"NO PAPER COWBOYS":

STORIES

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Equilibrium is paramount in the crafting of a story, and for every writer this sense of balance is different. The writer must manage a balance of showing and telling, of denotation and connotation, and forever strive to find the perfect word in both the denotative and connotative sense, so that the reader and writer can meeting in a living story—both in the ink on the page and the remaining white space.
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PART I

CRITICAL ANALYSIS
speaking in Silence: white space and black ink

When we think of literary fiction, we don’t think of works that spell everything out for the reader. Literary fiction has a particular set of values: a richness of character over the manipulative hand of plot, a quality of language that elevates the mundane, and a depth of feeling that results from emotional involvement of the reader. Work is required of the reader. Some would label this work *interpretation*. To an extent, this is true, but there are connotations that surround the word *interpretation* that we need to address. For example, some would read a story and say, “What is this story about?” Granted, this is a general question that could be answered with a plot summary or a statement of themes or ideas present within the story. What is particularly alarming is that some would answer this question as if it were a math problem. As if there is one true answer or meaning. Literary fiction defies this type of narrow interpretations. This is because literary fiction uses not only the black ink of words on the page, but also the white spaces between to convey messages (intelligible and otherwise) to the reader.

So, what’s the difference between these two parts: the black ink and white space? We have to start with the words themselves, the black ink, the machinery that composes a story. They are the bones and muscles and tendons. Fiction writing is a series of choices. Every word is a choice of the author’s. And with every choice, the writer forms a consciousness of narration to accompany the characters and scenes the author creates. Not only is every nuance of character or peculiarity of scene a choice of the writer’s, but also how these nuances or peculiarities are communicated to the reader as a conscious choice. And if we look at writing as a series of choices—a stream of chosen words—we have to ask the questions, “What is said?” and, “What is not said?” The words themselves are the dividing line between ink and white space. This is because words both denote and connote. In his text *S/Z*, Roland Barthes defines denotation and
connotation in one fell swoop, writing, “…connotation is a secondary meaning, whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation” (7). Thus, denotation indicates the primary meaning of a word, while connotation refers to the surrounding meanings. This word *surrounding* is of particular importance. Connotation doesn’t operate in any sense of linearity of meanings. There is the primary meaning (denotation) and then all of the other meanings occupy a nebulous space, as opposed to any linear hierarchy of meanings. This isn’t to say that some meanings are not closer to the central, denoted meaning of a word.

Denotation works within the words on the page, primary meanings driving the gears of the story, doing their work from within the ink. On the other hand, a word’s connotations swirl in the white space, building on the connotations of the words that surround it. These connotations build to a feeling or a sense of atmosphere within the reader. Barthes makes an interesting comparison, writing, “…connotation makes possible a (limited) dissemination of meanings, spread like gold dust on the apparent surface of the text (meaning is golden)” (8-9). Connotation creates a nebula of signified meanings. As such, connotation becomes one of the fiction writer’s most valued tools.

There is a necessary interplay between the ink and the white space, a bond that must be managed. Simplicity and directness are the key to managing this bond. With more denotation, there can only be less connotation. Verlyn Klinkenborg speaks to this point in his book *Several Short Sentences About Writing* when he writes, “Without extraneous words or phrases or clauses, there will be room for implication. The longer the sentence, the less it’s able to imply, and writing by implication should be one of your goals” (12). Rick Bass echoes this sentiment in his essay “When to Keep it Simple” when he writes, “My own preference is toward the small notes and the disproportionately large amounts of emotion and information they can contain, as well as
the utility of their accumulated force, neatly fitted as if into a stone wall that seems simply or even crudely constructed from afar, but potentially dazzling when viewed up close” (33). Bass and Klinkenborg praise the use of short simple sentences, whose collective effect speak a silent volume in connotation and implication. As each sentence is formed, the surrounding meanings build an invisible tapestry for the reader to interpret and experience.

Hemingway’s iceberg theory is another way of explicating the interplay between the words on the page and the white space. The iceberg theory gets its name from Hemingway comparing the construction of a story to an iceberg. It is a theory based on omission. In his book *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway writes, “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing” (192). Hemingway writes that proper omission strengthens a story. Yet, this does not necessarily condone omission for omission’s sake. Writers must know what they are omitting, that way they can properly omit. The invisible substructure—the submerged seven-eighths of the iceberg—requires crafting as well, and the only way to craft this substructure is for the writer to know what he is omitting. The omitted or unsaid only receives its invisible structure by the proper use of language—by saying the right things. According to Hemingway’s theory, only the bare essentials should be shown (more on showing and telling to come) to the reader, while what cannot be said should be left submerged for the reader to intuit and feel. The facts—dialogue and action, all composed in scene—float above the surface, while feelings, symbolism, and thoughts are submerged. In her essay, “Imagist Interpretation of the Bullfight-Text,” Beatriz
Penas Ibáñez writes, “The unsaid, the invisible, the part omitted from the linguistic surface of the text is truer to life than the actually said. In other words, unreadability, like invisibility, does not entail inexistence. The watcher’s and the reader’s imaginations, activated by an incomplete form, can infer the missing portions which, although invisible, exist and can be retrieved or inferred or reappropriated through personal interpretation. Hemingway’s iceberg theory of writing is also a theory of reading, one that seeks to engage readers in a creative kind of reading that matches his own creativity as a writer” (157). From this passage we can infer that what is not said is the most important part of a story. It is the part that is alive within both the reader and the writer. This also hearkens back to the notion of literary fiction requiring work of the reader—the work of interpretation. It is the writer’s job to craft a story in such a way that “the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (Hemingway 192).

The paramount example of this theory is Hemingway’s oft-anthologized story “Hills Like White Elephants.” In this story, Hemingway presents the reader with a very simple scene between a man and a woman awaiting a train. They are never given names. Why? Names are not needed to tell the story. The two discuss an abortion, though the abortion is only referred to as “an operation.” The man is in favor of the abortion because having a baby worries him, while the woman is very conflicted about going through with the abortion. The abortion and the characters’ feelings about the abortion are left completely submerged and invisible. Hemingway crafts a scene (and particularly dialogue) that offers insight into the interior of the characters and story. Take this bit for an example:

“It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig,” the man said. “It’s not really an operation at all.”
The girl looked at the ground and table legs rested on it.  

“I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.”  

The girl did not say anything (Hemingway 540).  

Here, Hemingway gives all the dialogue to the man as he is trying to convince the girl to go through with the abortion. Hemingway also makes it very clear—even though it is in the white space—that the girl doesn’t want to talk about the abortion. It is a perfect example of using physical action and scene-work to explicate what is in the white space.  

David Foster Wallace—in one of his sparest stories—“Incarnations of Burned Children” expands of Hemingway’s iceberg theory of writing. Wallace—known for a more maximalist style of writing—still employs the parts of Hemingway’s theory by leaving the most crucial connections between characters to the white space. In “Incarnations of Burned Children,” Wallace depicts a mother and father contending the accidental scalding of their infant child. Much like Hemingway, Wallace only refers to the characters as “the child,” “Daddy,” and “Mommy.” The reader does not need to know the characters’ names to understand the plight of the characters. Yet, Wallace does use a style based on a synthesis of showing and telling to add greater nuance to the characters’ emotions in the white space. Wallace writes, “…with his cupped hand he gathered and poured or flung more cold water over the head and shoulders and chest, wanting first to see the steam stop coming off him, the Mommy over his shoulder invoking God until he sent her for towels and gauze if they had it, the Daddy moving quickly and well and his man’s mind empty of everything but purpose…” (114-115). In accordance with Hemingway’s theory, Wallace uses a series of actions—scene-work—to show us both the
Mommy and Daddy’s reactions to the burning of their child. Their emotions are left for the reader to extrapolate—the father’s fugue state of desperation and the mother’s frozen reaction of guilt. Yet, the real motivations and most critical emotion—love—is left to the white space. Wallace doesn’t have to tell the reader that the parents love their poor, scalded child. Their actions show they love their child. This implied love is the connection between the work of the reader and the writer. Empathy for the burned child and the desperate parents is what makes the story a living, breathing thing for both reader and writer.

In my story “What Happened to the Gar,” the white space carries a ghost that is mostly present only in the white space. That ghost is the character of Dan Ellers. Ellers is mentioned only in the memories and thoughts of Simon, the story’s POV character. It is Ellers’ ghost that drives the story and gives the story’s ending a sharp emotional punch, when the reader realizes that Ellers has committed suicide. This story was inspired and, in many ways, is a retelling of the J.D. Salinger story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” On rereads of this story and (hopefully) my story, the reader feels the pain of the POV characters acutely. The realization that the reader has at the end of these stories is that the characters have been carrying an emotional pain that at the end of the story finally comes to full bloom. The reader needs to ask, “Have the characters been feeling this the whole time?” and the answer needs to be yes. This is ultimately a tragic ending—a notion that goes as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics* when he writes, “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and possessing magnitude…and effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions” (50). “What Happened to the Gar” and “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” operate in this Aristotelian tragic mode. When the reader realizes the emotional anguish of both Simon and Seymour Glass (in “Bananafish”), pity is sparked within the reader—if not honest empathy—and catharsis can occur.
On the other end of the spectrum though is my story “A Better Trail.” Unlike, “What Happened to the Gar,” this story doesn’t save a big reveal for the end. On the contrary, from the outset, the story’s narration tells both the reader and the character of Rhoda that the story will not end well. Signposts pepper the story giving the reader hints that Rhoda’s rodeo dreams will be smashed, and that she should not trust Darnell. Everything directs the reader’s attention to the risky nature of Rhoda’s decisions, from Schmitt’s early line, “Y’all know it won’t work,” (75) to Pep biting Darnell’s backside (81). The story builds a cloud of risky connotation around Rhoda’s actions. Each decision made contributes to the overall effect of the story. Edgar Allan Poe echoes this in his review “The Tale and Its Effect” when he writes, “In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (725). This refers to the totality of a short story’s effect. Good, literary short stories should be perfectly engineered to achieve the author’s desired effect within the reader. Every word must be perfectly chosen.

If we return to the idea of writing as a series of choices, similar questions face the fiction writer. What should be said? What shouldn’t be said? What should be denoted and what should be left to white space? For the answers to these questions, the writer should consider what types of language lend themselves better to denotation or connotation. Denotation lends itself better to concrete language, the definite, actions, and dialogue. On the other hand, connotation is suited to the abstract, the nebulous, and the unintelligible. Why try to convey an unintelligible feeling through denotation, when the writer could allow the reader to feel it through connotation? This is why emotions are better left to white space. It is better to conjure these emotions in the reader through connotation, to craft characters and situations that are believable and concrete, to show, and not tell the reader what it is the characters feel. Of course, a writer could write, “Tom is
angry.” But why not show the ways in which Tom’s anger manifests itself? In this case, the writer allows the reader to empathize with Tom, to feel his emotion in earnest.

Yet, this is not an indictment of telling. Telling is just another tool in the fiction writer’s toolbox, much like showing, or connotation. Peter Rock, in his essay “The Telling that Shows”, gives us good definitions of showing and telling when he writes, “Telling is narration. It can involve exposition, commentary, reflection, hypothesis, and more. Showing is action and dialogue, what we often refer to as ‘scene’” (228). There are many times in a story where telling is not only appropriate but best. Telling is needed to deliver information that showing cannot. Telling is needed to assist the reader in immersion. The old saw “Show, don’t tell,” gets it wrong. The successful fiction writer must both show and tell. Balance is required, and for every story that balance is different. Rock goes on to say, “Whether the narration speaks to us implicitly or explicitly, it is the means through which focus, or limitation, occurs, an interpretation of the action that we can compare to our own” (231). Thus, telling can be used to be a safety valve for the connotation that results from showing. Some stories may not need much telling, others might require quite a bit. Rock follows up his statements on telling by writing that showing doesn’t take care of the reader in the same way telling does, that characters don’t care about the reader, but that “…the action and dialogue must draw us inside, seduce us, so that we believe in the people involved, so that we care about them and can hurt with them, and especially so that we can understand how to read the tone and slant of the narration around them” (231). Rock makes clear that a story’s showing and telling need to work in conjunction with one another, the showing presenting the characters and situations in a way that the telling is illuminated, and the telling constantly guiding the reader’s attention so that the showing can be understood.
Immersion is the key to writing good, memorable stories. Both reader and writer must become immersed in the work. The writer must be immersed while she writes. The reader must be immersed when he reads. This is where the two parties meet, where true meaning is created. Klinkenborg describes this meeting when he writes, “And then one day you’ll write a sentence that says more than its words alone can say. You’ll know that it says what you mean without having said it, and you’ll know that the reader knows it too…It lets the reader complete the thought…This is writing by implication” (114-115). Is there a more rewarding feeling for the reader to complete the thought of the writer? This is true empathetic communication. The black ink and white space form an empathetic bridge between reader and writer.

