma, you have to push hard for as long as you can.” Jim looked at her drained face. He felt the prickle of doubt but refused to submit.

“Alma, you have to push.”

“Save the baby.” She whispered. “Cut my belly.”

Jim wanted to vomit, but he’d already considered the option. Truth was, he wanted to save Alma, not the baby of filth like Runt Ray.

“No, Alma. We can do this. I’ve done this before.” Jim looked at Mary wondering if she judged that lie. She nodded at him. She wanted to be reassured, too.

“Are you ready, Alma? On the count of three. One, two, three.”

Alma growled and arched her pelvis off the seat. Jim overcame any sense of delicacy and pushed in between her perspiring thighs. Blood rushed on to the seat, but the baby’s head also became visible. With no thought for the pain, Jim reached his hands

around as much of the baby's skull as he could and tugged it. He held it gently yet with firm surety.

"Push, Alma!"

She cried out.

"Jim?" Mary questioned and searched between the faces of Alma and her husband.

"You have to push! It's coming."

Alma's growl died into a squeak. Jim held the baby's neck. When he found shoulders, he pulled. The baby slipped the bonds of womb and canal, the quiet sucking sounds of a wounded body behind it.

"Sweet, Jesus! Alma, thank the Lord! Your baby!" Mary smiled.

Jim saw the color of the baby. He rolled it in his arm and slapped its back. In an instant, the little girl shrieked.

"It's a little girl, Alma." Jim searched for her arms as daylight faded. Alma did not reach for her baby. Mary reached for it instead. As Jim leaned forward to hand the girl to Mary, his hand slid in a puddle on the seat. The blood pooled beneath Alma and crept toward Jim at the door.

"Alma. Alma." Jim repeated. Her eyes flickered open. "Alma, are you okay? I didn't cut that much. I swear."

Alma's breath rasped. She said, "Thank you, Jim. Mary. Help Louise."

Before Jim was able to ask her to fight for her life, Alma Ray sighed her final breath. Her mouth fell slack and she sank into the dark space of the seat. Tears rolled over Mary's cheeks as she cradled the wailing baby.

Jim backed out of the car, standing in the twilight. A sliver of moon hung askew. Tree frogs trilled as the first fireflies flickered from in the obscurity. One of them alighted on Jim's forearm, little legs tickling along the trail of muscle. What had the bug found there worth announcing, Jim wondered to himself. What could be worth the glow on this night? Jim balled his hands, feeling the sticky coating and squeezing them tighter for it. He wished they'd pop and shatter. He forced them open, lifted his arm, and puffed a little air beneath the firefly, setting it to the breeze again. A little tear mingled with sweat when he heard Mary humming to the restless child.

"Preacher?"

Seeing Jim at the edge of the garden, the pastor straightened slowly, every vertebrae sliding into place as he drew himself up to his full, erect height. He pulled his hankie out, a dainty little cloth with pink roses embroidered on the corner, and dragged the threadbare square over his forehead before jamming it into his pocket. Pastor Thomas licked his lips, rough with salt.

"Jim." He extended a hand, and Jim grasped it. "How can I help you?" Thomas held on until Jim dropped his hand.

Jim stepped back and looked out over the field behind the parsonage. The corn stood high, covering half the sky from where they stood. The pastor looked back at his tomato plants. The heat of summer had coaxed them into tall bushes, but the shortened days showed in the gangly growth and yellowing leaves.

"You got a tomato worm."

“What?” Thomas had been looking at the plant but thinking on Jim’s unexpected presence.

“See the black pellets? The missing leaves? Half-eaten fruit? Hornworm. Tomato worm. Greedy fellers.”

“Oh, yes. I think it must be a hornworm. I never can see the little blighters.”

Jim stepped forward, brushing past Thomas. A low branch of the plant bobbed as Jim plucked a fat worm up.

Jim opened his palm, and the worm wriggled. The size of a large man’s thumb, the body writhed being so far from safe and verdant stalks. The worm’s hook jutted like a curved dagger, but it did no harm. Jim touched it with his other fingers.

“You know what this becomes?” Jim raised his brows, questioning the pastor.

“Can’t say I do, Jim. Filthy creature has eaten half of my Marglobes!”

“A hummingbird moth. The wings beat like a hummingbird. Sort of beautiful in its way.” Jim traipsed between tomatoes. When he reached the edge of the field, corn tassels waving, he lowered an open palm to the ground and rolled the worm onto the dirt. “I can’t guarantee he won’t be back.”

Pastor Thomas rubbed a forearm over his face while watching Jim.

“I need to talk to you about Albert.” The sunlight reflecting from the two-story white parsonage made Jim squint. Pink zinnias toppled into the yard, shoved into the grass by the previous day’s rain. Jim imagined a little, garden-gloved church lady would be out later with twine and stakes. Probably a casserole, too.

“Nice boy. He has taken a great interest in Sunday School of late. He recited all of the books of the Bible two weeks ago.”

Jim coughed and looked at his boots. Both men knew Jim had no interest in Leviticus and Lamentations. “Yes, well.”

Pastor Thomas smiled at Jim. “What about Albert?”

Jim searched his mind for words. Only memories of Louise’s contorted face surfaced. They rocked up like a dead fish, rising from a depth and bobbing there. He rarely dreamed, but he had last night. Thunder cracks roused him, and he resettled each time into the hazy vision of his hands wrapped around Louise’s neck. But then her face transformed into her father’s, Runt.

“Jim?” Pastor Thomas bent a little to pinch a shoot from the top of his tomato plant.

A crow roused from the corn, taking two hops before launching down through the curve of valley. Wings stroking the air ponderously, the crow’s caws reverberated against the sloping hills. The little clapboard church rested on wide, misshapen sandstones with pin oaks swaying over the slate roof. White headstones crumbled in the yard, timothy tall and waving between. A new stone had dirt heaped at its base. Norman Miller. Ten days older than dirt, Jim thought. Now under it.

“Well,” Jim watched the country church in the vale for a moment longer. A sweet place. Bittersweet like the waxy peel of red apples. He turned and looked right into the face of the pastor, tanned and handsome.

“Louise Ray is fixing to force Albert into the quarry. She isn’t letting him back to school and won’t let him back to the farm, she says.”

“You talked to her? Why would she do that?” Thomas’s brows came together.

Jim rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "I talked to her. If you can talk to her. You want to go cast out Satan? Up on yon hill..." Jim coughed. "Maybe she wants drinking money. Maybe she wants rid of the boy. That quarry breaks men. Go on down there second shift and watch 'em limp to their vehicles. She's got no love for the boy, Thomas."

The pastor leaned in when Jim used his name instead of calling him "Preacher."

"I asked her for Albert. Told her I could care for him. She won't have it. She can't love that boy. She can't love anything but a cheap bottle of whiskey. Her father was rotten, and he spoiled her, too. I won't speak hate to you, Thomas, because it isn't your way, but I don't see any way around that snake but to chop her head off." Jim felt a little regret in saying this considering the suspicion about Mary in town. His very good wife and Jim's very bad manner. Her buried so quickly on the hill behind the barn. He heard the murmurs even without talking to the neighbors. Louise was the first to say it to his face. "I don't know what to do. We need help," he mumbled, looking at his boots again.

A blur caught Jim's eye near the flowers along the house side. Melly cat dived for a grasshopper. She clasped her paws over the spot she'd landed on. Her rigid back bristled with anticipation, and the furry tail whipped.

"Shoot, Melly. She followed me down." A little glad for the distraction, Jim jerked a thumb at the cat.

Pastor Thomas studied Melly, looking beyond her though, really.

"I got no need of another mouth to feed. Myron's poking around. Early drought was hard on crops."

“Myron said you might sell the herd or lose the farm.” Thomas still looked at the cat, and the words dropped out absently.

“Myron don’t know his head from a hole in the ground.” If Melly felt two pair of eyes regarding her activities, she gave no sign of it. She lifted her paws carefully, and the grasshopper emerged. Splitting her feet just wide enough, the insect leaped and she pounced after it.

“I don’t know what she’s playing at, Thomas, but we can’t let that boy go to the quarry. He isn’t hard like that. It’d kill him. They’ll gopher him around that old slag heap, all that trash from the steel mills coming down from Canton. He does a good day’s work at the farm. That quarry’ll be poison to him.”

Thomas had seen the men from the quarry. Dirty and mean with exhaustion. He read Psalms to Dan Mackey when his left arm had been crushed by some gritty hydraulic press. That arm, twisted, limp, and purple, rested on Dan’s mother’s linen tablecloth until Flinner’s Funeral Parlor hearse, which doubled as ambulance, drove him to the hospital. When Thomas saw Dan again, he was a man one arm lighter. He went back to the quarry two weeks later. People talked about the disreputable dealings of the owner, an Italian from Youngstown with interests beyond men but not beyond profit. Thomas hadn’t made up his mind about all that, only having seen the swarthy, round gentleman once. It made a stir when he came into town, which was rare. Thomas scrubbed his hands over his hair, thinking of the oil reflecting sun in that man from Youngstown’s mane when he had taken off his hat.

“Too many boys lose too much innocence too quickly,” Thomas said rubbing a puckered scar on his arm. When Jim glanced at it, Thomas smiled. “I haven’t always been a pastor, you know. Where’s Albert now?”

“He stayed in the guest room, which is his now, I spose. I took him down to Francis Wright’s shop. Louise’ll be too drunk to snoop there. Francis said he could use the help for few afternoons.” Jim twisted a heel in the soft earth. “That’s what he said, anyhow.”

“And you think it was more a favor? Does it cost you so much to have help?”

Jim grunted.

“Because it would cost me not to give it.” Pastor Thomas’ mouth fell back into the thin line of concern. “Did you talk to the authorities? The Sheriff or anyone?”

“I got nothing to tell them about Louise Ray they haven’t heard. Sheriff Coonie Collins,” Jim slurred the name, “couldn’t be bothered to piss on his wife if she was afire.” Jim shook his heading adding, “Sorry, Preacher.”

“So you haven’t called them?”

“Wouldn’t do any good.”

“Good.”

Pastor Thomas picked a black and yellow stripped beetle from a cucumber vine and pinched. Jim heard the crunch of its shell. The pastor flicked it to the grass, turned, and strode toward his house. Jim watched him go, shirt tucked in evenly with a smear of sweat down the back. Thomas held his head high as he marched through the yard to the house. Jim knelt and wiggled his fingers. As Melly cat jaunted over and collapsed belly

up, Jim's eyes stayed on the shape of the pastor. Melly's fluff absorbed his hand, and he muttered, "I don't know, Melly. I just don't know."

Glass shattered, shards bursting and glittering in the daylight. Amber drops streamed down the gray clapboard. One jagged angle of crystal wedged in the board and shivered from the force. Louise raised her chin, scratching her neck with a thumbnail. Her dingy teeth bit into the purplish puff of lower lip. She slumped back against the door that hung crookedly on one rusted hinge. The slatted porch, scarcely big enough to accommodate a body, squealed beneath her weight. Her watery eyes rolled toward the men standing in her yard.

"I am sorry, Louise. That bottle slipped from my hand." Pastor Thomas stared at her, his eyes, usually so warm and chocolaty, dulled and darkened.

Jim saw the glint of glass powdering Louise's hair, and he gaped. He leaned away from the pastor like it was a man he did not know and stuffed his hands beneath his armpits.

Louise shivered when she returned Thomas's stare. Her fat lip and bruised temple attested to Louise's acquaintance with the hands of violent men. This, though. This was something different. This was a man who'd come to give her communion. His soft hands had bathed her bleeding brow after she'd been left in the alley behind the West Virginian Tavern. Pastor Thomas offered her, Louise Ray, salvation. He extended to her an open palm that she had always slapped away with disdain and surety that it would extend again. But here he stood, a hard-faced man who'd seen the mangled bodies of

wartime and tortured souls of everyday. Louise knew, even in a stupor, what she had slapped away all those times. She felt the precious kindness withdraw, and it hurt more than a blow to her cheek.

“I guess you and Jesus can’t hold your liquor,” Louise drawled, her face forming a smug expression over the saggy cheeks of drunkenness.

Jim convulsed in a fit of laughter, the accusatory pun cracking the tension into a joke all the more comical for its falling into conversation inappropriately.

Louise twisted to look at Jim, her upper lip creeping toward her nose and jugular vein throbbing in her throat. Narrowing his lids under Louise’s scrutiny, Jim forced his lips into a tight line.

Pastor Thomas said in a pious tone, “Indeed, Louise. You are a keen observer of the faith.” He turned to Jim and chuckled, storms still threatening in his dark eyes and gathering brow.

“You can go to Hell. You and your precious Jesus and Goddamned Uncle Jim.” Louise jerked forward and spat the words, knowing her venom was weak. Tears rolled down her cheeks when she settled back against the groaning door.

Thomas saw the tears, and he smiled. “Oh, Louise. You’ve had so many chances.” The pastor knelt before her, and she broke into ragged sobs.

Jim’s stomach knotted. He had offered nothing more to the conversation than a clipped greeting to Louise. He stood to the side and watched Pastor Thomas work on the woman until she collapsed into that sniveling heap on the porch. Thomas offered her courtesy and mercy. Kindness and conversation. But the language Thomas knew she’d understand, threats and violence, made Jim queasy. Louise had exhausted her efforts at

coy acquiescence, seduction, defiance, and out-right hostility. Thomas rolled through the efforts of Louise until she had no energy to fight. The rigidity of the pastor's spine, even as he kneeled before Louise, shocked Jim. After all of their history, Jim was not immune to the cries of the woman.

Thomas reached a spread hand to her neck, and Jim held his breath. Thomas brushed the mass of tangles over her shoulder and patted her arm. Barely able to drag oxygen in through her open mouth, Louise sobbed harder. Her hands balled into fists, pressing against her thighs. Thomas leaned in so close. Jim stepped forward, the smell of alcohol filtering in with piquant grass. Jim balanced on the balls of his feet. Thomas lifted the edge of Louise's coat, the thing stiff with filth. A pearly handle, curved and sensual, absorbed the sun in iridescent waves. Gentle and light-fingered, Thomas drew the knife from Louise's inner pocket. She watched him through flooded eyes. Jim heard the knife blade scrape past the bond of the pocket and his fingers twitched. He looked to the pastor, then to Louise. Back to the pastor.

Thomas clutched the knife in a sure hand. Steadily, he squeezed it, knuckles white and firm. Louise turned vacant and wet eyes to the horizon beyond. Her neck and chest opened to the pastor as she pushed against the door. The knife balanced between them, the pastor and the woman, blade throwing dancing diamond reflections on the porch. Thomas twisted, the knife glinting, and he flung it in a fluid arc toward a stump. The knife knocked the side of the stump and tumbled to the ground. Thomas looked at Jim and shrugged. Jim rolled back on his heels, dabbing a hankie across the dribbles on his temple.

“Louise, you know why we came.” She held her face away from the pastor, her shoulders trembling every few moments. Thomas rested his hand on her knee and said, “Albert.” He peered into her scrunched face, and she nodded.

Growing to his full height, tall and lean, Pastor Thomas still held his body as erect as the Cross. He reached into his trouser pocket, withdrawing a stack of folded bills. Licking his lips, the pastor uncurled the wad.

As the stack slapped the porch boards, Jim gasped.

Louise looked at the cash and then at the pastor. Red puffs around her eyes matched the bruises of her lip and temple. She exhaled jaggedly, like a dull saw skipping over a log. She made no move to the money, only wrapped her arms about her chest and looked again to the distance, tears leaking in streams over her cheeks.

“It isn’t a request, Louise. It’s a deal.” Pastor Thomas showed all his brilliant teeth as he ran a palm over the smooth, black hair. “Jesus loves you.”

Thomas strode down the hill to the woods, but Jim stayed there a moment with Louise. There again sat the broken-hearted little ragamuffin he’d known since she was born.

“I’m sorry, Louise. I should have done the same for you.”

Jim thought he heard gunshots as he walked back through the woods. But he left Louise to make her choices and walked home to milk his cows with Albert.

EIGHTY-SEVEN DAYS

Sheila grunted, the excitement stirring her emphysema. “Let me shoot him, Timmy! Let’s shoot him!”

“Back up, Sheila. I’ll handle this.” Timmy clenched his jaw, wiped his neck with a bandana, and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

“Yeah, but we’re gonna have to kill him.”

“Sheila.” Timmy’s voice rose a few notes as his eyes rolled up. “Granny.”

“Don’t call me that! I’m too darn young.” Sheila’s leathery lips poked out.

Timmy regripped the pepper spray can, his index finger feathering the button as the heap on the ground wriggled and moaned. Shifting his stance, Timmy leaned right, then left. Lunge-ready. Like a wild cat, with pepper spray.

“You ain’t getting my beans, you sum bitch!” Sheila weaved toward the heaped man like a frenzied rabbit. A thin swish of silty dirt sprayed the man’s back. Sheila grimaced, contacting the body on her second kick. Her flip-flop thunked against ribs. Gray hair wisped out of her ponytail and covered her eyes as she wobbled. She braced herself with the AK47, barrel in the dirt and the butt against her palm. Lids squinted, she bit her lip in satisfaction.

Timmy was envisioning himself, the stalking wildcat, that crouching moment just before a pounce, when the sound of a weak kick and the sight of an assault rifle being used as a cane spooked his inner feline. “Sheila! Gimme that gun, damn it! Give it here.”

Sheila whisked the gun into her thin arms. Her face softening into a pitiful plea, she cradled it tight against her flat bosom.

“But you said I could hold the gun. Come on now, Timmy.” Sheila turned her back to him, her eyes cornering on the man curled into a ball on the ground.

“If you can’t be responsible with these firearms, Granny...” Timmy reached around Sheila’s pink cardiganed back and locked his hand on the gun.

“Granny shmanny. Alright.” Sheila relinquished it, turning to kick another cloud of dust over the quivering heap. “I don’t need guns to do my work. But I ain’t nobody’s Granny!”

“You all are crazy,” the heap mumbled between sobs.

Timmy flicked his focus to the ground.

“I warned you, Arliss. What you coming round here for anyhow?” Timmy pocketed his pepper spray into one of five bulging pouches of his cargo pants. Even as he questioned Arliss, Timmy felt a warm pride at how many knives, energy bars, pepper sprays, multi-tools, match packs, and the bottle of sunscreen he’d fit into those pants. Timmy nodded to himself. He knew the value of things. His thumb grazed over the sunscreen cap next to his pepper spray. Skin cancer would be no joke in times like these. “How’re you still alive?” He tugged his pants’ waist up with one hand, balancing the gun in the other.

Arliss struggled to think. He struggled to move. He pulled an arm down from his face for a moment, searching for Timmy with bleary eyes. A long, blistering burn covered his cheek and melted into the forearm between his head and the ground. Fresh pink skin formed around the burns. They’d never really heal, he didn’t think.

"I...I," Arliss stuttered but Sheila rushed over, yanking a pepper spray can out of her tattered jeans pocket, and fogged him all over again.

Arliss cried out and rolled, rubbing his face with the stomach of his faded black t-shirt. The spray burned his eyes and nose, and thick dust caked the saliva strings on his chin.

"Damn it, Sheila!" Timmy seized the spray, shaking it away from Sheila's wrinkled hand. "You go over there. You put your back against that tree. I don't want to see you move." Timmy pointed to the spindly trunk of the ash tree.

"But, Timmy!"

"That tree." It was the only green in the vast expanse of dirt hilltops and shards of charred tree trunks. A lonely spray of green where Appalachian spring used to bloom.

Sheila lowered her head like a scolded dog and shuffled a few feet toward the tree. She looked back at Arliss, narrowing her eyes and mumbling, "Think you're gonna get my beans? You got another thing coming. I'll give you beans, Arliss Hatch. I'll give you beans where the sun don't..."

A snap of Timmy's fingers stopped Sheila's murmured monologue. She scuttled to the tree. Pressing her back into the bark, she smiled demurely back at her grandson.

Sheila looked at the wide shoulders and thick neck of Timmy. His shaved head gleamed in the haze of sun. Thick stubble shadowed his shallow jaw. His gray t-shirt darkened beneath his arms as the sky poured down a torrent of heat. Sheila relaxed her aching spine against the tree, preparing to watch Timmy do the dirty work. She hoped he would do the dirty work.

Sheila didn't doubt Timmy's physical strength, never doubted his intelligence or commitment to the preparations. She doubted Timmy's resolve to use the gun. Her nostril flinched.

"Arliss, let the air get to your eyes. It'll help." Timmy kneeled over Arliss.

Arliss sniveled and murmured, "Sons a bitches."

Sheila, squinted over the folding hills. That's all there was in every direction. Charcoal earth meeting flame sky. The sun raped the parched land as it had every day of the last three months. Even the leaves above her curled and shriveled in the lonely tree. Smoke trails didn't wind in the east sky anymore, and the last ash fell like rain nearly seven days ago. Five of their goats dropped dead already. Hair fell out and skin blistered. They dropped to their knees, one at a time, and gave a final scream. Sheila licked saliva drops back to her gums when she saw the last crying goats collapse. Timmy burned them when she returned to the bunker to get a knife. It was a darn waste. Timmy wanted to understand what was happening to the world, but Sheila didn't need to know. She had spent over half of her life preparing. It was the end. That was all. The end for those who hadn't been prepared like she was prepared.

"Sheila Stubbs don't go down without a fight." She repeated it in her brain while turning back to see Timmy helping Arliss sit up. Sheila snorted and spat a wad. The hard curve of a closed pocketknife dug into her buttocks as she scrubbed her back into the tree bark. She smiled to herself. "No, sir. Sheila Stubbs don't go down easy." She reconsidered. "Sheila Stubbs only goes down easy for a long drank water in cowboy boots." Thinking of her departed beau, Harlan Stubbs, puckered her mouth. Everybody she ever met had to admit Harlan knew how to wear a pair of Wranglers. Sheila licked

the gap around her incisor. Harlan could shoot off the head of a timber rattler at fifty paces. She told him not to drink that last beer. Never heard the coal truck come up behind him outside the I-64 Diner. Not enough rations for three anyway, and Timmy was blood kin.

Sheila glanced back at Timmy and tried to love him. It wasn't the boy's fault his grandpap hadn't been Harlan. That vacuum salesman knew how to sell, just not vaccums. Timmy's mama had the salesman's chin and so did Timmy, as Sheila remembered it. It wasn't the boy's fault his mama let him play with dolls before she died. Sheila told her daughter more than once, "Your head is ate up with chemicals. You need to stop that chemo and look to ginseng roots." Didn't matter, though. She died, and Timmy, an adult man, still had a Cabbage Patch dressed like an astronaut on his bed. The jagged edge of a cracked molar stung the back of Sheila's tongue.

"Arliss, how'd you get here? We won't hurt you." Timmy's eyes darted to Sheila.

Arliss choked on the air. Timmy smelled it, too. The vague weight of something caustic riding the breeze. Not knowing what it was or from where it wafted, he worried about it. They had stockpiled water and food, ammunition and livestock. Not oxygen. Not enough to survive on. He wondered how long before Sheila's hair fell out, and she dropped with one final bleat like the goats.

Timmy didn't have to look at Sheila to see the smirk, to see that face held by wrinkles in a state of permanent bemusement. Life handed Sheila many piles of crap, and Timmy knew she flung them right back. He respected her mix of piss and vinegar, as she called it. He wondered if it had ever been tempered with honey. Every year in

school, he recognized the head tilt, wide eyes, and compressed smiles of pity from new teachers as he related his lineage. When he'd go to play at a new friend's house, the parents would ask, "Who's your pa?" He'd mumble that he lived with his Granny Sheila down in Stroat Holler. Repeat play date invitations weren't issued. Sheila's sharp eyes, blue as Lonesome Creek after the spring thaw, at least as blue as it used to be, cut to Timmy. He occupied himself with the man on the ground.

Arliss still sputtered, so Timmy slapped his back. Crying out, fresh tears rolled down Arliss's cheeks. Timmy noticed burns coiled up the man's arm and beneath the sleeve. The same rosy bubbles peeked through a fraying hole in the back of Arliss's t-shirt.

Unable to behold the agony of Arliss or to stop the man's cough, Timmy's face dropped. He followed the trail of shuffled steps over to Sheila's feet. Thin wedges of the rubber flip-flops wore unevenly beneath her. Her corn-colored toenails curved over the dirt-splotched toes. At least one of those nails had abandoned Sheila's callused foot. He found it curled by the sink. Holding it out in a pair of pliers, he asked Sheila why her toenail occupied space where they might prepare food. She replied that she was saving it until she found the crazy glue. Timmy burned it with the goats.

The brown, cracking straps of Sheila's flip-flops fueled a rising fire within Timmy. Every day for the last five years, he told himself, "If I have to hear those damn thongs one more day..." He never finished the thought. When most of the planet's inhabitants were likely dead, he and those flip-flops shared the same living quarters. He felt those flops suck his life as they sucked Sheila's arches down the concrete hall of their bunker.

“Timmy.” Arliss grabbed at Timmy’s cargo pants desperately. “Timmy, I been everywhere. I been walking the roads looking for anything alive. There’s nothing, man. Nothing. There’s just bodies down in Hastingsville. Cars on the roads, bodies in the buildings. People are burned up, man. I don’t know, man. I don’t know.” Arliss shuddered.