Yet, there are dangers to writing with too much implication/connotation. Klinkenborg reminds us of this when he describes the use of ambiguous sentences as creating a state of uncontrolled implication, which sets up unsaid promises to the reader that the writer cannot fulfill (141). If too much is left to the white space, vital definition and focus is lost. Confusion—or worse, dissatisfaction—besets the reader in these cases. Clarity is a necessity—even in the white space. This comes from the proper balance of connotation and denotation. Showing and telling.

One such occasion where clarity is absolutely necessary is transitions in time and space. Rock discusses this when he writes, “Let me put it bluntly: shifts in time and space are very rarely occasions for drama and very often occasions for much confusion” (232). Rock asserts that scene shifts require telling. Pure denotation is required for these moments in a story. The reader needs to be oriented and grounded. Without this grounding, the reader will be lost before the writer ever gets a chance to show a scene.
An example from my own work comes in the story “North and West.” First, let’s look at the first line: “Pat was a college flunk-out with a beater Volvo and a cowboy hat” (19). What do we learn about the character in his line? We get a name (Pat), a descriptor (college flunk-out), and two possessions (beater Volvo, cowboy hat). Already we have a pretty good idea of who this character is. Pat isn’t suited to college, yet has some involvement with cowboy culture. Movement is also implied with the invoking of the Volvo. This invocation, in addition to the header “Northbound, I-35” grounds the reader to a character that is on the move.

Considering that “North and West” is a road story, grounding the reader is of particular importance. This is why I gave each scene a header indicating a location and whether or not Pat and Vivienne were on the move. This is a very simple way to orient the reader, and avoid the confusion created by two characters constantly on the move. It is also worth noting that there are very few scenes in “North and West” that depict the two characters in the car driving. This is simply because there is very little drama in the quiet hours on the highway. I found the space of the car is too confining, and decided I’d better leave the long hours of highway to white space.

In comparison, what must be shown? Rock responds to this question, stating things that cannot be simplified must be shown. He writes, “Emotions, for instance. Relationships. And the only way to express such complication is through interaction—often between the characters but sometimes between the narration and the doings of the characters” (Rock 234-235). Simplify what can be simplified. This leaves more room for the drama of emotions and relationships which need scenes and connotations to bring them alive. Emotions and relationships need the full page—both ink and white space—to become real to the reader.

One such place where emotions and relationships come to the forefront is in dialogue. Dialogue is always tricky in that realistic dialogue is not necessarily true to life. Literary
dialogue lacks (for the most part) the real life pauses of hesitation. These pauses and “ums” would render the boring and clunky. When committed to the page, these pauses and beats become glaring, as opposed to being ignored in most speech. Dialogue must reveal character. The characters get to express their own voices, though not without the help of narration. Good dialogue requires the proper use of showing, telling, denotation, and connotation. Both ink and white space must be unified to make dialogue that is believable. For the most part, the writer should get out of the way of good dialogue. Allow the characters to show what they feel and think through what they say. If the writer allows this to happen, he will rarely have to use a speaker tag other than, X character said. The narration won’t have to describe what was said because the reader will know how it was said according to what was said. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Some nuances of dialogue have to be told. Lying is one example. When a character lies, the narration must communicate that what was said was a lie in order to avoid confusion in the reader. The writer must use narration (through speaker tags) to manage and focus their character’s dialogue, yet the dialogue itself must illuminate the characters speaking as well as seduce the reader. Conversations are the meeting points between characters, and they must stir up the same emotions that real conversations bring out in us.

One example though of a lie that doesn’t require explication occurs in my story “Who Prays for the Devil?” when Art reunites with his father at the end. Art’s father asks, “How did she dance?” referring to Art’s mother at her wedding to another man. Art, having attended the wedding of course saw his mother dancing. She danced happily—a sight that ultimately drives Art to relapse—but Art lies to his father saying, “Bluely, Pop” (53). This line of dialogue is one of the most important in the story. On the technical side, “Pop” effectively acts as a speaker tag, indicating that Art is doing the talking. But also, there is no need to indicate that Art is lying to
his father, as the reader sees in the first scene that his mother dances happily. But what this line does in the white space says a lot about Art as a character. It says that as much as Art has been hurt by his father, and as much as he might be afraid that he is turning into his father, Art still loves him enough to lie to him, thus saving him some heartbreak (or at least attempting to).

Another area of interplay between showing and telling is the use of metaphor. Metaphor is a specific type of telling that can augment what is shown in scene or even what is left to white space. Metaphors compare one thing to another, without using the words “like” or “as” (in the case of similes). A metaphor is a more direct comparison, directly call one thing another. Metaphor adds additional layers of nuance or specificity. It can both narrow and complicate a reading, depending upon its use. Rock speaks to this point when he writes, “We attempt to defamiliarize, to show something in a new way. Metaphors can generate an understanding that is specific to a moment in a story, but they are also dangerous, as they are places where we, when writing, can step outside the story in an effort to impress ourselves or others, or to control and limit a reader’s interpretation” (237-238). Metaphor can add specificity to physical action by comparing it to something odd or unfamiliar. This also helps to add more atmospheric connotation to the scenes of a story. The fiction writer can also use metaphor to further focus that which must be left to white space. It can make the abstract or unintelligible concrete, and thus both bring the unintelligible into focus, while complicating it as well.

I use this technique within my own work in the story “The Better Part of Fishing” when Polly is thinking about her grief at the fisherman’s funeral. In the story, I write:

“Polly took her seat at the end of a crimson cushioned pew, her eyes eschewing the walnut casket, the hollow centerpiece of a tragic tableau. Instead, she caught herself eyeing his family, his mother spangled in black, father resting his head in his hands. She wished
desperately to sit among them, separate from all the friends and acquaintances, and when she realized this she felt herself blush. Who was she to compare her grief to theirs? She had barely known the man, even if that little knowledge had seemed enough. Had the family known what he had become to her? She was still dismayed at how his brief presence had left her with such marvelous wounds. Or was it her that had left the wounds? Had she not carved out a little of herself to allow for his inclusion in her life? Now there was only a cavity—hollow as his casket—that ached and could not be filled” (107-108).

This passage focuses first on the casket and its hollowness. The casket is the physical “ground” for the metaphor used later in the paragraph to anchor the more abstract cavity or absence within Polly. This is a moment where a told comparison helps to add nuance to the emotion that rests in the white space of the story. Another instance of this occurs in the middle of the passage, when I write that the fisherman’s “brief presence had left her with such marvelous wounds.” The word wounds acts to ground the pain of her grief, to make it concrete and relatable. That, and with descriptor marvelous, the metaphor lends a greater specificity to the connotations in the white space.

Another instance of metaphor in my work comes up in the story “Dirge” when the narrator’s wife attempts suicide. As she is laying on the stage at the Corner Bar, she reaches up for the narrator’s hair saying, “Such black feathers” (Agnew 38). This directly compares the narrator’s hair to the feathers of a blackbird, which in turn helps to tie the disembodied lyrics of the song “Bye Bye Blackbird” to the characters and make the lyrics more real and emotive to the characters.
Metaphor of this style comes back up in the story “No Paper Cowboys” when the narrator is compared to the dead spike in the story. The spike and the narrator are bound by metaphor in the same way that the narrator in “Dirge” is bound to the idea of blackbirds.

Another similarity is the use of italics to disembody voices. Italics aren’t used very often in “Dirge” but they are a rather significant part of “No Paper Cowboys.” In that story, the narrator relates what he perceives and experiences around him to lines that he has read or songs he has heard. This is a technique that I learned from Rick Moody’s book The Black Veil: A Memoir with Digressions. In his book Lost in the Funhouse, John Barth addresses the use of italics saying that italics are “…the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases…Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for “outside,” intrusive, or artificial voices…They should be used sparingly” (72). Admittedly, the italicized quotes in “No Paper Cowboys” are not used sparingly, but they have a purpose. The point is that this is how the narrator relates to the world and situations he finds himself in. They are outside and intrusive and artificial. And these interruptions, in addition to the 2nd person point of view, help to immerse the reader in the narrator’s highly associative mindset. The quotations themselves also lend to the story’s depressive and dark tone. Lines like “It’s plain to see, the sun won’t shine today, but I ain’t in the mood for sunshine anyway” (Agnew 55), “Warmth, warmth, more warmth! For we are dying of cold and not darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost” (Agnew 58), and “faithful to a corse” (Agnew 58) all bring the reader into the narrator’s depression, as well giving some more specific insight into the character.

There is yet another workshop saw: writing is revising. In revision, the fiction writer further works towards clarity, both in the words on the page and in the white space that surrounds them. Revising with the white space in mind requires more cutting than adding. It
requires cutting two good words to make room for one perfect word. Klinkenborg sums up his revision theory in the final pages of his book when he writes, “So revise toward brevity—remove words instead of adding them. Toward directness—language that isn’t evasive or periphrastic. Toward simplicity—in construction and word choice. Toward clarity—a constant lookout for ambiguity. Toward rhythm—where it’s lacking. Toward literalness—as an antidote to obscurity. Toward implication—the silent utterance of your sentences” (148). Klinkenborg points to perfect clarity and simplicity, even in the use of connotation, which by its very nature, complicates. Ambiguity and confusion must be curtailed. The writer must manage their use of connotation and white space, must focus and narrow interpretation enough so as not to lose the reader within the white space.

Equilibrium is paramount in the crafting of a story, and for every writer this sense of balance is different. The writer must manage a balance of showing and telling, of denotation and connotation, and forever strive to find the perfect word in both the denotative and connotative sense, so that the reader and writer can meeting in a living story—both in the ink on the page and the remaining white space.
Works Cited

PART II

SHORT STORIES
North and West

Northbound, I-35

Pat was a college flunk-out with a beater Volvo and a cowboy hat. Going to the university had always felt like a wrong turn. So when the grades came in, Pat did what he thought was best: he pulled the remaining four thousand dollars his now dead grandmother had given him for schooling out of his savings account and hit the road. He knew how his parents would react, so he didn’t tell them a word of what was going to happen. College had been their idea anyway, and Pat wasn’t going to wait for another bright idea from them. Ahead of him was no future, that’s what they would say. But with no future, there would be no dread.

He drove north, crossing the Red River and into Oklahoma, stopping in Ardmore for gas. He bought a cheap bean burrito from the Exxon station and a cream soda to wash it down. This had always been his road meal for long trips, a ritual he had picked up from his uncle, the saddle bronc rider and steer-tripper that won the All Around at Cheyenne in 1984. The uncle that taught Pat to rope in the mornings while they waited for the dew to get off the grass. Even though Pat rarely caught the calf, he loved the feeling of the loop whipping like a rotor over his head and the loping of the horse as he stood in the stirrups. The championship saddle that his uncle had won—divine with hand-tooled leather and polished silver—had sat on a stand in Pat’s grandparents’ house for as long as he could remember. It was a saddle that would never touch a horse’s back. It was too perfect, which made it useless. Except to Pat it was everything he wanted. But his grandparents died, one then the other, and Pat’s uncle left without a word, willfully disappearing. His parents decided to sell the old championship saddle. It sold quickly.

As he ate his burrito, Pat thought he just might go out and find his long lost uncle, but he knew not to hope. But the rodeo—the one his uncle won—they held it every year. He could go
there, and maybe find something that would remind of the days where all he needed was a rope
and a good uncle.

**Westbound, I-40**

Pat turned left at Oklahoma City, the maddening spirals of asphalt. It was his duty to
Manifest Destiny, he thought and remembered his uncle’s voice. Go west, young man. North
and west. He thought of Wyoming and Montana and Oregon and his uncle’s PRCA forays, the
soft dirt of the arenas, night after night. That’s where he would go.

But Pat became cocky in his escape, pounding down the interstate at seventy-five, eighty-
five, ninety. The Volvo shook and shuddered. He listened to the sounds of the road, the wind
slamming into the windshield and the whirring of tires like radio static.

An interruption: an eighteen wheeler lumbered ahead of him and he pulled into the fast
lane to pass. A minivan, slow in the fast lane. He was neck and neck with the eighteen wheeler
and bumper to bumper with the minivan, foot mashing the brakes. He knew it then. He wasn’t
going to stop in time. He pulled into the tall grass of the median, the front driver side tire diving
off the asphalt and slamming into the dirt, exploding. The axle snapped like a bone, and the
Volvo came to a twisting halt.