“How’d you make it out here, Arliss? What about Tam and the kids? What happened to your arm? There isn’t anything? No signs? No news?” Questions bubbled and burst to the surface of Timmy. His eyes raked over Arliss’s face.

“Tam and Jess. Riley. Oh God!” Arliss doubled over, dry heaving.

Timmy felt a part of the spectacle. Eighty-seven days had passed with towers of smoke across the horizon, ash falling, sun burning. Otherwise, there was nothing. No birds or flies. No planes or sirens. Three days of static on the television before that ceased. Just silence on the radio. This blistered, heaving, frail man was the only clue Timmy gained. Timmy was patient. He pulled a metal water can from his lowest right calf pocket, letting the can clank against a knife.

“Take a drink, Arliss.” Timmy pulled out one of his energy bars, the kind with peanuts and chocolate chips. He favored them when he was weight training. He used to carry a hamburger patty in his shirt pocket because Sheila said those were better for him than some nutty bar. The other men in the weight room watched him eat his hamburger, and it made him uncomfortable. He bought a year’s supply of the peanut and chocolate chip protein bars.

Arliss poured the water over his mouth, rivulets running through his beard and moistening the caked dirt. Sheila gasped and shuffled around her tree when Timmy passed over the energy bar.

“You can’t keep the whole world alive, Timmy! Sweet Jesus.” Sheila covered her face with her hands.

Timmy squatted next to Arliss while the sun began to sink into the mustard haze of the horizon. In the sideways rays, Arliss pulled his thoughts back from the edge of human suffering. Timmy let the AK47 straddle his lap.

“When I was in Hastingsville,” Arliss took a deep breath. “When I was in town, I went to every place. I was just looking for any life, you know?” Arliss paused, looking at his boot. His matted beard quivered, and red rimmed his eyes. Tears welled again.

“Timmy, I was in McIntire’s Electronics. Wasn’t nothing working. I set down next to an old radio Jonesy used to keep in the back, you know? I was just tired. Half-crazed. But I heard something on there, Timmy.” Arliss moved closer to Timmy’s face, his eyes drilling into it. “I heard... something.”

“What was it, Arliss? What’d you hear?” Timmy’s long forehead crumpled just above his eyebrows as he grabbed Arliss’ hand.

Arliss pulled his hand away. He rubbed it through his oily mullet, which had grown to a shaggy kind of mane. “I don’t know, Tim. I just heard voices. Weird voices. I called out, and they disappeared.”

Sheila roared to life. “You what?” She stumbled behind Timmy, grabbing a thin branch off the ground before she fell. With a puff she struggled back to her feet. She ambled close enough to Arliss to whack him with the branch. “You dummy!”

“Hey, Sheila!” Timmy stood up and grabbed her thin shoulders. He steered her back to the tree. “I told you to stay here.”

“He’s a fool. He just told everybody we’re out here.” Covering her wrinkly lips with an arthritic hand, Sheila shook her head.

“I’m handling this. Stay here, watch, and listen.” Timmy patted her shoulder more to assert that she should stay than to comfort her. “You hear anything else, Arliss? Couldn’t understand what was being said?”

“No. I don’t know. I just called out saying I was in Hastingsville, Ohio.”

“Boy, Arliss Hatch, your momma dropped you on your head one too many times. She wasn’t a genius herself. If you was mine...slap some sense into that greazy head.” Sheila crossed her left arm beneath her sagging breasts. Her right thumb flicked crud from beneath the fingernail of her middle finger.

“Sheila,” Timmy sighed.

“I’m just backing you up, Tim. The whole valley knows it’s Gospel truth.” Sheila arched an eyebrow, watching Arliss shift. “They did before they died, anyway.” She ran a pink tongue over her lips. Harlan was at rest in Jennings’ Knob Cemetery, and Timmy was with her. Sheila didn’t care for the rest. The setting sun caught in the folds of her sallow cheeks.

Pushing the AK47 onto the ground, Timmy rolled his backside into the dirt and sat cross-legged.

“Arliss, how’d you come to survive?” Timmy tilted his head in wonder. He saw the changes eighty-seven days had impressed on Arliss. The man looked flat. Timmy and Sheila had discussed the potential appearance of squatters, thieves, and bandits

during their years of preparation. He expected he might know some of them. But the battered face of Arliss Hatch? Timmy never expected trying to search for knowledge in that simple plumber like searching for gold nuggets. The self-preservation skills that Sheila had funneled into him never seemed to overcome his sense of empathy. Not the way his Granny Sheila told him they should. Timmy felt the softness grow under his ribs as it had on his tenth birthday when he let a buck wander beyond the range of his rifle. Papaw Harlan said, "Boy, you are slow and thick as molasses" and took down that buck anyway.

"I was down in the basement of the courthouse working on the water heater. I don't even know what happened. An explosion. I don't know. I was knocked off my feet and hit my head on a pipe. Not even sure how long I was down there." Arliss followed Timmy's eyes to the red and pink swirls on his arm. "These wasn't there when I woke up. They just come up a few weeks ago when I was washing up in Elk's Creek." Arliss paused. He felt the burden of the things he'd seen pressing hard against his heart. "I come out of the courthouse, and..." He looked away. "So, I run home. The cars wouldn't start, so I run. I didn't even get up the driveway before I seen them." Arliss pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

Timmy wanted to know what happened to Tam and the kids, but the grief suffocating Arliss knotted Timmy's stomach. Timmy imagined the bodies askew in the yard in front of the cream-colored doublewide. He focused his mind on the horror, seeing the skin and muscle burned off the bones of little Riley's face. Nothing but a white skeletal grimace with smudges of flesh flecking the skull. Timmy shook the thought from his brain.

“Was it bad, Arliss?” Timmy’s breath caught behind his teeth.

Arliss sniffled and nodded. Sheila snorted. Timmy waited.

“I headed out here when I heard the voices on the radio. I didn’t know where else to go. Nowhere else to be.” Arliss lowered his head from the sight of a horizon of jagged trees and dirt hills. “I figured you’uns would be alive if anybody was. I know she’s been hoarding supplies for years.” He threw his head toward Sheila.

Sheila accepted the reference to her preparations for the apocalypse as a personal affront. “You no good sack of crap.” She snorted and spat across the gap between herself and Arliss. A ball of phlegm landed next to his hand, but Arliss only looked at it.

“I never seen another living thing in twenty miles of walking out here. I seen one cottonmouth, but he was twisted as a dog’s hind leg. Didn’t have the wherewithal to threaten me. Poked him with a stick, and he up and died.” Arliss’s shaky fingers smeared beads of sweat across his forehead.

Timmy’s mind wandered back to the radio. He wondered who might transmit. What if he could make contact? Maybe things weren’t so bad all over.

“Hey, Arliss. Do you remember the bandwidth where you heard the voices? Maybe I can find it. I mean, it’s worth trying.” Timmy made to help Arliss up.

“You ain’t taking that pile of turds into my bunker, Timmy!” Sheila slid toward the men. Her lips pinched and set into pleats of tiny wrinkles.

The rows of canned beans in the bunker flickered to Timmy’s consciousness. Sheila was right to protect the provisions. It wouldn’t take long. “You might better rest anyway, Arliss. I’ll go check for a minute.” The possibilities of finding other survivors, of understanding what happened and rebuilding a community electrified Timmy. He

turned away from Arliss, forgetting to press the haggard man on bandwidth. The ridged metal of the bunker roof barely peeked above the swirling dirt. Timmy skidded toward it. Just before he yanked up the trap door to descend the ladder, he looked back.

“I’ll watch so Arliss don’t get too hot out here,” Sheila called with a nod toward Arliss.

Timmy waved. A few minutes with the radio were all he needed. The lightness of hope buoyed Timmy’s heart even as he burrowed down the chute and into the bunker. He slid down the narrow ladder and sidled past racks of canned peaches. On the metal counter in the latrine, Sheila’s wadded hairballs wavered in Timmy’s draft. That usually disgusted him despite Sheila pronouncements that everybody would be wearing pants made of their own hair before long. He ignored the hair as he rushed down the hall and snapped on the radio in the kitchen. Dragging a stool before the box and antenna, Timmy wetted his lips as he fingered the knobs.

The waves of static drowned Timmy’s hopes for thirty minutes. With the disintegrated aspiration of finding another pocket of humanity, Timmy climbed the ladder. Heavy with failure, he watched his boots walking back to the ash tree, the final rays of nauseous sun reaching from the west.

Timmy looked a few feet ahead to see Sheila’s back curled over Arliss. Arliss’s legs splayed across the dirt. The AK47, a black mass against the dirt, rested where Timmy had set it. His heart rate and breathing quickened as he trotted up. Arliss’s bloodshot eyes stared into the saffron sky. Those eyes lacked the reflective glimmer of life. They looked like the eyes of a long-dead opossum along the roadside. His mouth

was cracked open. Sheila withdrew stiff knuckles wrapped around a lighter from Arliss's pocket.

"What happened?" Timmy kneeled on the other side of Arliss, lifting the blistered and limp arm. Sheila's pocketknife spiked in the jugular. A thick violet line oozed to the sticky pool beneath Arliss's fringe of hair.

Sheila watched disgust twist Timmy's face. She backed away, stepping out of her flip-flops. As if to stave off an icy wind she pulled her cardigan tight across her back and chest. She closed her eyes and declared, "I done what needed did. Mercy, really."

"Granny? How could you?" Timmy groped for words and understanding. He grew up hearing Sheila's tirade on the weakness of other men. He waited for the apocalypse with her on Friday nights when he wanted to be kissing girls under the bleachers at football games. He stored the food and procured the arms. As he breathed heavy air, Timmy thought he should thank Sheila for her efforts at preservation. Instead, he saw the stiffening body of Arliss and felt disappointment.

Timmy pivoted from the body and strode to the bunker. Sheila steadied herself on the tree, and, for the first time since her daughter died and she took on Timmy, she wondered at the glint in her grandson's eye.

Timmy returned with a gas can and matches.

"Don't waste that gas, Timmy!"

Timmy looked at the withered face of Sheila, then down at the ground. Her flip-flops still curled abandoned in the dirt. Timmy realized he would wake up every morning to that rasping voice, that leathery face, and those petrified flip-flops. All of those Halloweens he missed toilet-papering neighbors with other boys. All of those birthday

parties he wasn't invited to. All of the times he deserted CarrieAnn Michaels behind The Butt Hut, never quite touching her hand, saying that he had to get home. And when she whispered, "No, stay," he'd turn away with the carton of cigarettes under his armpit because he knew his granny expected him. He had spent his youth preparing for a lifetime with Sheila.

Timmy popped open the gas can, doused Arliss, and flicked a match onto the dead man's chest before Sheila could dive in to retrieve her knife. A fit of juicy coughs burst from Sheila. Smoke and bitterness contorted Timmy's face. He turned and grabbed the splitting leather straps of the flip-flops and flung them into the fire.

"What'd you do that for?" Sheila wailed.

"Damn it, Sheila." Timmy put the cap on his gas can and marched back to the bunker. Eighty-seven days. He shook his head at the stubble-covered hills shadowed against a coppery sunset. Coppery like CarrieAnne's hair. He opened his eyes wide to let the caustic air dry them. "Damn it."

GRACE

Destiny could wait. It didn't matter how little time the old man had left, Destiny could sit in the car and pick at her stubby nails. Grace wanted it that way.

"I'm coming with you."

Grace cleared her throat. "No. Stay here, Destiny." It wasn't a shout, but Grace felt each syllable of her daughter's name slap to the teenager's face. She rarely said it.

Destiny fell back against her seat, but her wide-eyed stare, the cornflower eyes, didn't shift from her mother. Grace turned away and murmured, "Stay here, D. You wait for me."

The only response Grace heard was the shuffle of a grocery sack and the hiss of a pop bottle.

Grace nudged the car door with her hip. It squealed and latched shut. Flecks of rust from the Cavalier's disintegrating fender sprinkled the asphalt. The car rocked as her daughter shifted inside. Grace pinched and sucked her cigarette. As smoke unfurled in her lungs, she felt the smoldering heat approach her fingers. She flicked the butt to the ground and smothered it with a curling, scuffed sneaker. Scrubbing a rough hand over her face, she started walking.

Iron clouds shielded the horizon as bare trees clawed the lowest puffs. Grace crossed the lot with her head pressed against an October wind that filled her stained satin Cleveland Indians jacket, billowing it around her back. Shivering, she clutched her purse strap to the opposite shoulder. Her ponytail flapped, and she patted her head to make sure the scrunchie held.

She halted before the metal door, the stale flavor of her last cigarette clinging to her tongue. Burned tobacco permeated her senses, but she wanted to smell the autumn leaves. Above a weather-battered wreath, a light blinked from red to green, and the door clicked. She released the worried purse strap and clutched the cold metal handle. First squeezing every molecule of oxygen out of her lungs, Grace filled them to capacity before sidling through a narrow crack in the doorway. Her bottom padded the door, and it gave a delicate snap as it closed. She stepped past the administrative offices, approaching the deserted nurse's station. A cockatiel squawked from the corner.

Grace shoved her balled hands into the jacket pockets and felt for the hole in the tip of the left pocket. She rubbed the fraying fabric and poked her index finger through until the hole squeezed around her finger. She turned the corner and continued down the hall. An old man slumped in his wheelchair, saliva bridging the space between flaccid lips and the thigh of his jogging pants. Cries for help yelped from the room next to Grace. She shifted her gaze, trying to hold her eyes to her sneakers. A middle-aged woman twisted in a recliner, her eyes closed and her mouth moving in a mechanical plea. The woman's hair still held the golden highlights of middle age, but disease puckered her face. Her clawed hands dug at the chair arms. A potpourri of bleach and feces swirled in Grace's flared nostrils. This was a horrible place to die.

Room 107. She faced the closed door, an unnatural-looking slab made to look like wood. She pulled a hand from her pocket and bit into the tenderness of her thumb. The nail barely covered her finger. She gnawed the edges until the metal flavor of blood warmed her tongue. She extended her arm to push open the door. As she did, the rumble

of a pill cart echoed out of an adjacent room. The nurse glanced at Grace and flashed a smile.

The nurse began speaking in soft tones, pacifying tones. Grace looked at her. Charlotte's chestnut eyes filled with understanding, and she combed her long nails through wavy, platinum locks. At the base of her throat, a tiny gold cross reflected the fluorescent light. Annoyance gnawed Grace's gut like bile. Charlie, they'd called her in school. Twenty years ago, when they graduated together. Charlie took pictures for the yearbook and sang in the choir. Charlie dated football players, got drunk and screwed them in the back of her Monte Carlo. Grace bit the inside of her cheek remembering the belly bulge under her own gown as she marched through the graduation ceremony, sweat oozing down her lower back in the June sun. It only took one time with a drunk fifty-year-old neighbor. Charlie spread her legs for any guy.

Grace sighed. Charlotte was always nice to her, even when the other girls in their school treated her like shit. She looked into Charlotte's face. Crow's feet and sagging cheeks. No one is seventeen forever. Charlotte was saying how glad she felt that Grace received her call. Things weren't looking great for Grace's father, and Charlotte just knew Grace would want to be there. The other nurses hadn't been able to find a working phone number. Grace scratched her chin. Charlotte tilted her head, and pressed her lips together in a sympathetic smile, the kind in which the sides of her lips curled down and her bottom lip overtook the top one. She extended a hand and rubbed Grace's arm. Red fingernails, blunt on the acrylic tips. Grace managed a weak smile. Charlotte told her to call if she needed anything. The cross bounced on her chest as she nodded. Anything at all. Coffee? Snacks? Drugs? And Charlotte's shrill laugh rang like two raccoons

scrapping over trash. Grace nodded and pushed through the door. She rolled her eyes as Charlotte's cart rumbled in the hall and forced the door shut behind her.

She hovered near the threshold, vision adjusting to the dim room. It was sparse and white with one metal chest of drawers and a plastic chair. A pink bedpan tilted against the wall on the top of the drawer chest with a pack of adult diapers beside. In the corner, in a bed, Grace's father withered. He stretched thin against an air mattress. A little motor hanging on the bed hummed as it inflated. Gray afternoon light broke through the window to reflect on his baldness. His eyebrows, bushy and white, twitched. A long, fleshy nose quivered, but he swallowed the thick air of the room through his gaping mouth. His cheeks hollowed in the peaked face. The oxygen machine inhaled and exhaled next to the bed, but the hose and cannula snaked into a pile on the floor. His hands folded into the concave chest. The hands jerked.

Grace's breath fell into rhythm with the oxygen machine. Uncomfortable, but it kept her breathing. She tiptoed to the bed, peering down at the old man. Stubble and dried food trails crusted his chin. His pale lips puckered into his mouth, revealing bare gums and a lavender tongue. Looking in that pit, her stomach contracted. That mouth had peppered her with curses as long as she could remember. Those lips, thin like her own. She turned her face toward the window, hand drifting to rub the heart-shaped locket at her throat. Chrysanthemums trembled in the breeze, flowers decayed and crumbled. Grace turned back to the old man. She extended a finger and poked him. The bony arm met her finger through his hospital gown. He did not rouse.

The car floated off the side of the gravel road like a docking ship. Grace eyed it as she danced her doll across a mud puddle. She rubbed a wrist across her nose, tangled strands of hair matting on her sweaty cheeks. She thought she saw a lady hovering behind the steering wheel, so Grace spat.

The car door slammed, and a petite woman, pale and fine, pecked her way across the rutted driveway. Her pantyhose webbed over the toes peeking out of her strappy heels. After she surveyed the puddles and dirt, she held the swinging bells of her trousers up, a file tucked beneath one arm.

Grace squinted at her, but the lady looked like a disco dancer. So alluring. Pretty and thin, feathering black hair swept away from dark eyes. Gold hoops swung against her shoulder. From the way that lady angled between car parts and trash in the driveway, Grace knew she did The Hustle. Maybe she knew Andy Gibb.

The sun fell into the valley late, and a cloud of bugs still swirled from the moist morning. The road dipped right into the valley and right back out. Their trailer was the first in a sparse cluster that pocked the narrow valley hillsides. The front doorway led to the driveway. The back kitchen window looked into the boulder-strewn hill. Just up the south hill and down a few miles, town expanded. Still, few straggled into Mason's Crick Valley without business.

"Hey, honey! What are you doing?"

Grace looked at her legs, crossed into the mucky water from Sunday's rain. She didn't say anything.

"You have pretty dolly. Does she have a name, honey?" The lady waited then added, "My name's Angelica."

The lady knelt close, and Grace smelled the musk of sweat mingled with vanilla. She pulled her doll tight into her skirt and stared at the ground.

“It’s going to be another scorcher today, isn’t it honey? You keep cool down in this swale?”

The lady wiped a hand across her forehead, somehow managing to keep her trousers out of the dirt when she let them drop. When Grace didn’t respond, the lady rested a pale, manicured hand against her bony shoulder. Grace’s head snapped toward the hand, and she asked, “Why you call me honey?”

Pause. “Because your hair. It looks like thin clover honey. Sweet, too.” The lady smiled, a warm smile. Without teeth. “I came out to check on you kids. Why aren’t you in school today?”

Grace didn’t trust this woman in her ironed clothes and compliments.

“You know Andy Gibb?” A test.

“Pardon? Andy Gibb? Oh, yes, I know him.” The lady looked puzzled, then sang, “Oh, I...I just want to be your everything...”

Grace smiled. The lady stood up, wiggled her hips, and rolled her hands with the rhythm of her sung, “do-do-do-dos.”

“You’re touched,” but Grace giggled and pulled her doll out to watch with her.

The lady laughed with teeth this time. “You like to dance?”

“No. But I watch on the TV when Jess goes into the Foxhole.”

Brows arched, the lady’s smile sagged. “Do you go into the Foxhole?”

“Sometimes.” Grace’s smile drooped, too. “Me and Ed watch the shows because Jess says we can’t stay home.”

“Oh, so he takes you?”

“Can’t trust fool kids, you know. He says I’d burn down his trailer.”

The lady opened her folder and pulled a pen from her pocket. Grace rubbed the back of her neck.

“Honey, you are too sweet to be in the Foxhole. That’s not a place for kids. That’s a dirty place.” Grace lowered her head. “But you have to go, don’t you? Sweet thing. Tell me, who is Jess?”

Tears burned in Grace’s eyes, and she hated it. Shouldn’t have mentioned the Foxhole. It never felt right to be there. “My dad.”

More scribbles in the folder. Grace swallowed hard, and when the lady asked to see inside the house trailer by taking Grace’s hand, the girl jumped up. She wiped her eyes on her skirt and led the lady up to the door.

“Ed was napping, so I left him. He sleeps a lot because he ain’t quite right.” Grace rushed to defend Ed in the same breath, “But he likes Andy Gibb.”

Grace weaved the lady between clothes piles in the house. The fresh sun cooking outside waved into the trailer. Grace offered the lady a Pepsi because that’s what a sophisticated lady would like. The lady nodded no, and Grace was relieved because there was nothing but Coors in the fridge. When they got to the back bedroom, Grace shoved Ed. He grunted and rolled over. A big smile covered his face, and it re-split the lower lip. “Ed! I told you to stop smiling!” Grace raced to get a piece of dishcloth for Ed’s bleeding lip.

“What happened?” The lady sat down on the bed next to Ed.

“Ed put his head in front of Jess’s beer bottle.”

“Is that what Jess said? Does that happen a lot?”

Grace didn't answer. Jess said it didn't come easy, seeing the face of their trashy mother on Ed. The way Ed smiles, stupid and happy, just how their mother looked when she climbed in the truck with some slimy hippie from Walhonding. Amy still had the baby fat from Grace hanging on her hips, but Jess said she liked how it made her clothes tighter. When that hippie's truck drove off the bridge into the flooded creek, Jess said it was the best and worst day of his life. Even if he had to stare into the likeness of that woman's face every day, blood is blood. Amy was a slut, but Jess knew what mattered. “Gracie, you're my girl, and I honor my blood. I never drove away.” That's what Jess would say as he patted her head and Ed's. She sometimes studied her face to find some trace of her mother. She didn't know who she wanted to see stare back at her.

In the silence that followed Angelica's question, Grace wondered what this all meant. Nobody like this lady came to their house. “Jess won't like you being here, lady. He doesn't like strangers or snoopers.” Grace regretted bringing her in.

“I'm not a stranger. I'm a friend. Honey, do you and Ed like living with Jess?” Grace held the cloth to Ed's face, holding her breath. “What if you moved with a family in town? Like a sleepover but longer?” Grace didn't answer. “You'd go to school, and Ed could have a special school. And nice clothes and records and books.”

“Maybe.”

“I think it would be a lot of fun. Dinner every night, and television and no more Foxhole.”

“Ed can come?”

“Of course. I don't think this house is the place for two kids.”

“Like the Foxhole isn’t for kids.”

The screen door slapped, and Grace felt her stomach flop. Jess, all shadows, leaned against the doorframe to the bedroom.

“Who the hell are you?” He rubbed his waistband where he kept a pocketknife hanging from his belt. He smelled like alcohol and earthworms.

“Mr. Lind, I’m Angelica. I wanted to stop and introduce myself to see if there’s any way I can help your family.” She was on her feet, swaying back from the door but speaking smoothly.

“I’d say you can help a fella, lady.” Jess sucked his lip. “I don’t mind knowing you better. Grace, there’s Nutty Bars for you in the truck. Take Ed.” The slurs of words oozed out as Jess unbuckled his belt.

Grace struggled to grab up her older brother. She didn’t like to hear the moaning. She didn’t want Angelica to be like that, but all the women to visit had been. Sometimes they brought their own kids, and Grace had to hide her dolls and keep Ed safe from meanness.

Angelica raised her palms to Jess. “Sir, I am here for a welfare check on your children. You have been grossly negligent. They are truant. They are filthy. They are half-starved. The state of this house... As soon as the paperwork is processed, they will be placed in foster care, and your benefits will be reassessed.”

Grace remembered the records and television Angelica had offered, and she decided to head straight for Angelica’s car with Ed. She left her naked doll in the dirt.

Jess tried to focus his gauzy gaze at Angelica. He started to laugh a throaty guffaw that Grace hated. It usually came before getting smacked. “You ain’t having

them kids or my benefits. I took them on all this time myself, ever since their mom left. She up and walked out on all of us.”

Angelica swept past him in a rush, and his reaction was too dulled by a night of hard drinking to impede her. Grace was pushing Ed into the backseat when Angelica appeared. “Good girl, honey! Mr. Lind, you are a danger to these children, and they are being seized from your custody.”

Jess shouted from the front step, “You won’t have them kids, bitch. Why don’t you call Sheriff Jones? He’ll tell you. He owes me. Gracie, you tell her I done everything a man can do.” He sounded suddenly sober.

Angelica slipped into the car and turned the ignition. It rumbled, and gravel spit from the back wheels. Grace looked out the back window to see Jess banging his fist against his truck hood. She expected it to be the last time she saw her dad, and her throat felt like she’d swallowed a pine cone.