Pat thought for a moment that someone would stop and check if he was still breathing,
but no one did. He got out, paced around the Volvo, inspecting the damage. A blown-out tire
and a sheared axle. The memory of his uncle’s old mare—abandoned like the championship
saddle and Pat—laying in a copse of white oaks, her leg broken. The smooth action of the thirty-
thirty mingled with his ragged, tearful breaths. The echoing gunshot followed by the purest
silence.
The Volvo wasn’t worth the repairs. It was a relic of Pat’s life in college, in the city. A gift from his parents. “It’ll get you from A to B,” they had said. What they had really wanted to say was that the Volvo would get him away from the ranch and the cattle. “Get a good job,” they said. Pat’s dad had always told him a joke: do you know how to make a small fortune in the cattle business? Start with a large fortune.

Pat pried off the license plates, peeled off the inspection and registration stickers, took his insurance card from the glove compartment, and checked the cash even though he knew it was all there. He packed these things into his backpack and started walking. Go west, young man.

He walked on the sunbaked asphalt past where HWY 270 intersected I-40. He walked past a mile marker, then another. Cows watched him pass from the other side of barbed wire fences, indifferent to his troubles. Time evaporated and Pat was certain the sun would forever hang over his head. The world became a bigger place when he was on foot. He entered a purgatory of taking one step and then another. He knew the road would outlast him.

**Cherokee Crossing, Oklahoma**

Pat caught a break at a Kwik Stop, restocking on burritos and cream soda. He threw in a bottle of water and a road atlas for good measure. He sat in the shade with his back to the ice box and watched cars pull up to the gas pumps. Oklahoma plates, Texas plates, Arkansas, New Mexico. Pale tourists with sun visors and cameras tried desperately to see and remember every ounce of their vacation. Next door was a trading post and he wandered into it, thinking there would be something useful to purchase, but the trading post only sold souvenirs: dream catchers, polished stones, t-shirts, paintings of eagles and wolves and Indian chiefs, postcards depicting scenic vistas, beaded moccasins, toy revolvers, turquoise boots, and bluegrass CDs. He had once
read a book that said the soul of America was hidden within places like this, as if it could be summed up by the worthless shit people spend money on. Luckily, there was a cabinet of jarred goods, and Pat picked up a jar of pickled garlic.

He was in line checking out when the old cashier looked past him to the doorway and said, “Ma’am, you can’t bring him in here unless you’re gonna carry him.” Pat turned to look and in the doorway was a young woman, blonde and almost skinny to a fault with slender limbs. A great dane was tethered to her hand. The blonde woman eyed the cashier and mumbled something that sounded like French. She had a puzzled look.

“No pets,” the cashier repeated, pointing to the slobbering beast. With a huff, the woman escorted the dog out of the trading post.

“People like that,” the cashier said when he reached the counter, “think they can do anything, I guess.” Pat thought of the license plates in his backpack. “Don’t know what she was thinking bringing that dog in here.” He paid for the pickled garlic without comment.

Outside, the blonde woman was kicking the fender of her Volkswagen Beetle. The dog whined and tugged gently at his leash. One of the VW’s tires was flat.

“Ma’am,” Pat said, but she couldn’t hear him over the thuds of her kicking and the violent rushes of French that erupted from her mouth. “Ma’am, do you need a hand?” The woman turned and looked him over, before resuming her French ranting.

“Ok, ok, ok,” Pat said. He inspected the Volkswagen finding the tire iron, jack, and spare, and while the woman paced and muttered, he changed the tire. When he had finished, the woman tried to shove a twenty into his hand but Pat refused. “I don’t need any money,” he said and left.
He descended a grassy slope to the interstate and was once again faced with the seeming impossibility of walking the highways. Having only walked a handful of yards, the Volkswagen pulled over next to him. The passenger window rolled down and the French woman’s dog poked its head out with a bark that reverberated in Pat’s ribcage.

The woman shushed the dog and said, “Do you need a ride?”

Pat looked down the interstate where the black asphalt met the horizon in a hazy mirage of water, then he got in the back seat.

With the woman, the dog, her pile of wrinkled clothes in the backseat, Pat, and his backpack the Volkswagen resembled a clown car. The car wasn’t necessarily dirty but cluttered. Blue and silver Red Bull cans were scattered along the floorboards. The woman had thumbtacked a collage of photographs to the car’s ceiling, and a gold ring was hung by a chain from the rearview mirror. The great dane turned its massive head around to face Pat in the backseat, going as far to touch its wet nose against his, sniffing him, as Pat avoided breathing or any sudden movements.

“Where are you going?” the woman said with a shrug and a smile.

“How about Wyoming?” he said, pulling out his road atlas and pointing to the little, black dot that was Cheyenne.

“I’m on my way to Seattle to see family,” she said, “but I can take you to Wyoming.”

“Ok,” Pat said.

Northbound, HWY 83

They drove in silence for a few hours, the woman flicking her eyes from the road to the rearview mirror. Her name was Vivienne and she called the dog Max. Pat asked her what a
French lady was doing in this part of the country and all she said was, “Taking photographs, but I have been in America for a long time.” Pat thought that it made sense for her not to tell him much, being strangers and all. Why had she picked him up in the first place? Didn’t they have slasher films in France?

After they passed through Shamrock, turned right, and headed north up the Texas panhandle, the sky turned an electric red as the sun passed below the horizon. Vivienne pulled over onto the shoulder and put the Volkswagen in park. “Would you sit up front with me?” she said. “I’m sleepy, and Max isn’t much of a conversationalist.”

“Ok,” Pat said and pulled himself out of the backseat. When he opened the passenger door, Max let out a pathetic whine.

“Max, allez,” Vivienne said, and the giant lumbered out of the front seat. Pat directed him into the back, but not without Max letting loose a yawn that showed every one of his dagger sized teeth.

“He is a big baby,” Vivienne said as Pat took his seat in the front, “but he is my little brother. He was with me when I was in France.”

“Emphasis on little, I suppose,” Pat said. The Volkswagen started to move down the highway again.

“You are a cowboy?” she said, touching one of her fingers to the brim of his hat.

“Oh, no ma’am,” he said with a smile, “but I’ve known a few.”

“Tell me about them,” she said.

He didn’t really know where to start, but that was the way of explained things that had always seemed so clear to him, so he started with what had always irked him. “Well, there are cow folk all about still, but real cowboys are few and far between. Hell, there are some riders in
the PBR that ain’t cowboys. Boys that’ll make a contractor get ten bulls up saying they will ride ‘em all, but then they get the wind knocked out of them after two bulls and takes off for the house. You see real cowboys don’t just have the skills—no, that’s the easy part—but they also have something inside of them: toughness, integrity, an occasional kindness, and a love for what they do. Those men are cowboys.”

Pat’s eyes were drawn to the collage above him. “What was happening there?” He pointed to a photograph of a girl, maybe five, in a dress covered in lace. She was sliding down a metal slide, the rest of the playground in the background.

Vivienne’s eyes were wary, but she spoke.

“My father returned,” she said, “he took me to the park.”

“Where did he go?”

She rolled her eyes and muttered something in French.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I picked that picture because it seemed to be a happy time?”

“Yes, it was. Because he didn’t bring me anything.”

“…”

“You see, we had money. Wealthy is the word. He would bring me expensive gifts when he returned. But this time he didn’t. He took me to the park and laughed and played with me.”

“He was trying to earn your love, not buy it.”

“No. I think this is when his money ran out. But I like your version better.” A smile slipped out of her. He liked the sight of it.

His eyes scanned more of the photographs on the Volkswagen’s ceiling. He saw a clipped photo on the edge of the collage. It hung over his eyes and dripped of dread. It was her,
older now, an adult save for the eyes, in a white dress, hand in hand with what looked like the happiest man in the world.

He thought of the little gold band that hung by a chain from the rearview mirror.

“Is that your husband?”

“Oui. That was him.”

“What happened? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ask.”

Her eyes watered at the corners.

“Nothing that would not have happened eventually,” she said.

Pat changed the subject but kept talking until the rhythms of the road lulled him to sleep.

When he woke, Max was still snoozing in the backseat, but Vivienne was singing to the radio:

\[
\text{I know some day you’ll have a beautiful life,}
\]
\[
\text{I know you’ll be a sun in somebody else’s sky,}
\]
\[
\text{But why, why, why can’t it be, can’t it be mine?}
\]

The meager lights of Perryton flickered before the Volkswagen, and they pulled into a Motel 6’s parking lot. Pat followed Vivienne into the motel and up to the counter. A woman who looked like she had worked the late shift her whole life sat there, her graying hair barely holding in its bun and her eyes sunken deep, the pupils barely peeking out from between the lids.

“May I help you?” she said.

Pat stepped up to the counter and said, “We need a room for the night, a double, please.”

Vivienne caught his eye and held up two fingers.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Two rooms, please.”

“Doubles?”

“Sure, that’ll be fine,” he said.
Vivienne smiled.

The hostess started setting up room keys, explaining that breakfast would be available from six to ten and how to access the wifi. Pat turned to Vivienne, but she had already walked out the automatic doors to the Volkswagen. Pat paid for the rooms with new, crisp twenties.

He met Vivienne by the car. She was rooting through her pile of clothes digging out a camera and a bottle of Sailor Jerry. Out of the Volkswagen’s pint-sized trunk came a duffel that she slung over her shoulder. Max was sleepily pulled out of the backseat. Pat just grabbed his backpack.

In the hotel’s hallway she took her room key. After he dropped the plastic card into her hand, she showed him the face of her wrist watch. “Five A.M,” she said.

“Five?”

“Yes, for photographs we leave early,” she said.

He showed her two thumbs up. Her lips curled into a crooked grin, and she continued down the hall to her room, Max in tow. Pat realized that he was disappointed, kind of embarrassed. He told himself that he was just being pragmatic by initially suggesting a single room, but he knew that was only partly true. He found himself revisiting the day with her: the way she would brush away windblown strands of hair without frustration or a sense of futility, how she would sneeze softly, as if it were a secret, then hold her hand over her nose and mouth, her eyes flicking this way and that, wondering if anyone had noticed. Maybe it was simply that she had picked him up, that he now felt some attraction to her—she had plucked him from the world. She was an agent of his escape.

Westbound, HWY 412
She pulled into a rest area just as the sun cast the world into a yellow light. She shook Pat awake. “Watch Max, please,” she said. The dog whined as she exited the Volkswagen armed with her camera.

Pat watched sleepy-eyed from the car as she walked to the barbed wire fence at the edge of the rest area. She took a picture of the fence, a decrepit barn in the background. She started to crawl through the fence but snagged on a barb.

Pat hooked the leash to Max’s collar and the duo made for Vivienne.

“What did you want to go through the fence for anyway?” Pat asked.

She pointed to the barn.

Its roof was made of sheet tin, rods of light beamed through rusted out holes. Old tack hung on the walls of four horse stalls. Mice skittered through strands of hay and old feed bags, the familiar debris of a ranch.

“What is that?” Vivienne asked pointing to a piece of tack.

“That’s a hackamore,” he said. It was rusted and the leather rotten. “You use it for breaking colts.” She took a picture, a scowl smeared on her face.

La Junta, Colorado

They stopped at a gas station before continuing west to Pueblo. “I’ll pump,” Pat said, sliding out of the passenger seat. It was Vivienne’s turn to pay.
“Ok, keep Max in the car, please.” Pat had hoped to see mountains by now, but still the plains that had plagued them through Texas and Oklahoma’s panhandles stretched on. Dust still hung in the air. It was good they had stopped.

Vivienne came out of the station with a cream soda. “For you,” she said.

“Thank you, ma’am. Have you tried one?” he asked, the bottle extended.

“Oh, no.” She shied away, but grinned all the same.

“Come on, try it.”

She eyed the cream soda, then Pat.

“Ok.”

Pat popped the top, watched the fizz dissipate, and handed the bottle to Vivienne.

She took a timid sip, then a longer drink. He noticed the gentle cleft in her chin, the way her throat pulsed as she swallowed.

“Good,” she giggled and handed back the bottle.

“I think so,” Pat said.

He went into the station to use the restroom, and that’s when he saw them, the condoms. He bought some, and found that he couldn’t look the cashier in the eye, as always. It was shameful and he knew it. He tucked the little box into his pocket and got into the Volkswagen.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He couldn’t look her in the eye either.

**Larkspur, Colorado**

Traffic had bogged them down, and they realized that there were few purer hells than being stuck in traffic when only the horizon called to them. It started with sighs from Vivienne
and a whine from Max, then Vivienne took a tiny exit and followed the one lane road to a deli that looked like a gingerbread house with gas pumps out front.

No sooner had they hauled themselves stiffly from the Volkswagen, a bald man in chainmail and a kilt cornered them by pump four.

“Would you mind signing our petition?” Chainmail asked. He held a clipboard out towards Pat.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Pat said.

“Just down the road,” Chainmail said. “There are more of us there.”

“What is this?” Vivienne asked, taking the clipboard and examining the list of signatures.

“It’s a petition trying to rid Larkspur of fossil fuels.”

“I’ll sign,” Vivienne said.

“Wait,” Chainmail said, “you’re not from around here are you?”

“No.”

“You have to have a Colorado driver’s license to sign.”

“Oh.” She handed back the clipboard.

After Chainmail had walked back down the road, Pat said, “Well, you see something new every day, I suppose.” Vivienne retrieved her camera and, snapping on his leash, led Max from the Volkswagen. She was headed down the road as well, so Pat followed.

The deli sat atop a hill and down the back slope were scattered tents, wagons, booths, and pavilions. Everywhere there were people seemingly transported from the fourteenth century.

Pat realized that ole Chainmail had not been the anomaly, but rather he himself was.

Vivienne only took a moment to survey the encampment, before descending into the carnival. They ambled through the tents not buying anything, only looking. Occasionally,
Vivienne would dislodge herself and take a photograph, and Pat would wait with Max’s leash in his hand, trying not to feel like a tourist.

When they tired of walking, Vivienne picked a tree and they sat under it eating turkey legs. They watched the menagerie of people as they acted out a different time.

“It is the weirdest thing,” Pat said, tossing the remnants of his turkey leg to Max.

“What is?” Vivienne said.

“All these people acting like lords and ladies.”

“It is strange to you?”

“Yeah, how could it not be?”

“It is odd that you think so, I think,” Vivienne said. “You are a cowboy. Does that not make you,” she scrunched her face, “an anachronist?”

“Is that French?”

“No,” she giggled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you not play out a different time as well?”

“No, cow folk are still around,” Pat said, but Vivienne just shrugged. It scared him that Vivienne might think he was just as childish as the people of the carnival.

Is that how Pat’s parents saw him? As a child playing cowboy. How little respect they must have had for his uncle.

Cheyenne, Wyoming

And finally they arrived. The arena was a contemporary Circus Maximus with a racetrack for horses around the main arena and a grandstand towering over the dirt.
The tickets weren’t cheap, and he had to pay extra for the ticket taker to allow Max in, but Pat gladly paid. It was the Daddy of ‘Em All, as the announcers called it, the rodeo that his uncle had won in 1984.

Vivienne had to grab Pat’s shirt tail to keep up with him as he weaved through the crowd that he had to admit was not unlike the one back in Larkspur. Men in felt hats brandished waxed moustaches and polished revolvers. Vendors sold boots and pearl snap shirts and pocket knives. Max’s eyes were wide, trying to take in every scent and sound, but the leash pulled him onward.

Their seats were high up in the grandstand and were much closer together than he had anticipated. They sat next to each other, closer than they had ever been when confined to the Volkswagen. Max lay atop their feet, munching on a hot dog with ketchup. Pat fidgeted and tried to shuffle his feet, not mustering the courage to look at her, even though neither pulled away.

The rodeo began with the traditional pageantry: the singing of the national anthem, a prayer for safety, and a parade of horses and riders. Vivienne’s eyes widened at the column of riders in their regalia of hats, buckles, boots, and chaps.

“You’ve never been to a rodeo, have you?” Pat said.

“No,” she said, tilting her head towards him.

Pat explained every event as it happened. Vivienne’s face seemed to be a mixture of curiosity and excitement occasionally mottled with concern. The first time a rider tripped a steer, the lariat catching the animal’s back legs and sending it end over end, Vivienne gasped.

“It’ll be alright,” Pat told her.

“I don’t like it. This must hurt the animals,” she said. Her face was reddening and she crossed her arms.
“The animals will be ok,” Pat said.

“Do they get hurt often?”

“No,” he lied. He didn’t want to tell her that steer tripping was illegal in most states.

“The animals are resilient?” she said.

“They are pretty tough, yeah.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“But it has to happen.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she fumed.

Could she not understand the celebration of skill, the heritage displayed? Did she not understand that rodeo was more than mere sport? He wanted to say more, to justify each steer’s pain, but he couldn’t. She had him.

When the rodeo had ended and the winners received their saddles and buckles, Pat and Vivienne wandered down into the staging area behind the bucking chutes. This was where the contestants waited before they entered the arena. In the middle of the dim, concrete room was a long bench made of cedar. The bench was covered in signatures old and new.

“My uncle told me about this. The contestants sign the bench if they win,” Pat said.

They searched the bench for Pat’s uncle’s name. On their hands and knees, they inspected each squiggle of ink and found only one that could have been his uncle’s, but it was just a set of initials.

“Your uncle. It is him, I think,” Vivienne said.

“Maybe.”

“It must be,” she said.

“I don’t know.” His head hung low.
“It’ll be alright,” she said.

**Beartooth Pass, Montana**

They had been driving up, but sometimes the switchbacks would take them back down a few hundred feet so that they could climb even higher on a smoother slope. As they climbed, Pat found his attention alternating between the scenery and the erratic curves of the ascending road. The temperature dropped drastically during their climb.

He had been itching to get out of the Volkswagen for a while at that point, but when he saw the snow by that still, clear pond by the highway, he couldn’t contain himself.

“What?” she said, suddenly removed from the trance of the road.

“Snow,” he said, “It’s fucking snow.” He didn’t wait for her to get out of the car. Instead, he took off, jogging around the pond. The mosquitos took to him. He thought at over ten thousand feet up they probably didn’t get too many human meals.

Snow was a rare enough thing where Pat came from. If it ever did fall in his part of Texas, it didn’t stay long. Instead, Texas got cold rains and sheets of ice on the roads.

When he came stomping into the fresh mountain powder, he heard Vivienne call after him. He turned and found her scrambling to construct a snowball, Max’s leash looped around her wrist. He dove to avoid the first shot, rolling over in the snow to make his own ammunition. A snowball caught him in the chin as he threw his first, striking her on the shoulder and sending Max into a fit of wary barks.
As another snowball struck his hip, he realized that diving to the ground was a tactical error, so he scrambled to his feet and started to scamper up the hill away from the highway. Ducking around rocks and trees, he seemed to lose her and that’s when he saw the rock. It had a fifty foot vertical face that rose straight out of the green grass, with its back side gently sloping back at an easy incline a good two hundred feet away from the vertical edge. There was no question as to what would happen next. He climbed at an even pace up the back slope, putting one foot in front of the other. “It’s just walking,” he told himself and only once did the slope get slippery enough to force him into a bear crawl.

As he reached the top he focused on his feet, not looking out in front of himself. He made sure his feet didn’t hang over or too close to the edge. He looked up and the world was before him, lakes like melted silver, the fuzzy green brush strokes of trees in the wind, a gray highway that snaked on and on, and mountains like the one he now stood atop stretching up to where snow could be mistaken for clouds.

He could hear Vivienne call to him from below, the snap of her camera. Had his uncle seen this and vowed to never go back to Texas? If so, Pat could understand.

**Coeur d’Alene, Idaho**

He thought it odd and even had to admit that it frightened him when Vivienne said that there was only one room left at the hotel and it was theirs to share. Seeing that Vivienne had put her duffel on the one queen bed in the room, Pat set to making out the sleeper sofa, unfolding the stiff spring mattress and smoothing out the wrinkled sheets. Max took up his place, laying in a heap at the foot of Vivienne’s bed like a lazy gargoyle on a broken cathedral. The dog eyed Pat through his drooping eyelids, or at least Pat thought so. She showered while Pat lay in his
makeshift bed flipping through the channels on the TV. She came out of the steamed restroom in a t-shirt and flannel pajama pants, her hair still clinging to itself with water.

“You have had a good trip?” she said, running a towel over her head.

“Yeah, it’s been really great,” he said.

“We will be in Seattle tomorrow evening,” she said.

“I know. I know.”

“What will you do then?”

He was afraid to answer, afraid to even think about it.

“Will you go home?”

“I don’t know if I want to go back,” he said.

“No one ever wants to go back.”

She crawled into the bed next to him, and he wanted to kiss her, if only to stay on the road. But he knew the road would outlast them. Her wet hair grazed his forehead as she held him, the only kiss they would share. She would go here, he would go there. A night later as he stood in front of the bus depot in Seattle, watching the Volkswagen drive away, he felt that the dream didn’t have to be over, that everything and anything was still possible. It was only a ticket away. But he bought his ticket, headed south and east, and hoped that the hours staring out of a bus window, the death throes of the trance and his vision quest, would be enough to allow him some hope. Maybe a glimpse of one more mountain.
Dirge

You know she is dying to leave, but the people sink their velvet claws into her. The whole Corner Bar loves her voice. It is the last birdsong before night. She never sings long enough. It’s what everyone says. “You should sing longer songs.” Their words are cigar smoke, purple and dissipating. She smiles, eyes like upside down U’s, shrugs. What is there to say?

She stirs the ice in her tumbler, idle. You lean in. “Are you ready to get out of here?”

“Please.”

At home—your tie a dead snake on the floor—she turns on the radio. The amble of a saxophone. A voice that was not human—it is what she wanted. You both sit on the cold couch, her head lolling. Her eyes slink to yours. Her frosted hands on your face.

“It’s ok.”

You look through the gaps between her fingers; they smell like cucumbers. “Say anything,” you plead. Her hand slides down the slope of your nose to cover your mouth. She leans in as if to kiss you, her eyes so brown.

“| am a splinter, and the world will push me out.”

***

Of course she would be back, that’s what you tell the people at Corner Bar. They had heard she was not well.

“She’s looking forward to it.” You know it’s a lie, but…there’s no excuse.

She drifts out of the bathroom in a blue eggshell dress, limbs thin and spectral. It’s not her style. She’d rather fly under the radar, incognito and unassuming. That is the nature of her beauty.
At Corner Bar, patrons shake her pallid hands.

“We can’t wait to hear you. What will you sing?”

She gives them wan smiles and takes the stage. The bar has learned that she will not use a microphone. They put the spotlight on her, her eyes lifted to the light. She sings from a faraway place, the audience pushing in on the stage.

*Bye bye, blackbird.*

She falls straight back, as if into the grave. A gasp and you’re at her side. You can feel the heat of the spotlight. Did she lock her legs? Her eyes have rolled back, the deep brown gone white.

“Say something, Evie.”

Her eyes flicker back, and her hand reaches for your cheek, your hair.

“Such black feathers.”

You hear the sirens at the threshold, and she retches on the stage. The paramedics take her away, and she is whispering, “I am a wisp. Blown away.”

***

They pump her stomach. You’re not there when this happens. It’s for the best. In the ER waiting room, a child jumps from chair to chair, a giant traversing islands. You try to drown yourself in the hospital’s burnt coffee, but your scalp only starts to tingle. You play chess on your phone against yourself, moving the pixel ivory and ebony without reason. *Forward into the breach, nary a pawn will survive.*

“Mr. Abrams.”
A nurse leads you back to meet a doctor who tells you that Evie has overdosed on her anti-anxiety medication. He says she won’t speak. “Not a word,” he says, “and we need some information.”

He lets you into her room, where an IV is running to her ghostly arm, her eyes low.

“Hey, you know when we met?” you say. “You were singing with the Mitchum ensemble. Your ex was on the drums, Terry Reinhardt. I swear to God, he stared at your back, broken-hearted the whole gig. But you started to sing and it wasn’t like when other people sing, all full of smug performance. You did not perform. You never have, not for a moment. No, you step on stage and core out your heart right there for all the audience to see. It’s why I love you.”

Her face crinkles and melts so she buries it into the pillow, auburn hair unfolding like tendrils. You want to say look at me, but you know she can’t.

“The doctors, they need some information.”

She points you out the door. You go.

The doctors want to send her to another wing of the hospital, but they need her permission.

They say, “Ma’am, we would like to move you to our psychiatric unit. Will you sign off on this?” Her eyes scan the document they hand her, those almonds jump to you.

Say something. Say something to help her understand. Say something to help her understand that she needs some help. Say you love her one more time.

“This was our idea, Mrs. Abrams, but we need your support to move forward.”

She closes her eyes, nods her head, signs on the line.
The drive home is hollow, vacant streets black and shiny from a fresh rain. Had it rained? You’d missed it.

Ella Fitzgerald is singing through the radio. You shut her up with the press of a button. Road static and flickering headlights lead you home where the lights are off, the floors swept, dishes clean, and bed made.

The purple flier advertising the gig at the Corner Bar lies face down on the dining room table. You can’t bear to throw it away, a sickness forming in your stomach. After you had first married, you kept all of the fliers, hanging them in frames on the walls, but she took them all down and sold the frames.