“Disgusting man.” Angelica caught Grace in the rearview mirror. “Good girl, honey! You did the right thing to get out with Ed. There’s a better life for you.”

Grace mulled the words over, and she whispered them to herself, “There’s a better life for me.”

Feeling the warmth of Ed next to her, Grace cried in their bed in the back room of the trailer when she said those words a week later. “Sheriff Jones honors his debts. And kin is kin,” Jess crowed as a deputy dropped the kids off in the driveway. He went out for the night to celebrate, and Grace fingered the locket Angelica had given her. And she cried.

“Jess,” Grace hissed. She butted her palm against the shoulder.

Lazy lids lifted. Grace’s father searched the ceiling, extending a wavering arm. He moaned.

“You’re alive,” Grace barked. The edge of her lip curled like a snarling dog.

Jess dropped his arm, turning his face to Grace. He fixed his foggy pupils on the angles of her cheeks. Grace smoothed her expression and stared at him. The corners of Jess’s mouth lifted into a wide smile. He mumbled and grunted. His hand darted from the sheets. He grabbed Grace’s hand, forcing a wheezy “Gracie” from his throat. Tears prickled and stung as they had every time that hand had touched her. Jess squeezed her rigid fingers.

Grace searched Jess’s face for her own feelings. She thought if she came to the nursing home his weakness would turn her heart. She searched for sympathy. Nothing. Only memories.

Grace heard the rasping laugh of Jess when his drunk friends razzed her older brother, Ed. At first, Ed would chortle, thinking he was in on the joke until the first beer bottle chucked by Jess’s friends hit him. His laugh would fade into whimpers. Sometimes, Jess’s friend Trapper would stand up and say, “Come on you birds.” The other men groaned and pleaded innocence when Trapper unfolded himself from the table. He may have only been 5’3”, but few questioned his fists or his decisions. When a beer bottle flipped back across the trailer and knocked Woody Smalls out one night, Grace giggled for days. Trapper would help Ed out to the yard and sit with Grace, telling them stories of riding the railroad through deserts and mountains. Long nights under the stars

where wolves sang sounded like a dream to Grace. Trapper lived with a black-haired woman and had a little girl of his own. Even though she was younger than Grace, Trapper brought the girl's old dresses to her, and they fit. She still wondered how it would have felt for that man's hands to have smoothed down her hair before she slept.

Summer days when Jess stayed home, Grace hauled Ed's twisted body onto her back and carried him down the crumbled concrete steps herself. She would sit him back in his wagon cart, and they'd "run away" to the creek beyond the last trailer in the valley. Grace would pick wild blackberries, and she and Ed had that world all to themselves. Ed used to laugh when she tickled his nose with the pungent spikes of wild onions. When the long days ended, and Grace knew her father would be passed out on the couch, she'd carry Ed up the steps and into the bed they shared. Grace had worried for Ed those long months she was in school. The sheriff said she had to go to school. Ed dragged himself out and into his wagon, though, and met her at the end of the driveway every day. She didn't care what other kids said.

Jess coughed. "Need a damn cigarette." The words slurred and mumbled through his gums. He reached beyond Grace like someone was there to pass him a smoke. "Gracie, did you get the right ones?" he whispered.

The wagon, heavy and wobbly-wheeled, squealed behind Grace as she yanked it down the highway. It was a quiet road, and no cars passed. Ed's legs dangled over the side but his arms folded against his chest like a mummy. Five days Grace had counted since Ed stopped eating. He rested in the bed, staring at the wall or sleeping. Grace

didn't know what it meant. She was supposed to play a peasant in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* that night at school. She had a line, and Tony Simmons had noticed her. It didn't seem important any more.

That morning, when the first birds started singing and Jess tumbled through the door, Grace begged him to take Ed to the doctor.

"Where do you think the goddamned money's coming from?" The brown and tan plaid couch, cigarette burns on the arms, lurched as Jess dropped face down on it.

"Get your dad a drink, Gracie. I had a hard night."

Grace glanced out the window. The old truck rested lopsided in the gravel. Jess and his buddy Woody had been scrapping at night. She knew half of Jess's haul of metal and junk wasn't his to scrap. It was now.

"He hasn't had nothing to eat in days. Please, Jess. Please."

"Shit, girl. I ain't got money to spend on doctors for that retard. Give him some coffee. Nothing a little coffee won't fix." Jess rolled over and snored immediately.

Really, Ed was too big for the wagon, but Grace couldn't think of a better way. She could make do, she decided. The trailer tucked into the valley only five miles from town. Progress was slow, though. The clouds to the south rumbled and darkened. Ed moaned. Grace kept on.

The Sohio Station, blue and bright, perched at the edge of town. Grace breathed out with some sense of relief. They would make it to the doctor before noon. She thought they would.

Grace heard the truck lumber behind her. She didn't turn. She kept walking toward the Sohio sign like it was heaven. Jess rolled up behind and stopped. He jumped out and sauntered up to her face.

"Where's my wallet, you little snake?"

Grace kept tugging the wagon, but Jess smacked his dirty boot inside, kicking Ed. Ed curled more tightly. Grace stopped, and Jess faced her.

Without any more words, Jess punched her in the stomach. She collapsed onto the hot asphalt, and Ed whimpered. He'd never used a fist on her. Jess, flexing his fingers and knotting them together, finally stooped and pulled her up by her arm. Grace remembered the scowl on Jess's face, like he'd been the one to take a fist in the gut. "Why'd you make me do that? Hell." He squared his chin with hers and smeared the tears on her cheek. "Shit, Gracie. I don't know what to do with you kids," he'd muttered. A car rolled past, bubbles of tar snapping under the tires.

"Hotter than Farrah Fawcett in a wool coat out here." Grace didn't smile, not even when her father poked her with his finger pointed like a gun. With a cough and rough hand, Jess pulled his wallet from her shirt pocket. He left her with Ed beside the road while he weaved to the truck and coasted to the drive-thru behind the Sohio for a cold Colt 45.

They never did make it to the doctor. Not until Ed died a week later, and he was picked up for the morgue. Natural causes, Jess muttered to everyone who asked. Not many asked.

Grace's face set as she stared at Jess. Some small part of her felt disappointed that hatred hadn't ebbed over all those years. When Jess left Ed to curl up and die on a dirty mattress in the back of their dilapidated trailer, shaking and starving, a pool of ferocious anger and bitter venom filled Grace. It had never ebbed.

Jess's lids flickered. Brilliant blue shone beneath the cloud of age. Blue like the spindly flowers that line cracking asphalt in summer. As blue as Ed's. And Destiny's. Like hers. Grace rubbed her eyes and bit her lip.

Grace couldn't forget. She could not forgive all of the tears she had dried from Ed's face. When Jess called Grace's dead mother a whore, she hated Jess. When he backed the truck over her kitten, Yellow, she hated Jess. When he brought home a stoned, half-dressed woman and they smoked and moaned all night. When he welted her back with his belt. When she told him their neighbor, Ray Rob, forced her to have sex in the bathroom of the gas station and Jess laughed saying Ray Rob was a hell of a stallion. When her daughter was born, nine days after high school graduation and Jess said the girl looked like a mongoloid, Grace hated Jess.

Grace dropped Jess's hand. He whimpered and spoke nonsensically. She reached behind his head and pulled out the pillow.

"Gracie? Where's my little girl?" Jess muttered but his eyes were closed.

The pillow crackled, its thick plastic exterior covered with a thin white case. Grace squeezed it in her fists. Jess laughed. Grace turned her head to the side, like a robin evaluating a worm. In a fluid motion, that sudden break and flood of anger, Grace forced the pillow over Jess's face. He thrashed and grabbed at her arms. Jess held surprising strength for a man so near death. Grace's force held like steel. Her purse strap

slid down her arm to wrap around her trembling wrist. A strand of hair wisped into her mouth.

The door clicked behind her, and she twisted to look. Her eyes rounded, and she breathed through her mouth.

“Goddamn it, Destiny! I said wait in the car!”

With a sharp inhale and a steady release of air, Grace opened her hands. She straightened and pulled her purse strap up. Jess choked.

Grace’s daughter, a slim girl beneath the wide blue eyes and pale streams of hair, surveyed the room. She looked at her mother and then to the pillow just dropped from her grandfather’s face. The black eyeliner gave her eyes a hollow stare. She tugged at the strap of her lacy tank-top, pouting. Pink polish chipped from her chewed nails. Destiny flew between the borders of understanding life and never understanding it at all. Grace did not know where the girl would land. Naiveté and unconcern or comprehension and burden.

“Pap’s a bastard,” Destiny said as she looked in her mother’s eyes. The girl turned, tugging her jeans down below her waist, and shuffled out the hallway.

Grace yanked Jess’s head forward and squished the pillow behind it. She didn’t fidget with it. Jess’s head lolled, mouth agape and eyes blinking slowly. She pulled the scrunchie from her head, smoothing and refreshing the ponytail before she pivoted and walked into the hallway. She’d let his life trail into the waste of adult diapers and pureed dinner.

As Grace passed the nurse’s station, she called, “I think he needs the bedpan, Charlotte.” She maintained her pace, only pausing to enter the key code for the front

door. The little light on the pad flickered green. She pushed the bar on the door. The wide smile of Chief Wahoo on her jacket laughed back at her from the glass in the door. As soon as the door slammed behind her, she fished a cigarette from the depths of her purse and poked it between thin lips. The lighter from her pocket rose in her hand, and she held the flame long enough to barely burn her thumb. She dropped it back in her pocket. The wind pushed on her back as she made her way to the Cavalier, and it carried smoke from her lips.

Destiny's head pressed into the cracked headrest. Grace opened the door and flopped into the driver's seat. The wind slammed the door closed. She pulled the seatbelt across her body and rolled the window down an inch. Destiny never opened her eyes. The car grumbled to a start. Grace hadn't told her daughter tales of childhood. She did not utter Ed's name or her mother's or Angelica. She did not tell her daughter that her conception occurred by force on the floor of a gas station bathroom. As she looked through the pocked windshield, she realized she'd never had to say those words. Grace sucked the cigarette and determined to love her daughter better. The road opened before the sputtering car, and Grace and Destiny rolled along it.

PLACE IN NARRATIVE: WRITING FROM REGION AND INTO THE BEYOND

Everyone comes from some place. Our places change, bringing changes to our character and situation in life. Our story and history is in our place. It may not be what people see when they face us, but it's there in the way we pronounce greasy or wash. Me, I was born near the banks of the Ohio River, born into a place where the oil money dried up one hundred years ago and the only flow left was from people's sewer pipes into Duck Creek. I played with black snakes on the kitchen floor before I knew what they were. Everyone ate at "greazy spoons" and complained about "Warshington." And I rolled to the gospel waves reverberating out of tent revivals in those tight hills of Appalachia.

I moved on. I left that behind. But is it really behind or is it some part of a history and fabric that shapes my life? We reside in a place, but equally that place, that experience resides in us. As in life, no narrative is complete without place because no character is constructed without it. Characters cannot breathe in no oxygen. They cannot run on no ground or smell autumn in no season. Place anchors our narrative. It shapes and shades our stories with context and meaning.

Setting provides the novel or short story with one of the most critical foundational supports. The author might establish a plot and a character, but actions do not occur in a vacuum. Not only does it supply a background for the action of a narrative, "setting helps define a story's dimensions. Setting grounds a story in place" (Burroway 164).

Writing craft books often address the issue and importance of setting, yet they do not often highlight the significance of place. While the two words may be used

synonymously, I would suggest that setting is contained within place. Setting is the particular staging for a scene or novel. Place encompasses that setting, but may include a grander scope and perspective for the narrative as a whole. It is a time in a particular space. Setting may be carpet color and uncomfortably small room size. Place is a front porch in the rural, “desolate” American South where a mother sits with her developmentally handicapped daughter and a stranger walks up the lane into the shadow of the mountain in Flannery O’Connor’s “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” While a story might be character driven, what drives the character? What has informed him or constructed him? Place. In what circumstances does he feel at ease or ill at ease? How does he operate with his environment? Setting. Viewing the character in a particular environment, whether it is that character’s natural habitat or not, will inform the reader of his desires, motivations, and general background. Setting can inspire reaction character, but place has actually woven the fabric of the character.

Authors may create setting through a creative brushstroke, painting the scene with vivid details. Place is often a motivation within the author to share experiences with which he or she has an intimate relationship. Eudora Welty, in her essay “Place in Fiction,” writes of the author, “...place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view” (781). With setting, we gain the scene, positions and details of scene. With place, we have the setting of the scene while also gaining the aspect of community, of history, of language, of social convention, all of which dominate in the realm of characters’ lives within the story as well as gaining a view of authorial experience.

Flannery O'Connor used setting and place masterfully to expose the inner-mechanisms of her characters. While her stories have the strong flavor of regional place, even the artificial construct of a doctor's office becomes an explosion of ego, religion, racism, mental illness, poverty, and social strata in "Revelation." The Southern setting of O'Connor's work gives her stories distinct zest as well as the authenticity of her experience in that place. Yet, O'Connor manages to so carefully engage place that the foibles exist in characters rather than in region. She wrote of the South in an era during which the Civil Rights Movement edged closer to some sense of equality between races, old Confederate values and independence still sparked electrical current among certain groups of the population, the entrenched, dogmatic Christian values dominated individual viewpoint, and economic depression and inaccessible education continued to prevail in rural communities.

In "Revelation," those characteristics of the South are illuminated through the waiting room of a doctor's office, the story's setting, and the thoughts of Mrs. Turpin, shaped by place. Mrs. Turpin observes the other people in the waiting room, from the stylish woman to the poor. She remembers when she surveys the group that on restless nights she imagines Jesus asking her who she would like to be if not herself. She may only choose between being "white-trash" and being black. She begs for a better option, but Jesus will not relent. In the end of their conversation, she says, " 'All right, make me a nigger then—but that don't mean a trashy one.' And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black" (*The Complete Stories* 491). Mrs. Turpin believes herself respectable, right with the Lord, and hard-working. Gradually, O'Connor reveals that every character of the story looks down upon someone,

condescends and judges like Mrs. Turpin. From the “white trash” woman in the doctor’s office to the black women who work the cotton fields for Mrs. Turpin, everyone operates in the world from some sense of superiority. O’Connor uses her experiences as a Southerner to enliven these characteristics, but the judgments and concepts she magnifies exist in her characters. They are individuals from the South representing greater human flaws. Instead of drawing the conclusion that Southerners are small-minded bigots, she engages the reader to consider, aren’t we all like this sometimes?

“Revelation” is a particularly interesting story because O’Connor’s use of place in that story is itself multi-dimensional. The immediate setting is that of a doctor’s office waiting room, a location that could exist almost anywhere. It is very small, with a table covered in magazines, and chairs occupied by a spectrum of people from the local community. O’Connor reveals these details in the opening paragraph. She also reveals Mrs. Turpin’s disapproval for particular people in the room, which is the impact of place on character. The reader immediately recognizes that this woman is at odds with her surroundings. Through her interactions and reactions to other characters, the reader sees Mrs. Turpin in conflict with her community. When she returns to her farm, she grapples with her own understanding of her position in the world. O’Connor weaves the setting and place, all of the characters and interactions, so that the reader may have a magnified view of this self-righteous woman, who seems loathsome but has actually never had cause to question her perceptions of herself in her society until that moment in that waiting room in that rural South of the mid-twentieth century. Mrs. Turpin’s place shaped her into a creature who viewed every class as a lower class because of her belief in being morally superior. O’Connor is able to transpose values and characteristics she

has recognized from her life experience to characters in a story to illuminate a situation of frame of mind for readers.

In O'Connor's essay, "The Regional Writer," from *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, she discusses the impact and importance of place on a story or book. "Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community" (53). She argues that the writer is not that caricature who exists in loneliness outside of society. Rather, the writer is an individual familiar with the structure and tenants of a community and with the unique ability to set that perspective into words for others from within or without that experience to assess. Welty supports that view, writing, "Fiction provides the ideal texture through which the feeling and meaning that permeate our own personal, present lives will best show through" (782).

In "Why I Live at the P. O.," Eudora Welty uses the experience and knowledge of Deep South culture to spin the humorous tale of a Mississippian family's discord causing one daughter to move into her place of employment, the post office. The story occurs in China Grove, Mississippi, and Welty invokes her familiarity with nature, social customs, and vernacular to flavor the story. The narrator relates the tale to the reader as she would to any person living in China Grove. Explaining how her sister stole her date, the narrator says her sister "told him I was one sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same" (57). The tension between the narrator, Sister, and her sister, Stella-Rondo, escalates as Stella-Rondo manages to turn all of the family against Sister. While the family's interactions appear dysfunctional and

odd, the only thing the narrator takes issue with is the treatment she received from Stella-Rondo and the rest of the family upon this prodigal child's return.

Though real families dwell somewhere on the spectrum between normalcy and complete dysfunction, Welty's portrayal of this Southern family is intentionally hyperbolic. Highlighting the extremes of behavior orbiting the narrator impacts the reader with a sense of wonder at this Mississippi family. Though a story of familial antics seems common enough, this story could not occur in California or New York or Minnesota. It is grounded in the circumstances of living in a small town in Mississippi. Characters like Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, and Stella-Rondo are cast as extremes of society. Here are the old, proud, Southern grandfather patriarch, a drunken and eccentric uncle, a spiteful, relationship-wrecking sister, and an enabling mother. The characters are revealed through dialogue, dialect, and reaction, which were harvested directly from Welty's interactions with rural Mississippi. Papa-Daddy retaliates to the rumor that Sister suggested he cut his beard by calling her a "hussy" (58). When Uncle Rondo stumbles into the scene wearing "one of Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimonos, all cut on the bias," the narrator acknowledges that he had drunk "another bottle of that prescription" as he does each Fourth of July (59). The narrator's reaction is less concerned with Uncle Rondo and more concerned with the hideousness of the kimono. When Stella-Rondo returns from Illinois, after a broken marriage, and she declares that her two year-old child is adopted, the family accepts it. Phrases like "dizzy as a witch" and "kiss my foot" are peppered throughout the story (60-61). Written in 1941, references to Shirley Temple and assertions like, "Of course Mama had turned both the

niggers loose; she always said no earthly power could hold one anyway on the Fourth of July, so she wouldn't even try" denote time and location for the story (61).

Through the portrayal of a particular family in a particular place, Eudora Welty is able to prod both conventions and absurdities in rural Mississippi culture. The greatest thematic element of the story is the family's willingness to ignore unpleasant, outrageous realities in order to maintain their identity as a family. That theme transcends place, but place holds this story. The story unfolds into a repeated spark and flare of uncomfortable and ridiculous interactions in the family, resulting in Sister collecting her personal items and moving to the P. O. The short story provides a glance at life, a brief view of its characters. Welty draws from her lifetime spent in Mississippi to isolate the characters to that culture and to insulate them from the effects of any other world view. This tale of Sister gathering her oscillating fan and fern to move to the P. O. in order to punish her family satirizes the hard-packed values, judgments, and cycle of life in America's rural South. Similar insular living could occur anywhere, but Eudora Welty's strength is in using her knowledge of place in Mississippi to give the reader a greater view on human nature, family dynamics, and small-town life.

In "A Native Hill," Wendell Berry confronts the role of place in his own life. Having established a successful writing career, traveled, and secured a faculty position at New York University, Berry felt a pull to return to the tobacco fields of Henry County, Kentucky. An author of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, Berry recognizes how the experiences of his youth and development in Kentucky have shaped his vision:

When I have thought of the welfare of the earth, the problems of its health
and preservation, the care of its life, I have had this place before me, the part

representing the whole more vividly and accurately, making clearer and more pressing demands, than any *idea* of the whole. When I have thought of kindness or cruelty, weariness or exuberance, devotion or betrayal, carelessness or care, doggedness or awkwardness or grace, I have had in my mind's eye the men and women of this place, their faces and gestures and movements (5).

Berry's essay demonstrates the impact of place on character. Divided into three sections, Berry begins by describing his return to the land of his ancestors. He writes of his knowledge and perceptions of the past using his contemporary observations. Berry recognizes that returning to the place of his past requires him to acknowledge both the strengths and weaknesses of the people and community of which he is part. He laments the poor farming practices of his grandfather and neighbors, practices that resulted in abandoned fields and superfluous damage to the natural surroundings. Yet he recollects all of the frolics and games he as a child enjoyed in those fields with his family. There is tension in Berry's mind reconciling the past with the present knowledge.

He then views the place by considering what damage other members of the community have done, observing beer cans littering the streams and opossums shot on a wooded trail. The tension now is between Berry and his community that does not share his value of this nature. "I find his empty shotgun shells, his empty cans and bottles, his sandwich wrappings...He is the true American pioneer, perfectly at rest in his assumption that he is the first and the last whose inheritance and fate this place will ever be" (20). By depicting himself as an outsider, one who views the carelessness of others with a critical eye, Berry is describing the heat of friction that he feels in sharing that community. The

refuse of his neighbors symbolizes to him the devaluation of nature on a greater social scale, thereby symbolizing the greater tension Berry feels on a national social scale. He is simultaneously a part and apart.

Finally, in the third section, Berry considers the coexistence of the land with himself as a human. It is an introspective and considerate series of glimpses into Berry's experience in the woods, on the hill, and watching wildlife. Mixing together the uniqueness of his history with the existence of others in his area and the life of the natural world, he admits, "We are in the habit of contention – against the world, against each other, against ourselves" (29). This contention is how writers create engaging fiction. Berry is writing of his personal experience, and it is the experience of the individual functioning within a place, within a time and a community, even within himself. This is the most critical role of an author utilizing his/her experiences in a place.

Editor of Berry's essay compilation, Norman Wirzba introduces "A Native Hill" by saying, "Authentic and responsible thought, while not restricted to the local or regional, depends on the clarity and precision that comes from sustained attention to the particular" (1). Wendell Berry's understanding and ability to magnify issues of sustainability and preservation root in his attention to the particular in Kentucky. That rural domain is his constant frame of reference. The author's understanding and exposure of his microcosm provides him the ability to relate his own experience to the macrocosm.

Although Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Wendell Berry grew up in different areas with different values and became very different writers stylistically, they drew from the well of their experience to craft their narratives. They rooted those

narratives in the rich earth of place. Place grounded the stories. Place nourished the growth of plot and buds of subplot.

Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Wendell Berry effectively used place to anchor their narratives, locating characters in a scene in time within a particular setting. While those authors were writing in the middle of the twentieth century, the material of the stories remains contemporary. O'Connor illuminated issues of race, religion, poverty, and prejudice in the American South. All of those issues continue to create tension in modern America. Through the comical misadventures of one dysfunctional family in rural Mississippi, Welty offers a glimpse at the social and cultural peculiarities that develop in isolated communities. Berry placed himself, the individual, between the natural world and the structure of human community. Though "A Native Hill" was written in 1969, issues of ecology, sustainability, and the individual finding context for life within society are very current discussions in the twenty-first century. Yet, how might the depth and horizon of place be explored through historic fiction and futuristic material? How might place lend itself to both the realistic setting and the more fantastical? And can the content of the novels of the more distant past or an imagined future stay relevant to society?

Sherwood Anderson published his collection of connected short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, in 1919. At the time of publication, Anderson was living in Chicago as he embarked on a writing career. As evidenced by his character George Willard's departure from Winesburg at the end of the novel, it was a period of migration for the ambitious from rural landscapes to the growing and industrial cities of the Midwest. Yet, Anderson's upbringing in rural Ohio had so significantly shaped his view of the world,

and more specifically of the individual within a community, that *Winesburg, Ohio* became his most enduring work.

While the stories may appear tame by modern social standards, Anderson pushed the boundaries of post-WWI societal mores. Porter Shreve, who has recently published his own novel chronicling a continuation of the story of George Willard from *Winesburg, Ohio*, quoted William Faulkner as saying, “Sherwood Anderson was the father of all my works – and those of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, etc. We were influenced by him. He showed us the way” (1). Anderson delved into taboos such as desire, sexuality, repression, voyeurism, and religion. Shreve acknowledges, “I recognized that he, his characters and I share that American birthright: an unyielding restlessness” (2). While Anderson seems an obscure author when compared to the likes of Faulkner or Hemingway, this ability to open to the reader the faults of his characters is why his novel remains seminal in American Literature. And as the characters of the story create the bond with the reader, what has created those characters? *Winesburg*.

The “modern” little town of Winesburg, Ohio, has no traffic lights or gas stations. Only a small pizza parlor filled with chortling farmers during lunch hour and a cluster of old stone houses in the shadow of a white church on the hill. Two hours west is Clyde, Ohio, Anderson’s hometown and the model he used for his tales. Clyde is slightly larger than Winesburg but remains a small community amidst the endless flat acres of northwestern Ohio. Clyde’s community website boasts, “Rich in history, home to the world's largest washing machine manufacturer, small town friendliness, whatever you are looking for, chances are Clyde has it!” Both communities, while threads in the fabric of the Midwest, are small towns clinging to a particular identity. The most prevalent aspect

of that identity is the value of work and people. The *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* quotes cultural geographer James R. Shortridge that at the turn-of-the-twentieth century, Anderson's contemporaries viewed the region's residents as "sturdy, dependable yeoman farmers – strong, independent, and confident in their ability, realistic in nature, and possessed of the best in youthful vigor along with the insight, experience, and dependability of maturity" (2). Shortridge also asserts that the contemporary view of the American Midwest is, "keeper of the nation's values," and he further describes that there is an "increased realization that the positive values that grow out of a rootedness in place are needed to give meaning to life and that the Middle West provides the nation with a needed touchstone for such values" (2). This historical context of cultural appraisal along with the current assessment of the Midwest's role in America give credence to the value of Anderson's work. But Anderson does not shy from identifying and magnifying the significance and perversion of the individual in this place. It is, in fact, more his purpose to expose the internal struggles and secrets of his characters rather than to recreate the ideal of hard-working nobility.