You take off your clothes, leaving them in the floor and crawl into bed. You can’t get warm, the chill of the hospital lingers. You wish she’d let you record her singing, then you’d have a way to bring her home, here and now.

But the bed is empty. She’s not there.

When you can’t stand it anymore, you go into the bathroom to wash your face. An empty pill bottle is there to greet you. Try not to drown yourself in the sink, shower until the water runs cold. She didn’t leave a note. Of course she wouldn’t.

Take the stapler. You staple every damn flier to the cream painted walls. When you run out of staples, resort to hammering finishing nails. Do what you must. Do anything.

Drag a blanket to the couch—you cannot go back to the bed—the words *bye bye blackbird* ringing in your ears.
Who Prays for the Devil?

Art watches his mother dance with her second husband. The man is not his father, but he is a nice guy, and his mother seems happy. Nice, Art thinks. Dennis is his name, and he is a kind man, yet ordinary. Perhaps after Art’s father, Dennis is a sort of retirement for her.

The country club is all white balloons and champagne glasses for the wedding reception. Art offered to play for the reception, thinking it would be special for his mother that he provided the music. She refused though, saying she’d rather talk to him and not have him busy. Art walked her down the aisle in place of her father, who passed a few years back.

Art is the only family his mother has left, and he wants only the best for her. His mother is rail-thin in her white dress, her high cheekbones framing a polished smile.

Art tries to mimic her smile, forces his lips apart, shows his teeth. Fakes it. He is happy for her, right? She laughs when Dennis whispers a joke into her ear. Dennis dances well, but he is no match for her. She is an angel—graceful—flitting around the dance floor. He can barely keep up. It’s too much for Art.

So Art maneuvers around the dance floor to his mother and her beau. Her face—resting on Dennis’ shoulder—lights up when she sees Art approach.

“Cut in?” Art asks.

“Of course,” Dennis says and wanders off.

“Lovely shindig,” Art says and takes his mother’s hand. “Thanks for inviting me.”

She laughs, “And why wouldn’t I?”

“I have a knack for bringing trouble with me,” Art says. Of course, she would think of Art’s father, who they know would only be down the road in Austin for a music festival, but she
doesn’t know about the sixty day chip in Art’s pocket. She doesn’t know about the meetings and
the benders, the fact that he is terrified of becoming his father.

“He wouldn’t show his face here,” she says. Art wishes he would. That way he could
pretend they were a family again. If only for a moment.

The song ends, and Dennis reappears to take away his mother. Art gives him a smile
before hugging his mother tight and saying goodbye. He drifts to the bar. Perhaps there is no
other answer. He orders a gin. Then another.

“So long, sixty,” he says an hour later and slaps the chip down on the bar. That’s when
the bartender decides to stop serving him. Art babbles about his father, about how he’s going to
find him. About how he’s going to set everything right.

***

Years before, on the night before Art left for college, his father smashed into Art’s Nissan
pickup. When he woke, Art found his father sitting at the foot of his bed sobbing.

“It’s a son of a bitch, man. A son of a bitch,” his father was saying. He was still drunk,
but solemnly led Art out the screen door. Art’s front bumper was in the yard, and the windshield
was a spider web of cracked glass.

Art was a promising young jazz guitarist due to get a scholarship, but then he wondered
how the hell he was going to get to Denton with a half crushed Nissan. Would he have to have
his mother take him and leave the car for the mechanic?

“I’ll pay for the repairs,” his father said.

“I’m sure,” Art said, “right after you leave the liquor store, right?”

Art regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. He’d always tried to be the
balancing force between his father’s antics and the resulting ire of his mother. Art always made
the effort to listen to his father, to be there for him in his worst moments, while Art’s mother,
who’d seen too many years of broken glass, bent bottle caps, and cigarette smoke, remained
cynical and distant.

“Art, you need to learn three things,” she’d say, “you didn’t start it, you can’t control it,
and you can’t fix it.” This was the mantra she’d learned from some Al-Anon book. Art thought
that his mother would use this mantra as an excuse to not support his father emotionally. It was a
thought that boiled his stomach. Could she not see that the drinking was a by-product of
something else? That he wouldn’t drink for no reason?

“But you haven’t been lied to, year after year, by the man that loves you,” she had said
one night over dinner.

“But don’t you love him?”

“Of course,” she had said and turned away, “of course.”

Art came in from the yard and sat down at the dinner table. A paper plate with burnt
bacon was there. Art nibbled around the fat on a slice. He could see his father out in the yard.

“What was it that Mark Twain said?” Art asked. *In two thousand years of Christendom,
no one thought to pray for the one person that needed it most*, Art thought.

Steam rose from the sink. His mother was washing dishes. Maybe she didn’t want to
answer the question.

***

The morning after his mother’s second wedding, Art wakes up hungover as hell. He
downs a half pot of coffee and hits the road for Austin, leaving a text for his mother, *I’m glad
you’re happy.*

*I love you*, she sends back.
Traffic is bad along I-35 with all the folks heading for the festival. Art loathes the whole experience: the traffic, the Texas heat, the inherent humidity of hundreds and thousands of bodies crammed into a street, an arena, a smoky bar. Art knows that he is in it for the long haul, forty-eight hours of beer and beer sweat and self-loathing.

But why? he wonders. One bad night, one bad relapse and all of a sudden he has to find his father. Hasn’t he done well enough in five years without him? Art looks back on the gigs where he had to be dragged off stage because he couldn’t stand any longer. He thinks of taking a shot after every single song in a show. He thinks of the boos from the crowd as he is hauled offstage early. For his latest tour, Art’s manager told him he had to be sober, or his manager would walk. Art agreed. And what happened to the sixty days of sobriety? Relapse is a part of recovery, right? It was a hard sixty days, starting with his tour, when days were no longer defined by cycles of sun and moon, but by sound checks and shows.

His mother’s wedding was supposed to be the start of a diminuendo. No more shows, just kick back and watch his mother be in love again. But in the quiet moments between exhaling and inhaling, a sense of dread burns away the protective linings of his stomach, his lungs, and esophagus. Art wants to fight fire with fire, to dump gin and whiskey down his throat. He thinks of the forest fires his father helped fight when he was a child. He remembers watching the smoke rise in the distance. His father told him of the controlled fires that are created to rob the blaze of oxygen.

But what if the controlled burning merges with the flaming trees and become one? With what fires did he burn? This is the question that haunts Art, and before he checks into the AOK Motel on the edge of Austin, he stops and buys a bottle of gin.
In the weed-smelling motel room, he throws the bottle of Hendricks on the foot of the bed, cranks the A/C on, and closes the big rubber curtains. Art lies on the bed, his socked foot tapping the bottle, and feels the wildfire burning at him. He kicks the bottle up to his knees and takes it in his hands. He pops the top and smells the juniper.

***

Art grew up in the garage of his house. Quarters clanging against the inside of the washing machine, his father sitting atop his Ampeg, strumming his solemn black Gretsch archtop and humming.

“The words will come later,” his father would say.

His father’s fingers were spider legs, plucking and calloused, deft and agile among the blue chords and minor keys.

“Why do you play such sad songs?” Art asked him once.

“The blues is happy music,” his father said with a smile. This was a lesson Art would take years to learn.

It didn’t take long before Art wanted a guitar of his own, the urge striking him while watching his father play a show under a great white tent. Eight year old Art was swaying in the front row, and a woman asked him, “Is that your daddy?”

And Art said, “Yeah, that’s my dad.” Looking back, Art was still proud. His father’s music was an intoxicant, infecting the audience with tears of fire. Art wanted nothing more but to do the same.

“It’s the only time he’s not lying,” Art’s mother would say later. “When he’s onstage, you can trust him to tell the truth.” But it would take some time for Art to see it, because watching his father on stage was like looking at the sun, it would blind him to everything else.
One evening with a thunderstorm roiling in the west, Art’s father came home from work at the window factory. This was before his father would be gone for long stretches of time, before he submerged himself into the solace of the road.

His father shook out the glass shards from his jeans cuffs. Art’s father was carrying a tweed guitar case.

“Got something for you,” he told Art, then gently set the case at Art’s feet.

“Pop her open.”

Art worked the copper latches and extracted a cardinal red archtop guitar—the same model as his father’s. Art marveled at the violin-like f-holes and pearl-inlaid mahogany neck, and at once Art knew the meaning of sacred.

“She’s not meant to be gawked at,” his father said, “she’s meant to be heard.”

Art plucked at the strings, the full-bodied sound mingling with the thunder of the coming storm. His soft pink fingers ached.

“My fingers hurt,” Art said and looked at the deep lines left in his fingertips from the strings.

“Don’t worry, they’ll callous soon,” his father said, “but you have to keep playing.”

“It hurts.”

“You can’t let that stop you.”

Art wakes at two-thirty in the afternoon, having sweated through his clothes. The Hendricks bottle is empty on the floor, and his blood pounds in his head. He brushes his teeth, vomits, and brushes again.
“I’ll set every juniper on fire, I swear to God,” Art says.

Art sneaks into the motel’s kitchen. He knows he needs something to soak up the alcohol. He finds cereal boxes, all empty. And then jackpot! In a cabinet, he finds some petrified bagels. He takes three.

“You can’t be here,” a voice behind him says.

“Charge me. Room one, eight, one.”

He eats the bagels fearing his teeth would break. He packs his bag and checks out amid the scowls of the management.

The pavement radiates heat, sending shimmering flashes of water into the distance. Art starts to sweat into his change of clothes. He can smell himself. He’d have to find a cool place to hide—a coffee shop maybe—a place with people and noise, where the quiet is dispelled, and blessed distraction could take over.

His father once told him of the hell of stillness, how he could find it in quiet hotel rooms at night where every thought was magnified and echoed in the hollow spaces between moon and stars.

His father had always slept with a bedside fan blasting wind into his face. Art had been told that this came from sleeping on the tour bus, the windows open, cold road air gusting in.

Maybe he wanted to feel like he was always on the move, Art would think and smile for a moment before realizing that his father was away again.

“Don’t try to understand it,” his mother had said and would say again. Was she afraid he would break himself against his father’s shadow, or perhaps live forever within its dark?

Even in the playing of Art’s guitar—his father gave it the nickname Redbird—Art followed his father. Art subverted the technicalities of jazz with the fraying heartstrings of the
blues. His instructors would kick over music stands hearing the added vibratos and bends Art’s father had taught him in the hollow of their garage. Yet within the same performance, Art’s instructors would praise his improvisation, citing truly heartfelt drifts of whimsy.

“They don’t know what they want,” Art’s father had said, “and that’s ok.”

“What do you mean?” Art asked. “How am I supposed to know what’s right?”

“Nothing’s really right or wrong,” his father said with a raspy laugh, “just do the best you.”

Hokey as shit, Art now thought. Probably high field hippie nonsense.

***

During his second semester at college, Art got a call from his mother. He was packing up Redbird at the end of rehearsal when the cellphone buzzed. His mother’s breaths were ragged, and he could hear her sobbing.

“Mom, calm down. What’s the matter?” Art said.

“He’s gone,” she said and instantly Art thought the worst. Had his father drunkenly driven headlong into a tree? Had his father’s corpse crashed through the windshield because he wasn’t wearing a seatbelt?

“What?”

“He left,” she said. “I kicked him out.”

“Jesus,” Art said. “Mom, you scared the shit out of me.”

“I need you to come home.”

So even though it was a Wednesday and he had another rehearsal that night, Art drove the three hours home. When he arrived, most of his father’s belongings were out in the yard. His mother—being the angel she was—had packed his clothes into suitcases instead of slinging
them all over the yard. Art surveyed the wreckage of his family. His father’s albums—the ones he’d recorded—were missing. Art asked his mother where they were.

“He took them. That and his guitar and amp.” Art thought of the malice in this. He father had cut ties as best he could, not even leaving them with a song. Art’s eyes became hot.

“What did he do?”

“He came home with a woman—I don’t know her name—but he brought another woman into our house.”

Art’s father never came back for the rest of his stuff, and after a few days, Art loaded it all into his truck and took it to the dump. He lingered over every piece of clothing before casting them into the void.

***

As the sun passes below the horizon, young people drift from their dark holes like bats from beneath a bridge. Art follows the crowds to the bars, where he stands outside by the bouncers, judging the music pouring from the windows and doors. The electric stammer of “Black Dog” threw the words like fists. *I gotta roll, can’t stand still / Got a flaming heart, can’t get my fill / Eyes that shine burning red / Dreams of you all through my head.* Art leans on his guitar case, not at all impressed with the woman singing. Her voice was passionate, yet lacked precision.

“The woman singing is no Robert Plant,” Art says, and the bouncer overhears.

“Maybe that’s the point,” he says.