Anderson begins his collection of stories with "The Book of the Grotesque." This brief introduction recounts the end of life for a writer who, in his time of thought and reflection before death, has come to view the people he has known in life as characters. They are not basic characters but distorted creatures who have been bent and shaped by "truths." These truths could be virtues or vices like virginity, passion, wealth, or poverty. For the writer, "It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (6). The purity of the truth warps as the person

grasps it more tightly, using it to define all aspects of life. Perspective is lost, and only the warped “truth” remains. Ultimately, the warped truth absorbs dreams, aspirations, flexibility, and time, entire lives. These are the conditions by which Anderson will create and sketch the character of the novel.

No story in *Winesburg, Ohio* is more gripping than that of Wing Biddlebaum and his hands. In his days as a young teacher in Pennsylvania, “He was one of those rare, little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a loveable weakness” (14). In those days, Wing was known as Adolph, and his students adored him. He funneled all of his joy in the power of education and inspiration of dreams into his schoolboys. “In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were part of the schoolmaster’s effort to carry a dream into the young minds. By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself” (14). One student who suffered from a slow mind and desire for attention accused Wing Biddlebaum of inappropriately touching him. The town saloon keeper beat Wing in the school yard, and a hoard of townspeople chased him through the darkness with anger, vengeance, and complete misunderstanding as their engine. Wing, though, never fully understood the accusations or the attack. The shame of unknown transgressions rooted in him. He escaped to Winesburg to live reclusively with an elderly aunt. As he talks to George Willard, the young newspaper reporter at the hub of the Anderson’s story cycle, Wing says, “You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them” (12).

Wing Biddlebaum's speech to George indicates Wing's conflict within the community, as well as the resultant internal conflict. And that is what Wing's story exemplifies. He was a man of ideas and passion who shared confidently with children. But he never understood the persecution. He ran, and, even in Winesburg, continued to hide from society as guilt and shame tarnished him. The constant flight and busyness of his hands indicates to him the wrong he believes he must have done. But he does not know. He does not know the sin or the penance to be paid. And so, he looks at his hands and at his own heart with suspicion. He is critical of the community while also feeling the emotional torment of isolation. This first complete story of a Winesburg citizen keens like tensed and plucked fiddle strings as this individual man languishes in the turmoil of small town atmosphere. The initial accusations were cast by society, but Wing then continues in a life of self-castigation. The story also highlights the ease with which blind and ignorant fervor sweeps through a group of citizens as with the citizens from the Pennsylvania town. Anderson sets before the reader the anguish and self-doubt of an innocent man, a man who once aspired to inspire youth and now settles to force his hands, as though they are foreign and criminal, into his pockets while watching the lives of other townspeople pass by on the road beyond his house.

In his introduction to the novel, Irving Howe writes as one who loved Anderson's novel with the kind of sentimental affection of youth, then questioned it as the informed and worldly mind does, before returning to the stories with a seasoned perspective and openness to appreciate it. While Howe praises the simplicity of the stories and how adeptly Anderson draws out the baser feelings of the cast in a small, Midwestern town, at times he seems to overlook the image Anderson has created. Howe argues that the novel

is not a “social verisimilitude,” and that it is not realism. However, as a fiction writer, Anderson does not strive to issue a factual representation of individuals residing in a literal Winesburg, Ohio. Howe admits the characters are not real flesh, “...Nor are they meant to be, “fully-rounded” characters such as we can expect in realistic fiction; they are the shards of life, glimpsed for a moment, the debris of suffering and defeat. In each story one of them emerges...driven almost mad by the search for human connection” (xiii). Anderson builds a plot and characters who are an image of life in the rural atmosphere of 1919, plots and characters that are uniquely of that place.

The validity of arguing for or against categorizations of realism in fiction is less important in Anderson’s stories because at no point is he looking to construct absolute truths. But, to cast Anderson’s writing off as vague imaginings relating only remotely to the Midwest is misguided. Most specifically, it is ill-informed and dubious coming from anyone dwelling beyond the twisting orchards, rolling fields, lazy diners, and steeped churches of rural Midwestern culture. Anderson, having grown up in Ohio, writes with authenticity and uses the experiences of his history to create characters that exemplify the nature of existing in an insular community. He drops readers into the seclusion of the town, alluding to cities and lives beyond, but only allowing stories to take place within the confines of the rural community. As Eudora Welty says, “Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it” (Welty 786).

The fictional Winesburg is a town in which the seasons change, yet the same activities occur regularly. The berry pickers go to the fields in the heat of June. The snowdrifts pile the streets in the winter. The train comes and goes each day. Hop Higgins, the night watchman, checks the security of town and drowns the evening away.

From Trunion Pike, to Main Street, to the slopes and Wine Creek beyond town, Winesburg is a community with little momentum. The clock there has stilled, leaving only seasons and mouldering souls to find progress. And those souls, they are grotesques, caricatures distorted and worn. Winesburg has shaped these characters in their lust, hatred, or insecurity, just as the characters perpetuate the social atmosphere of the small community.

I know *Winesburg, Ohio*. I know it in an intimate way. In the Biblical way. I've seen that town, where houses crowd the narrow streets and fields hug the backs of houses. There are days that life bustles and days of immobility. I grew up there. Of a Sunday morning, with dew on the fields, I walked to church along fractured sidewalks. I went to school in that crumbling brick building on the corner, played in the dusty lots and hid in the cemetery. All of the people in that village shook my hand on a crisp Easter morning, and some of them whispered behind their hands about me during afternoon lulls. I know that place, and I live there still.

Dreams are born in two-story Victorians in Winesburg. Many of those dreams collapse and heave out their brilliance in the darkened alleyway. Dwelling in this area with only little whiffs of wind from the outside world, it changes a person from one who has hopes to one who had hopes. Hopes? They dull like disused scythes. The humid Ohio air gets to them. Within the brain and heart grow the personality, but the community cultivates the values. Cultivates them. Trains and amends them. Individuals experience the mild adventures of small town life, believing there is a change ahead or some fresh thing. Only a quick burst of clarity, like a spring rain, can reveal the

distortion of a human's life in this town. Discontent creates a version of a person, nurtured in fear and frustration after many years in those stifling streets. Every day spent shopping for butter. Comparing beef. Admiring the curtains in a magazine. Complaining about your own curtains. In Winesburg, we settle: settle ourselves, settle our values, settle our dreams and hopes.

Time cut Winesburg adrift. The Civil War came. Then came the train and the tractor. A few more wars took a few more lives. Fashions filter into Cleveland from the East, and those trickle down to the village shop fronts. Ladies think the fashions garish, but they finally submit to the new frills about the time New York finds them passé. Books and magazines opened the eyes of Winesburg decades ago but never expanded that horizon of waving corn and forests. A man might speak his mind on politics or economy, but his routine works out just like his grandfather's. Rise with the sun for work. Toil for the day. Maybe a meander to talk with the fellows downtown. Home to dinner and to bed. No, time barely moves in this place. The Midwestern mores of God and Country and Safety in Familiarity clamped their jaws around Winesburg, never releasing that bite.

Everyone knows everyone in Winesburg. See that boy there? The chubby one with glasses? Want to know how he lost that arm? It is gruesome. Delightfully so. Stop in for dinner with a new friend's family, and they ask, "Who is your father? What does he do?" The whole of one's character balances on surname and paternal vocation no matter your age. Better not to be a farmer. Doctor, lawyer, or teacher will be best. A man of the cloth will do. It explains your not being a Troyer or a Mast, a Weaver or a Miller. Your mother is basic but harmless. Here, you make friends with local kids like

you. Perhaps, your personalities will discover their greatest faults and fears while you roam the hills beneath a watchful moon. Then, none of you will leave *Winesburg, Ohio*. You will stay while the ages pass, while your parents and friends pass. You will feel your life slink, setting with the sun.

My friend Tonya says, "Winesburg? That's my old stomping ground." Tonya saw her dreams rise and fade there. She sat, fervent and rebellious, in the principal's office for wearing jeans to school. She and her friend stole a station wagon and dropped the drive train out the bottom on a country lane. But Tonya's life waited only a few miles down the road, raising children on a dairy farm. There probably was a time she thought to leave, but time doesn't move in Winesburg like it does in the East or the West. She had her adventures. Her heart was revealed and made raw. It has callused again. Long, slow days and aching losses. It'd show in the gray of her hair, but she covers it. Tonya was born a Troyer, and she married a Miller. She does okay. It's her history here. It's her future, too. *Winesburg, Ohio* sets her life in motion and retards it.

I've had my adventures away from Winesburg. Russian vodka. Mexican dances. French insults. Cuban men. After the sultry whirlwind calms to a smooth westerly breeze beneath a hazy sky, somehow, my feet find this place. The bittersweet flavors of country air roil in my nose and onto my tongue. I want to go, to leave and find that there is still a world beyond *Winesburg, Ohio*. But the day, the week, month and year pass, and either my feet spread roots or the roots find my feet. This place and these people work up inside of me. Chafe and irritate. Caress and love. And I cannot leave behind the things that worked deep into me. Creeks, bees, clouds, fields, trillium, limestone. All in me. Gossip, judgment, late fashion, flat dreams. Inside, too. I know *Winesburg, Ohio*.

I do know that place as I know my own hand – feeling and beautiful yet foreign and still. This place? It is the tarnished and familiar unwound clock setting the pace of small-town life.

Wendell Berry asserted that returning to the land of his birth created the bittersweet realization that he had the unique ability to look within the place with the perspective of one who has been away. When moving to new places in his life, he was able to look at those places with the critical eye of a traveler who would not stay. In returning home, he realized, “But here, now that I am both native and citizen, there is no immunity to what is wrong. It is impossible to escape the sense that I am involved in history” (8). Even though Anderson wrote his collection of linked stories from Chicago and outside of the fictional Winesburg, he still constructs the place, plot, and characters of the novel with the unabashed and unhindered view of one who intimately understands the nature of rural Ohio life. He does not romanticize the existence or try to force the story to align with the values mentioned by Shortridge in his studies of the Midwest. Anderson instead uses the place to bring forth the perverseness of individuals struggling against their own nature while confined within the nature of that community, individuals seeking acceptance from others but dwelling in isolation.

Superficially, two novels could not appear more dissimilar than Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*. The community of rural Ohio in Anderson’s 1919 story collection seems so distant from the twenty-first century future of Bradbury’s 1950 story collection of Mars colonization and Earth destruction. Yet, Bradbury declares in the introduction to *The Martian Chronicles*, “It was Sherwood

Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* that set me free." He recounts the impact of Anderson's characters "living their lives on half-lit porches and sunless attics of that always autumn town" (viii). He began to scribble down the sparking ideas for his own characters. When an editor suggested that he knit them together, Bradbury realized that he had created his own sort of Winesburg, a view of the distorted humanity straddling the gap between a failing Earth and an expanding Martian colony. Bradbury's vision moved beyond the limits of known place, but he still recognized the value of place in his tales.

As in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Bradbury's chronicles are a collection of linked short stories. In Anderson's book, the most apparent common threads are the location of the stories in Winesburg and the character of George Willard, who recurs frequently as the town insider also looking for life beyond. Those commonalities do not link Bradbury's stories. His setting for stories varies between towns on Earth and the settlements on Mars. While some characters are repeated in later stories, there is no common character. What actually binds Bradbury's stories together is in fact place. Rather than physical place, it is the idea of place.