Art nods. “True enough,” he says and continues down the line of bars, until he arrives at his destination, a rundown building of red brick and wood. The sign over the door no longer lights up, but it still reads Firewater Bar and Grill. On the front door is tacked a flier showing the
cover of his father’s self-titled album from about ten year back. His father faced the camera over an empty table, his boots crossed and sticking out from underneath, his hair combed into a part, his eyes closed, and head resting on one hand. He is bathed in a blue light.

Art pushes into the bar and slaps a five down in the doorman’s hand. The doorman stamps him and blows cigarette smoke out the window.

His father sits on a stool in the center of the stage. Smoke pools cloud-like above him. Even from the back of the bar, Art sees his father’s sagging translucent skin, veins like worms protruding vermiculate, voice raspy yet sure, precise, the black archtop somber in his hands.

Art sips a gin to calm the chills as his father sang of a whale speaking to the earth, *Why are there no stars?*

Art had hoped the alcohol would harden his heart and temper his resolve, but he should have known better. The starless world of the whale consumes him, and he is washed in cold, salty depths.

***

His father plays a few more songs, getting increasingly drunk as fans place beers for him at his feet. Art turns away, unable to watch his father stagger and stammer through his own songs. It reminds him too much of himself. He hears his father tap on the mic.

“Everybody, we have a special guest with us tonight. Art—my son—come on up,” his father says.

Art turns in time to see his father point at him. He can’t hide. So Art drains the last of his gin and takes the cased Redbird up to the stage. On stage, he feels the familiar heat of the lights, but this time it feels hotter.

“Play us a song, will ya?” his father says.
God, how Art wants to say no, to refuse his father in front of everyone. But he can’t refuse them, the audience. Art takes Redbird from her case and plugs in to his father’s amp.

“I’ll play y’all what you need to hear,” he says and sinks into the slow, deliberate plucking of the strings. “This is a song by my father,” Art says over the swaying crowd, many of whom already recognize the song. His father may not have ever made it big, but his fans are loyal to a fault.

Art sings: *Would I drift strings to the moon / Puppet in the tide to bring you in waves / The finest piece of chaff.* The crowd is singing along but Art can barely hear them. *My traveled wings, my Hugin and Munin / Are tired in the droplets / The running pearls in snow / The specks of water on a windshield / Are motes of stars.*

When the song draws to a close, Art looks over amid the applause to his father, who is nodding, his eyes closed. They bow together, pack their guitars, and move to the bar. Art is trembling and orders another gin.

“Christ, five years, six?” his father says.

“Only five,” Art says.

“Only,” his father shakes his head.

“Hell of a show,” Art says.

“They didn’t pay me enough,” his father says loud enough to get the bartender’s attention. He is given a beer on the house.

Art fidgets a bit before grabbing a handful of peanuts from a burlap sack on the bar.

“Heard you just got off the road” his father says.

“Twenty-one cities, twenty-eight days,” Art says. “Where’d you hear that?”
“Just word around town. You’re a big-shot now,” his father says. Was that jealousy in his eyes?

It is true. Art’s new album was still selling well, and the tour sold out most venues. It is a luxury his father never had.

“You listen to the album?” Art asks.

“Yeah.”

“That it?”

“Did you play Redbird on it?”

“Of course.”

“I thought so.”

The meager crowd had started to filter out, some clapping Art’s father on the shoulder, others asking him to sign albums or posters. Some took photos with them. To them, his father was diligent and kind. Art was happy to see it.

“Hey, Pop?”

“Yeah?”

Art wants to ask why he left all those years ago, why he drank so much, why Art had turned out just like him, but the words won’t come out. His father puts a hand on his shoulder, but Art shakes it off.

“When you left, why did you take your records? Couldn’t you leave us with something?” Art says.

“Son, I don’t know why I did that. I’d change it if I could,” his father says and takes a slug of his beer. Art tries to stare a hole through his father’s face. He wants there to be more, for things to make sense.
“How’s your mother?” his father’s eyes were wet.

“She’s fine. Married again.”

“He’s a good guy?”

“Yeah,” Art laughs, “bit of a square though.”

“You were at the wedding?”

“Yeah.”

“How did she dance?” It was a question only his father would ask. In that moment, Art looks back at his mother in her white dress, dancing with Dennis who was not his father. He wishes that everything would have turned out ok. He wishes his father had never left, had never tasted beer. He wishes that he had never tasted gin? But then he thinks, *I would be someone else.* And he knows in the deepest part of himself that his father felt this too.

“Bluely, Pop,” Art says to his father. “She danced bluely.”

His father smiled and slammed the last of his beer.

“Thanks,” he says. “I gotta get going now. I’m hitting the last bus outta here. But it was good to see you.” Art watches his father rise. He shakes his hand.

“Good luck, Pop,” he says when his father steps out the door.

Art sits at the bar stirring his untouched gin with a straw. He pushes the drink forward to the bartender.

“You don’t want it?” the bartender says.

Art shakes his head, steps out into the night. The street is crowded—a sea of heads bobbing, laughing, smoking. His father was nowhere to be seen.
No Paper Cowboys

Your parents stand on the porch as you park your car under the awning where the chicken snake ate the baby swallows. Your mother still won’t walk under the empty nest.

“Is that my boy under that beard?” she says. You hug them both, one then the other.

“Come in out of the wind,” your father says. You must feel cold to them. The cows in the pasture lie beneath the wind, flesh hills in the grass. Work is done here, the animals tended to. You will break the ice in the water tubs tomorrow morning, stack the firewood on the porch. Your parents will smile because you are back and things are like they used to be. Nostalgia and love—their deceivers.

When you walk in the door, the cowdogs lie by the hearth and stammer to their feet, tails wagging. “They have missed you,” your mother says and takes your bag. The dogs press their wet noses into your palms.

You sink into the couch and the oldest cowdog—the one that was abandoned and limped up to the house from the road, terrified and shy, a broken thing—sidles over, creaking with every step, his grayed muzzle low. He lays a single paw on your knee. You scratch behind his ears, pale fingers through the black fur, and he looks at you. You wonder what he sees.

_Brother, I alone see you._

***

You wake with your father looming over your bed. He hopes you will help him with the morning feeding, but you long for the sheets, the chilled pillow, the nothing that follows. If only you were bedridden. Then you wouldn’t have to explain that dreamless sleep—less than even a moment—is preferable to waking life.

“Been sleeping late, haven’t you?” he says. You roll over onto your face.
“I’ll let you sleep.” Downcast eyes and the slow clicks of his boot heels on the hardwood floor. He won’t try to wake you tomorrow. He’ll stand at your bedroom door and think about it, but walk on.

You sleep through the sizzling of bacon grease, the groan of the coffee maker, muzak on the Weather Channel, your mother’s favorite soap opera, all of it.

And when sleep can no longer hold you, you stumble into the bathroom, brush your teeth, gagging when you reach back for your molars. You hope your mother isn’t on the other side of the door, listening to you choke. You can’t stand the question are you ok?

***

She asks, “Why don’t you go for a walk? Get some fresh air.” It’s plain to see, the sun won’t shine today, but I ain’t in the mood for sunshine anyway. You sit huddled over your notebook, telling it the things you cannot tell them, remembering the little things that you have seen in the yellowed pages of books, the lines deciphered through radio static. They compose you. You are made of paper.

In the early days, your father gave you a knife, its serrations good for cutting hay strings. You don’t touch it. You don’t go near it. Instead, you scribble, writing words in circles, and for a moment you are fine, in the repose of a trance.

But you can hear them in their whispers, echoes of the things you tell yourself:

She: All he does is lay around all day. He needs to go out and do something.

He: I’ll take him hunting or to the barns. We’ll figure it out.

She: I don’t think he should go hunting. Maybe he should see his friends.

He: I don’t think he has talked to them.

She: Maybe he just needs rest.
He: Honey, he sleeps away the morning.

She: I know, but, well I don’t know.

He: Me neither.

You wish you knew what to tell them. Do you let them see the notebook? Do you reveal that you write about the turtles you’ve had as pets, the one that bit your fingertip, the ones you saved from the highway, the ones that you shot in the bass pond because they eat the fish, the bullet smashing through the shell and turning their soft insides into soup? Do you tell them these things when you can only think of the sound of one perfect gunshot?

***

There are rules on a ranch just like anywhere else. If you walk through a gate, be sure to shut it behind you. Always check the water. Watch where you step. Don’t stand between a cow and her calf. Don’t surprise a horse. Go easy when moving cattle. Check the fences. Stand on the same side of the alley as everyone else. Climb the fence when you’re in trouble. Pay attention to what you are doing. Cowboy up. Do it right the first time.

***

In the grocery store you realize that people pushing carts act like people driving cars. Some are decent, some are assholes. You push your cart to the end of an aisle, and your mother loads some canned vegetables.

“Let’s get the turkey,” she says, prancing ahead of you, thinking of the meal to come, the family around the table, the smiles, the butter. She thinks, no, she knows everyone else in the store will have the same experience. She might as well speak a different language.

“How about this one?” she says, lifting a pale carcass.

“…”
“You have to help me, you know.”

You shrug, sensing other eyes on you, an itch, a tingle on your scalp. Only last week you were at a bar with your friends celebrating the upcoming break. The bar was like a wave pool chock-full of bodies in oscillation. You locked yourself in the bathroom where folks do one-hitters, leaving the tiny room skunky. You sat in the corner leaning against the walls, its throbbing heartbeat pushing you to tears. Someone knocked on the door, demanding the pisser. You flushed the toilet even though you didn’t use it, pulled your cap down low over your eyes. Damn them if they saw you crying.

***

At the car you can breathe again. You load the groceries, push the cart back to the door. A dualie passes by in front of you. There is nothing to stop you, no inhibition, no little voice in the back of your mind: don’t do it.

You get in the car and your mother asks again: “Are you ok?”

You buckle your seatbelt.

“I know something is wrong, but you have to tell me what it is?” she says as if she could fix it. As if you know what is wrong. If you knew what was wrong, you would have already fixed it.

“You can’t let things get you down. Be thankful for what you have. Be happy.”

Cowboy up.

Might as well tell the sun to rise in the west and the moon to forsake the earth.

***
Thanksgiving morning. You sit out watching your father fry the turkey, the oil bubbling, snapping. The cowdogs hover over the rim of the fryer but know better than to stick their snouts in.

Your uncle and grandmother arrive in a truck that spouts black smoke from the tailpipe. Your uncle is big, always has been, acting as if a mountain can be moved by anything other than the slow breaking of the earth. He pushes your grandmother—a bundle of wool jackets in a wheelchair whose wheels squeal, begging for grease.

“Colder than a witch’s tit in a brass brassiere,” your uncle says.

“Take me in by the fire,” your grandmother says, “and stop that cussing.” Her eyes have narrowed to a permanent squint, and the crags of her face speak of many winters, each more frigid than the last. *Warmth, warmth, more warmth! For we are dying of cold and not darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost.*

As she is wheeled by, your grandmother sends you a wink you do not return. The old cowdog ambles forward to lick your hand, and his tail is caught under your uncle’s boot. The cowdog lets out a *desolate cry.*

“Damn mutt.”

“Stop that cussing.”

The cowdog leans against your leg—*faithful to a corse*—and shoots a baleful look at your uncle.

***

At the table, you sit with the rest of them holding hands. “Let us pray,” your mother starts, “Thank you, Lord, for this wonderful bounty you have brought us, and we ask you to bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies. Lord, we thank you for bringing us here today as a
family, and we ask you to be with those who are less fortunate. And last Lord, we ask you to
look after our son who is troubled. Lord, take his demons and unburden him. In your name we
pray. Amen.”

Your grandmother pats your knee but doesn’t look at you. The others wordlessly set to
filling their plates. *Mark how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea—mark how closely they hug their ship...*

“Food’s good,” your uncle says, bits of turkey falling from his mouth. The cowdogs
huddle around his chair.

“Thank you,” your mother says.

You saw into a strip of turkey, cutting it to bits, but not eating. You herd the bits around
your plate with a fork.

“Not hungry?” your father asks.

“Not hungry! It’s Thanksgiving and downright sinful to not appreciate your food on
Thanksgiving,” your uncle says.

“Is everything ok, honey?” your mother asks.

“Clearly not. He ain’t right if he don’t eat here with us.”

“You don’t have to eat now,” your mother says, giving your uncle a look.

You feel it now, caught in your throat and lower. You stand.

“He’s gonna urp,” your uncle says.

You stumble for the restroom and make it just in time. Your mother’s hand is on your
shoulder as you heave and pant.

“Be sure to hold his hair back,” you hear from down the hall.
You don’t go back to the table, instead holing up in your bed. An ache of hollowness, a cavity forms inside you. You hear a scratching at the door but you tell yourself the dogs are at the table, the dogs are outside.

***

The next morning, your father and your uncle go hunting. You hear them as they load their rifles and slurp coffee from thermoses. You know the route they will take: over the cattle-guard and down the white gravel road to the low-water crossing where Scatter Creek runs through the property just past the pond that used to have catfish in it until some bastard netted the pond in the middle of the night. From there they will walk through the predawn dark to the deer blind where they will sit and listen to the coyotes make the night’s last run along the creek bank.

You think they may talk. How could they not?

“Your kid is a real piece of work,” your uncle would mutter in the dark.

“He’s just sick.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“I should take him to see a doctor,” your father might say.

“A doctor! Don’t waste the doctor’s time. Put that boy to work. Get him off his ass. I remember how he used to be—would just do his work and keep his head down. He was a good hand. Now school’s made him soft. He ain’t a cowboy like us anymore.”

“He ain’t a bad kid. Maybe he just thinks too much. We should take him to see someone. Hell, maybe a preacher.”

“Hell, he don’t got it bad. Look at him! He’s got a good family, he’s got a future. What more does he want?”
You wonder if that is how it goes, if they really say those things. You wonder if they shoot a deer.

***

The deer is a spike, already heavy-bodied, blood foaming from its nose. You help them suspend its carcass from a rusted pipe at the barn. The taut lariat angles the deer’s head towards the sun. You wonder if its eyes still burn. They must.

Your father slices the deer down the middle and starts to cut away the organs being careful not to nick the stomach or intestines. You roll a wheelbarrow under the carcass to catch the falling blood and offal.

When finished, your father sits on the ground, his sleeves are rolled up, his hands scarlet. You notice his eyes are far away and his face is contorted.

You are told to take the wheelbarrow and dump it at the creek. It’ll keep the coyotes away from the barn. Steam rises from the guts when you leave them in the frosted grass.

You haul the deer into the back of the truck, and you and your father take it to be processed. The game warden is at the meat locker and he inspects the animal’s tag.

“Just a young ‘un,” he says, “big though.”

He asks if he can take a sample of the deer’s brain, and your father obliges. The game warden takes a hacksaw and saws away at the animal’s skull, hairs and flakes of bone dust the grass. He removes some of the yellowed, spiraling mass inside, drops into what looks like a plastic pillbox.

“We’re doing a study, you see,” he says, “looking for degeneration.”

Aproned workers throw the deer in a freezer with the others shot that morning.

***
A cow is to be taken to the sale barn. “I need your help,” your father tells you. You try to fight away an exhaustion that has nothing to do with sleep and go. You and your father herd it down the alleyway towards the trailer when the cow turns, a fury in the carriage of its head. It charges. Your father makes it up the pipe fence but you don’t have time. You swing a gate towards the cow, hoping it’ll stop it. Better not to hope. You only make it halfway up the fence when the cow slams into the gate, flinging it back at you. The heavy gate pins you to the fence. The cow presses against the gate, desperate to get at you. You feel your ribs start to pop. You find yourself in a familiar place, time being reduced to pain, moment by moment. It crushes you because it can.

Your father starts to swat at the cow’s head with a sorting stick, and the cow retreats down the alley.

“Get up. Get out of there,” he says but you can’t move. Cowboys are not made of paper.

Your father helps you out of the alleyway, your arm over his shoulder. You can feel your ribs every time you breathe. Damn him if he sees you crying.

Your father sets you down and looks at you, his eyes no longer blind.

“Jesus, you’re hurt. You must be. Where did it get you?”

Poor Grendel’s had an accident, you remember. You want to tell him that it’s your heart, and for a moment you think he might understand.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

You hope there is a way back, a path he might help you find. You close your eyes to try to find it, the answer to the problem. You cannot believe such a monstrous energy of grief can lead to nothing.

“I’m just so sorry,” he says.
Behind your eyelids the spike crunches through the grass, ears scanning, its tail a white flag.
What Happened to the Gar

As soon as Simon deplaned, he slumped down at one of the slot machines in the terminal and fed it a twenty. Next to him, an older woman took pulls from an e-cigarette as she dutifully bet the minimum. He imagined the other passengers looking at him with disgust. “He has a gambling problem,” they would say. They couldn’t know the things he had heard in recent months. And that was ok.

Simon pulled the lever and watched a dollar disappear. It didn’t hurt. Losing the first one never did. He wished it was like that outside of Vegas, the only place in the world where a person could lose something and be happy. *Maybe I’m not cut out to be a therapist*, Simon thought. But with years of classes behind him, he couldn’t turn back. Now, in the final semester of his internship, he was faced with an endless tide of broken faces and downcast eyes.

The slot machine trilled as he won thirty-five dollars.

“Off to a good start,” the woman next to him said.

“I suppose.”

“What brings you to Vegas?”

“Just vacation,” he lied. His boss had told him to take some time off to get himself together, but Vegas was his own idea. When he played the game, nothing real was at stake.

Simon took his winning ticket from the machine and asked the woman where he could redeem it.

“There’s an ATM just over there,” she said.

*Never look a gift horse in the mouth.* That’s what Dan Ellers would have said. Even now, Simon could see the man’s dim eyes and white stubble like razors. They would have been in the group therapy room, sitting in a big circle, anxious feet tapping the coffee-stained carpet.
That’s when the therapist in charge would nudge Simon. He would want to see how Simon handled a patient.

“Dan, you seem depressed,” Simon would say.

Simon forced himself to stop thinking about Dan Ellers. He would catch a cab to the hotel, eat something maybe, visit the tables. He wouldn’t think about therapy sessions. He wouldn’t think about Dan Ellers.

***

Simon was at the MGM’s food court, trying to decide between a chili-dog or pizza. Two children—a boy maybe thirteen and a girl around seven—argued in front of the pizzeria.

“You can’t,” the boy said, “it’ll cost too much. You have two dollars for a soda, that’s it.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“We have to wait for Mom and Dad.”

The little girl stomped off into the casino.

“Oh, shit,” the boy said, drawing a look of ire from a retiree paying at the cash register. The boy tore off after the girl. Simon, sensing the special kind of trouble that only children can bestow, followed the boy and his quarry. The girl, noticing pursuit, started to sprint between the slot machines and gamblers, but her short legs were no match for the boy’s long strides. The boy caught her arm, and the girl cried out. Heads turned away from slot machines; pit bosses would be summoned.

Simon arrived just as tears started to sprinkle from the girl’s eyes.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“She’s being a brat,” the boy said under his breath.
“I’m hungry.”

“We can’t eat now,” the boy said.

“Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know. Grandma is supposed to watch us, but she’s sleeping. We were thirsty so we came down to get some soda. Then Macy started to throw a fit.”

“I just want something to eat,” Macy said.

“How about this,” Simon said, “everybody calm down first. Dry your eyes. We’ll get something to eat then I’ll take y’all up to your room. Sound good?”

“Ok,” Macy said.

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “What if you are a killer or something?”

“We’d just be going to the food court,” Simon said. The boy watched him, gauging the danger.

“Or I can go, but I’d feel bad.”

“Ok,” the boy said, “just to the food court then to the room.”

Simon bought them slices of pepperoni pizza and sodas. He sat across from them and watched them eat. Even the boy brightened up with the greasy pizza in front of him, every bite setting him more at ease.

“What’s your name?” Macy asked.

“Simon.”

“I’m Macy.”

“Hi, Macy.”

“His name is Dev.”

“Hi, Dev.”
Dev took a petulant chomp out of the pizza. He chewed with his mouth open, eyes leveled at Simon.

“Mom says he is moody sometimes,” Macy said.

“That’s ok. I know a lot of moody people.”

“Mom says he has trust issues.”

“I don’t have trust issues,” Dev said. Macy giggled. Simon caught himself smile.

“Where are you from? We’re from Michigan,” Macy said.

“Michigan, really? I’m from Texas,” Simon said.

“Do you have a horse?” Macy asked, her little eyes wide.

“No, sorry.”

“I’d really like a horse.”

“Where would you put a horse?” Dev asked. “In your room?”

“Horses are a lot of responsibility, more than a dog even,” Simon said, regretting it when Macy’s eyes fell.

“Did you come to Vegas to win the big one?” Macy asked.

“Nah, it’s just vacation. I guess I needed some time off.”

“Were you tired?”

“Something like that.”

“Did something bad happen?”

Simon became acutely aware of his leg shaking, and how the table gently quaked as a result. Dev occasionally would have to push his empty plate away from the table’s edge.

“Are y’all done eating?”

“Yep.”
“Yeah.”

“Let me take y’all to your room.”

“Ok.”

They rode the elevator to the fourteenth floor and took them to their door. Dev seemed relieved and Macy turned back to tell Simon it had been nice to meet him.

“I’m really happy to have met you too,” Simon said and realized he meant it.

***

Simon woke the next morning long before the sun peeked over the horizon. Unable to return to sleep, he started to brew some of the room’s provided coffee. He’d once heard Dan Ellers say that he loved sleep more than anything else, and that he was always depressed when he woke up. Simon sipped at the hot coffee and tried to understand, to empathize, but the feeling stayed at arm’s length, like a word stuck on the tip of his tongue.

When the sun came up and he’d had his breakfast, Simon visited the swimming pool, a mimosa cradled in his fingers. Even in the morning the pool was a crowded tangle of fleshy limbs, its sides ringed by tanned, shiny figures sunning themselves on white deck chairs.

Simon sat at the edge of the pool, and lowered his pale bare legs into the cool water. He had to remind himself that the water wasn’t actually blue, but that the pool’s interior was painted that way. The smell of chlorine scorched the flavor of his mimosa.

“Simon,’ Macy said, appearing behind him in a blue one-piece bathing suit.

“Hello, Macy,” he said.

“Is that orange juice?” she asked.

“Sure thing.”

“Are you getting in the water?”
“Maybe if you are.”

She started to skidder towards the ladder as Simon finished the last of his mimosa. He set the empty glass by the side of the pool and lowered himself into the water. He was belly button deep when Macy doggy-paddled over to him.

“I have to stay on this side of the rope. I can’t go in the deep end,” she said.

“That’s a good idea,” Simon said. “You know, whenever I was a little younger than you I was just learning to swim. And do you know what I did?”

“What?”

“I walked straight into the deep end. I just kept walking.”

Macy giggled even if Simon didn’t.

“The lifeguard had to fish me out. I had walked into the deep end and couldn’t get back to the surface.” He remembered holding his breath until he couldn’t, the water splashing into his lungs, how if you started to cry under water on one would notice. He remembered a sweet blackness then the strong arms and the sun in his eyes. He coughed and coughed. He wailed and his mother took him from the lifeguard. He didn’t swim for a long time after that.

“Are you sad?” Macy asked.

But he wasn’t sad. How could he be, when she was there? “Do you want to see what the deep end is like?” Simon asked.

“I’m not supposed to,” she said.

“It’ll be ok. Look,” he went and retrieved a pink raft by the side of the pool, and dragged it into the water. He lifted her onto the float and pulled her into the deep end. She lay flat on her belly, but every time she laughed her weight shifted to the sides.
“Stay in the middle of the raft now,” he said, and swam the raft in laps around the deep end.

“How deep is it do you think?” Macy asked.

“Fifty fathoms at least.”

“No.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Have you seen *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*?”

“Sure have.”

“I like that movie, except for the squid. But we don’t have squid in Michigan. Mom said so.”

“But you have muskies and pike.” Simon remembered this from one of his favorite books as a kid, *Sport Fish of North America*.

“And walleye,” Macy said, “but I call them wallys,” she said.

“Do you like to fish?” Simon asked.

“Dad doesn’t take us anymore.”

When Dan Ellers had heard that Simon liked to fish, he’d offered to take him to Lake Texoma to fish for stripers. “They’ll bite even in the winter, and let me tell you, you’d think a great white was on the end of your line,” he’d said. It was the only time Simon had seen Dan’s eyes light up. It pained Simon now that he had told Dan that he couldn’t go fishing with him.

“I don’t get to go fishing much either,” Simon said. “I have to work too much.”

“Where do you work?”

“I’m going to be a therapist when I grow up,” Simon said.

She giggled. “I’m going to be president.”
“Wow, the president? Can I say I’m your friend when you’re president?”

“You are my friend.”

He patted her wet hair, murmured the words thank you.

“Simon, are there beaches in Texas? We have some in Michigan, but the water is always so cold. We never go to them.”

“There are some beaches in Texas, but not where I’m from.” He thought of the Sulfur and Red Rivers, of catfish, bass, and alligator gar.

“Do you know about the alligator gar?” Simon asked.

She shook her head.

“Well, they are as big as an alligator and as ugly too. They eat the smaller fish in the river.”