The novel begins with Rocket Summer, January 2030. (In Bradbury's original 1950 edition, dates for the short stories were 31 years early. Upon republication in 1997, the dates were modified to reflect the idea of these stories occurring in the future.) "One minute it was Ohio winter, with doors closed, windows locked, the panes blind with frost, icicles fringing every roof, children skiing on slopes, housewives lumbering like great black bears in their furs along icy streets" (1). Furs are no longer in fashion, but this scene is familiar, with the seams of homes tightened, dangling icicles, and bulks of people bundling down the street. Perhaps it would seem strange to begin a story of Mars

colonization in Ohio, but this story centers the novel. It locates the reader. The time stamp informs of a future beyond Bradbury's mid-twentieth century knowledge. But Ohio in winter is recognizable, even to those not from the Midwest. He has engaged readers using the familiarity of place, the reliability of seasonal winter cold and ordinary occurrences of wrapping in layers to face the freeze for leisure or tasks. Ultimately, Bradbury twists a Midwestern January into the unfamiliar of his future place. The exhaust of rockets thaws the winter freeze abruptly, and this becomes an Ohio none of the readers have known. "The rocket made climates, and summer lay for a brief moment upon the land..." (2). The juxtaposition of what is accepted and expected in this place with a new characteristic, rockets and thaw from the use of them, pushes readers into a new territory, one in which the similarities of our Earth remain but will be challenged by Bradbury's conceptualized future.

The Earth settings of Bradbury's stories most frequently occur in the Midwest. Even the characters on Mars refer to memories of life in Illinois and Ohio. If, as Eudora Welty said, the author uses his/her individual experience in place to build the novel, then we must recognize that Bradbury is identifying uniquely with the culture of Midwestern America. Bradbury remembered his childhood in a *New Yorker* article and explained,

Twenty-five years later, I wrote 'The Fire Balloons,' a story in which a number of priests fly off to Mars looking for creatures of good will. It is my tribute to those summers when my grandfather was alive. One of the priests was like my grandpa, whom I put on Mars to see the lovely balloons again, but this time they were Martians, all fired and bright, adrift above a dead sea.

Rooted in this personal history, Bradbury uses the established and accepted cultural normalcy of life in the Midwest to make his stories accessible to the wider audience. This serves not only to gain a greater sympathy from readers who either share a similar experience or have perceived it through popular culture, but also the firm foundation of the experience permits Bradbury a greater platform upon which to build a unique and unusual future and provide social commentary on his contemporary world. This is, in fact, very similar to the small town atmosphere of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

In "The Third Expedition," recently landed astronauts discover a small, Illinois town existing on Mars:

The rocket landed on a lawn of green grass. Outside, upon this lawn, stood an iron deer. Further up on the green stood a tall brown Victorian house, quiet in the sunlight...upon the porch were hairy geraniums and an old swing...through the front window you could see a piece of music titled 'Beautiful Ohio' sitting on the music rest (44).

Though the crew's suspicion rises, it rapidly subsides when the deceased relatives of crew members appear to comfort them and carry them to the childhood homes they knew on Earth. While the reader understands the strength of Martian telepathy from previous stories, the crew does not. They accept the illusion of familiarity in substitution of reality. The captain and the archaeologist, two men reliant on science in their careers, replace logical thinking with the illogical in order to maintain the illusion. The crew members left their planet in search of unknown territories on Mars and are instead far more content in accepting a quaint Earth town they knew in youth. In this community, a

phonograph plays Al Jolson. Sounds of a horse and wagon bump along. A woman in 1930's dress appears. The same woman declares it to be 1956. Gradually, the captain recognizes all of the memories had been drawn from his childhood and filled with the relations of crew members. And as he reacts to this memory, the Martians comprising his pseudo-family kill him along with his crew.

Using the childhood history of this captain in "The Third Expedition," Bradbury leverages the impact of place on character. Bradbury's Martians recognize the significance place holds on human memory and psyche. While there is the battle for the crew members to sort what should logically exist and what they see around them, they submit to the comfort of memory. Soft grass and mature trees. Sun gliding over Victorian houses. Music wafting on a breeze and a breeze rustling flowers. This also allows Bradbury to give readers a sense of the bittersweet lingering of childhood while drawing out the prevalence of human desire to reform the unknown into the familiar. The existence of Green Bluff, Illinois, on Mars cannot be. But it pacifies the crew. This parallel in our own North American history cannot be ignored. I live near a town, Sugarcreek, known as the "Little Switzerland" of Ohio. Perhaps it does resemble the rolling green of Switzerland. It lies in Tuscarawas County, near Dover and north of Coshocton. Within a twenty-mile radius in this part of Ohio is the combination of anglicized indigenous community names combined with the memories and comforts of European pioneer pasts. "The Third Expedition" doesn't admonish exploration. It reveals the desire of human kind to relocate through recollection of past experience, and much of that experience is drawn from place.

Like *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Martian Chronicles* considers themes of isolation, loneliness, and search for meaning through relations. In "Night Meeting," an Earth man and a Martian converge on a desolate highway during the night. After so much miscommunication and misunderstanding, they come to realize that both live in different times. They occupy the same physical space but generations separate them. The Earth man perceives the ruins of the Martian city, but the Martian sees life there. The Earth man looks ahead to the new colonial city he seeks, but the Martian only views empty hills. They try to make some sense of the place and the time, but the Martian finally says, "Where is the clock to show us how the stars stand?" (117). It is a simple story of profound meaning. The story opens with different senses of time, how it might look or smell. But we don't really understand. We see the effects of time on our bodies, but it is not a corporal sensation. Humanity creates ways to gauge existence, measurements and barometers, without comprehending the meaning or layers of time. Even the things we perceive as eternal, even the stars, are not. Human lives are so finite, brief and flashing, that we often cannot see beyond the scope of our own being. This story intersects time and place with existence. Two strangers alone in the night meet to know that civilizations also live and die. Two men come alone and depart alone, seeking the light of society in the dark night. Yet the knowledge of other existence remains with them. The knowledge of beginnings and endings, loneliness and togetherness, remains.

Time is a significant part of place and plays an important role in *The Martian Chronicles*. The first aspect of time worth considering is Bradbury's original publication date for the collected stories, 1950. It was only five years after the end of WWII, after the first uses of nuclear weapons, the Red Scare, and fear of the unknown gripped

America. The United States engaged in the Korean War, supporting the South against Communist invasion. Technology became more accessible in household life as nations like the United States and Russia hastened to develop more advanced arms and move beyond their established borders, ultimately into space before 1960. So, Bradbury begins building his stories from the foundation of his childhood in the Midwest, colors the work using his experience in his present, but quickly moves readers into the imagined realm beyond.

Astronomer, astrophysicist, and author Carl Sagan wrote, "Mars has become a kind of mythic arena onto which we have projected our Earthly hopes and fears" (106). That is precisely the role of Mars for Bradbury. It represented, and currently represents, a frontier. We study it, sending rovers and receiving photos. Yet, no human foot has shifted Martian soil. Bradbury leaps into the void of that unknown planet in his imagined future. Humans travel to Mars, launching from the culturally normal and stable Midwest, and spreading across the dead seas and mountains of Mars. Vague hostilities and wars continue on Earth as colonies on Mars expand. The Martians, an already dwindling civilization, represent little more than superficial diversion to humans. Within six years, Mars is colonized by Earth people, the Martian populations are decimated, war engulfs the Earth, and nearly all settlers to Mars return home, abandoning what they have both destroyed and created. By 2057, the only glow of Allendale, California, in "There Will Come Soft Rains," is from radioactivity. Earth is no longer green lawns or icy winters but is a burning wasteland. The final story of the book resolves with a refugee Earth family landing on Mars and accepting themselves as the new Martian race. Bradbury

imagines the ingenuity, intrepidity, nostalgia, destructiveness, and continued roving of humanity into the future world unknown to him.

While some critics would object that Anderson romanticized the turn-of-the-twentieth century Midwest when literary realism was en vogue, Bradbury has no such intention or even accountability. Because he has moved beyond the limits of known place, specifically in 1950's America, he may suppose, explore, and create a futuristic United States and a colonized Mars as he chooses. Yet the significance is in what he chooses. Bradbury sets in motion a thought-provoking momentum toward exploration, destruction, and desolation. The stories do reflect on the nature of colonization and Western Culture's frontiersmanship even beyond our own planet, and writing into the future allows Bradbury to present a possibility to the reader, a possible future formed with regard to the present. Upon Bradbury's death, Gerald Jonas praised *The Martian Chronicles* in the *New York Times*:

The book celebrated the romance of space travel while condemning the social abuses that modern technology had made possible, and its impact was immediate and lasting. Critics who had dismissed science fiction as adolescent prattle praised 'Chronicles' as stylishly written morality tales set in a future that seemed just around the corner (1).

Even in presenting an unknown place as the setting for his characters, Bradbury draws from his experiences growing up in the cultural standard of the Midwest and adding his contemporary, politically hostile United States. His more focused experience for characters is gathered from his regional past, but his broader themes of exploration, hysteria, global war, and resultant diaspora is rooted in the grander identity of the United

States during the Cold War. Bradbury's utilizes his experience in place, broadens its scope through imagination, and ultimately strives to do as Flannery O'Connor suggested in "The Regional Writer," to communicate within a community.

Everyone comes from some place. Some of us orbit around that location, exploring the wider world. Some of us stay near our birthplace, knowing it intimately. That place, where experiences and history expand our knowledge and grow our understanding of the world, is the site on which the author rests in observation. It is the hill from which the horizon of human endeavor can be witnessed and studied in all the various textures, hues, and shadows. The most successful writers do not flinch when considering and describing that horizon. Whether writing of race and religion in the rural American South in the 1950s, plunging into the isolation of the individual and social mores of Midwestern life at the turn of the twentieth century, or creating a Martian world beyond current knowledge that is still dominated by human frailty and desire, each story has a place. The settings are all as unique as the eras and the experiences of the characters. But each author began with the knowledge of human nature rooted in their respective life histories, histories that developed in place.

During her NPR show, Diane Rehm asked Wendell Berry of his fictional Port William book series, "When you began creating this group of people and this place, were you basing it on your own people and your own place?" Berry responded,

Well, yes. I was basing it on stories I'd picked up here and there and somewhat on imagination because no place can provide you a whole story. So you start out maybe with something you know, something you've heard. And then there comes a time when you become able to imagine how that

could've happened. So the product is a product of imagination, not just of recording hearsay or remembering.

No good, complete narrative is a recorded listing of events. Even creative nonfiction meanders into the imagination's territory to develop thoughts and themes. In order to create a story, the imagination requires a big bang, some genesis. Place can be that beginning. Whether place is the constant root from which the straight tale of the particularly located story shoots or the root of a tale sprouting in all different directions to venture into sunlight, place holds the author and the narrative, allowing the reader that glimpse at characters and plots suddenly alive in the imagination.

The refrain, "write what you know" echoes in the ears of new, fresh writers. We can always research and imagine other realities. Those are useful and necessary tools. Yet within each writer exists the uniqueness of perspective and life known only to that individual. When the writer is able to observe and share stories crafted from that understanding and undergirded by the legitimacy of place, a new world of existence is opened to the reader, a new plot with intricate characters in a likely unknown though perhaps familiar setting. Place holds the story firmly while also shaping and nurturing it as it grows. For me, I stood at the door one January afternoon seeing the white day and remembering all of the green ones in my past. I thought of leaving a place but the place not leaving me, and a creative paragraph emerged.

The snow swirls in frail twists, piling onto last week's crusted layers of ice. Nothing moves out there. A barn, black and crooked rests against the sky. That sky seems thick. Snow filters into all the crannies of the barren woods, lining briars and limbs. No leaves now. No chirping birds or squawking raccoons. Silence. Last thing

she said to me was, "I set here all day and wasn't a soul come." She breathed it beneath a fever and twisted sheets. She was right. Not a soul did come. My winter coat and boots squeezed through the door frame while sweat and tears rolled down my cheek. Lou Ann died right in front of me like she'd waited for a witness. A mom and a grandma and a tough girl worked out of the hills of Harlan County to the sprawling tobacco fields and bluegrass horse farms of Lexington, face like leather with a cigarette smoldering eternally between two fingers. And the only person who came to her deathbed was me, a quiet neighbor girl she rattled her Mountain Dew can toward and offered her little pile of rich black "bottomland" every spring for flower planting. Why didn't love surround her at the final rasp and rattle? Snow fills every crevice. I feel cold in my chest.

I came out of the shallow foothills of Appalachia, but the impression of that place endures. I linger on the dusty roads where coal trucks grind around curves past rusted trailers clinging near giant limestones to the hillsides. Long-stories of tall tales and misadventures mingle with Sunday morning salvation. Hard words and soft hugs. Pride and care. Prejudice and spunk. Poverty and resilience. String beans and honeysuckle. The place I know is where rusted steel bubbles into cornfields and coalmines. All of those things generate the spark of my imagination. And the work of O'Connor, Welty, Berry, Anderson, and Bradbury awakens the knowledge in me that this place I grew up in is real. This place where my sun rises and sets, where my imagination ignites and expands, is worthy of words and stories. All characters dwell and take shape some place, and every writer is surrounded by a sea of characters in his/her place.

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