“Are they mean like sharks?”

“They just do what they do, but they aren’t particularly mean, not to people. But everyone thinks they are, just because they are big and scary looking.”

“Do people catch them?”

“That’s the sad part; people will get in boats and look for the gar, and when they find them they shoot them with bow and arrows. They don’t even eat the gar, just throw the bodies on the river bank where the raccoons and coyotes get them.”

“That is sad,” she said.

Simon opened his mouth to agree, to say something, but the words died in his throat. His eyes started to burn. He dunked his head beneath the water and closed his eyes. Where was the sweet blackness? He resurfaced and breathed deep, his eyes still closed.

“I want some ice cream,” he said.
“Yeah,” she said.

“Do you want to get some?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Ok, let’s go.”

He swam her raft to the edge of the pool where she could clamber out. They wrapped themselves in white towels, and he retrieved his wallet from the little locker he’d rented by the pool.

“What flavor ice cream do you want?” he asked as they walked back in the MGM.

“Va-nilla.”

There was a commotion behind them, the slapping of bare feet on tile floor, and a woman’s hand gripped Macy’s arm. The woman—unmistakably Macy’s mother—said, “What the hell do you think you are doing?”

Simon started to back away. *Say something. Explain yourself,* he thought. He panicked.

“I—”

“But this is Simon. He’s my—”

“I don’t care who he is. Where do you get off, buddy? Just walking off with my child in tow? Creep.”

“Mom—”

“No!”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

And they walked away, Macy crying and pleading, not looking back. A crowd of people had gathered around the scene. It seemed like they were trying to wall him in, but Simon broke through them and made his way back to his room.
He laid in his bed, still wrapped in his damp towel. There was a hollowing in the pit of his stomach left by the mother’s face, horribly contorted by anger and terror. And he understood how Dan Ellers could do it, seeing moment by moment the horror ahead of him, forever.
Rhoda had just won the barrel racing at the Clarksville rodeo for the third year in a row. She told herself that it would be the last time, for better or worse. She took her prize money—a whopping six hundred dollars—and loaded her sorrel mare, Pep, into the trailer. Darnell was waiting for her there, just as they had planned.

When they had first met, she had asked him to take her with him on the rodeo trail. He said, “Darling, do you gamble?” Rhoda had heard of him, a real, touring cowboy. A good bull rider who’d won buckles at big rodeos.

And now here he was, the straw hat and belt buckle, jeans tucked into his boots, black aviators over his eyes. As they hooked her trailer to his blue Chevy pickup, Rhoda received a text from her father. *What time will you be home?* She turned off her phone. Her parents would find her truck at the fairgrounds tomorrow, but Rhoda would be long gone.

She climbed into the truck. A tall man smelling of stale beer and regret slept in the backseat, his knee a bruised mess, and hat pulled over his eyes.

“That’s Schmitt,” Darnell said, “Don’t mind him. He won’t be awake for hours, and he’s too drunk to snore.”

“Is he on the trail too?”

“Yeah, he’s a bullfighter. Real cowboy that one is,” Darnell said with a smile.

They drove off, the truck growling low into the night. Rhoda didn’t look back as Clarksville’s meager lights faded behind them. She refused to. The trail beckoned, and she thought she was ready.

***
Four hours down the highway, they stopped in Eufala, Oklahoma for the night. Darnell knew an old stock contractor who would let them stay and had a stall for Pep.

When the truck came to a stop, a grumble emerged from the back seat.

“Who the hell is this?” Schmitt said, his blurred eyes on Rhoda.

“Championship barrel racer Rhoda Carlyle,” Darnell said.

“What’s she doing here?”

“She’s the money.”

That was the deal. The only way Darnell would take her was if she paid the way. The only way she could pay the way was to win. To keep winning.

“Y’all are a stupid bunch,” Schmitt said. “Y’all know it won’t work.”

“Wait a minute now,” Darnell said, “this is a champion right here, faster than polished steel. She’s got no lose in her.”

Rhoda looked to her boots, the night hiding her flushed face. This was high praise from someone like Darnell, but Schmitt’s doubt soured her. He sounded like her parents. She led Pep to the nearest stall, gave her some hay and grain from the trailer, checked her wallet.

“We made it, Pep. We’re on the trail now. It’s what we wanted, right?”

Pep dipped her snout into the water bucket and drank for a long time, her dark eyes never leaving Rhoda.

***

When Rhoda woke, she pulled on her jeans and boots, threw on a T-shirt, and headed out to Pep’s stall. She arrived to Schmitt sipping coffee and glowering at her horse.
“Don’t know many barrel racers riding mares,” he said. It was true: most rode geldings, preferring to avoid the hormonal temperaments of mares and studs. But Pep was worth the mood swings.

“She must be fast,” Schmitt continued, “How old is she?”

“Eight,” Rhoda said and dropped a flake of hay into Pep’s trough.

“Two young pretty girls,” he said and tried to pet Pep’s snout, but the horse snapped at his fingers.

“I hate horses,” Schmitt said. He put down his coffee to light a cigarette.

“You’re some cowboy then,” Rhoda said with a smirk.

“No, you’ll never hear me call anyone a cowboy. Least of all me.” He alternated between drags from the cigarette and sips from the coffee. “You know you shouldn’t be here, right?” Schmitt said.

“I have every right to be here,” Rhoda said, her eyes blazing.

“Yeah, you ride good, sure. But you have no place here. How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen? The road will spit you out, a broken thing.” He pitched the rest of his coffee into the grass and headed for the house.

***

Rhoda’s cellphone buzzed. Her parents asked Where are you? Call us now. Darnell was munching on a hamburger at the picnic table while Schmitt gulped down tallboys, staring out at Lake Eufala with what might have been tears in his eyes.

“You gonna answer that?” Darnell said.

“It’s just my folks.”

“They don’t know where you are, do they?” he said.
She shook her head. “Nah, they wouldn’t want me on the trail. They want me to be a vet.”

“Vets are never out of work,” Darnell said.

“I guess.”

“But I guess everyone’s gotta leave home sometime,” Darnell said. “I left like you did. Went to Cody and rode bulls every night. I was so broke. Lived in a car and bathed in the lake.”

“How was the water?” she said.

“Cold.” Darnell peered over his aviators at her and trashed the remains of his burger. “Come on,” he said and shucked his boots. He took her by the hand and led her to the water’s edge. He peeled off his shirt and said, “Let’s go for a swim.” His body was lithe but strong, his arms gnarled ropes. There was a long white scar on his right shoulder. He caught Rhoda looking and said, “Had surgery a few years back.” He stripped to his boxers and waded hip-deep into the lake.

“Come on,” he said.

Rhoda’s phone buzzed in her hand. *Come home, honey.*

She closed the phone and threw it deep into the lake before stripping to her underwear and taking to the cold water. Was this freedom that she felt on her skin?

***

They left Eufala, and after a night of driving, arrived in Rolla, Missouri. Rhoda knew Pep was restless as they pulled into the fairgrounds. They had only been able to stop to walk Pep a time or two, and those few times were always by the side of the highway, the freight trucks roaring by, Rhoda holding tight to the lead rope, hoping Pep wouldn’t bolt.
“Better water that horse,” Darnell said, and Rhoda got out of the truck, eyelids trying to stick together.

“Get some coffee,” she said.

Darnell gave her a look.

“Please?”

He gave a curt salute and made for the concession stand. The sun was up but the dew was still thick on the grass.

Pep showed the wear of the road, her ears lowered in irritation when Rhoda led her from the trailer. Rhoda left some hay in a hanger for Pep and set off with her water tub for one of the numerous hoses that snaked around the back-pens.

Schmitt limped to her, gritting his teeth while she stood filling the tub.

“Coffee anywhere?” he asked.

“Darnell’s getting some. How’s the knee?”

“Long gone’s my bet.”

She knew better than to tell him to see a doctor. A doctor would tell him not to rodeo, would tell him about surgeries he couldn’t afford. Any doctor would be a death sentence.

“Registered yet?” he asked.

“Next on the list.”

“You know what you need to do?”

“What do I need to do now?”

“You need to set some money back after every event you win. No, don’t look at me that way, do it. ‘Specially if you’re the money. You paying Darnell’s way, that’s fine, but don’t let it turn to more. Save some for yourself. The trail will end one day.”
“Thanks, Dad,” she said. A smirk crossed her face. His too. Schmitt helped her carry the sloshing tub back to Pep in spite of his busted knee. Pep drank as if she would never see water again.

Content that Pep was ok, Rhoda made her way to the press box, an open air platform overlooking the arena. It was drenched in American flags and red wasps. Rhoda ducked and dodged the angry little jets as she climbed the stairs.

A pot-bellied man, his buckle wanting to burst from his belt, sat sweating over the paperwork and cash register.

“Entry, ma’am?” he said.

“Yes, Rhoda Carlyle for the barrel racing,” she handed him a wrinkled hundred, “and Darnell Biggs for the bull riding.” Another hundred.

“You rolling with Biggs?”

“Um?”

“Nevermind,” he said, “Here’s y’all’s numbers. Three for you, and a lucky thirteen for him.”

Rhoda found Darnell back at the truck sipping from a styrofoam cup. “Coffee tastes like tar,” he said and handed Rhoda her cup.

The brew was burnt, but Rhoda knew she would be more human with a cup in her system.

“You’re lucky tonight,” Rhoda said and flashed his number thirteen to him.

“Shee-it,” Darnell said. “Everywhere I go.”

“What?”

“They always give me fuckin’ thirteen.”
Rhoda squinted.

“I won a rodeo a few years back. I was number thirteen, and I was young so I bitched and moaned about it all day. Said I was jinxed. I won all the same, but the bull stepped on my foot, broke it. Everyone laughed and laughed about it. Called my broken foot lucky. Been giving me thirteen ever since.”

Darnell looked embarrassed. Rhoda could tell by the way he half smiled, as if he couldn’t decide whether to frown or grin.

Was he bragging too?

“You’ll be fine, I think,” Rhoda said and patted him on the shoulder.

“You too, darling.”

His eyes kept on her, wolf-like, scanning over his aviators.

“I’m gonna saddle Pep, give her a run. I’ll see you later,” she said and started to edge away.

Darnell drained his tar brew and said, “Well hell, I don’t have much of anything to do. I’ll give you a hand.”

Rhoda wanted to say no. Knew she should. She felt her stomach turn over. He was exactly the type of guy she would have to keep an eye on.

“Yeah, why not?” Rhoda said.

When they came around the back of the trailer, Pep had already drained her water tub and was munching on the last of her hay. The mare whinnied when they came around the side of the trailer, nose reaching for Rhoda’s hand.

“Shh,” Rhoda said and slid the turquoise horse blanket over Pep’s back. Next was the saddle, but Darnell already had it in his hands, ready to toss it onto Pep.
“I’ve got it,” he said.

“No, give it to me,” Rhoda said. It was her saddle, a graduation present from her parents. Hers and hers alone.

“Yes, ma’am,” Darnell said and handed over the saddle.

Rhoda hauled the saddle up and set it on Pep’s blanket. Darnell, his back to Pep’s head, started to snap the breast strap of the saddle. Rhoda watched as Pep laid her ears back and bit Darnell on the backside.

“Shit!”

Darnell leapt away from the mare, hand in his back pocket.

Rhoda giggled, hand on Pep’s neck.

“Get you, did she?”

“Damn straight.”

“You’ll live,” Rhoda said. “Lucky she didn’t get your foot.” She winked.

“Go ride your damn horse.”

Rhoda buckled the rest of the straps and mounted up. “With pleasure,” she said.

The truth was that Pep was honest, and Rhoda loved her for it. With every hoof fall, Pep was honest with Rhoda. She ran as if she would never get another chance, every turn true and without hesitation. Together, they bounded over the dirt, nothing left unsaid between the two.

The point of this run was to just warm Pep up, get the blood flowing. Rhoda slowly walked Pep up to a trot, then to a lope around the lot. Pep knew the drill and kept her head up, breathing deep, oxygen filling her blood.

At the height of the lope, Rhoda decided that this, riding a horse through the late morning dew, was freedom. It had to be.
Don’t run *her* legs out, Rhoda had to remind herself, lest she run all day. She walked Pep back to the trailer, removed the saddle and blanket, refilled the water and hay, and pressed her face into Pep’s mane. She’d have to run a brush through it soon, but breakfast was calling to her.

“Be back soon,” she whispered into Pep’s ear.

***

A large tent had been erected for the rodeo’s contestants. A local barbecue joint was catering, their smoker radiating heat nearby. For breakfast, the caterers had provided bacon, sausage, eggs, biscuits and gravy.

Rhoda ate greedily. There was no way to know if she would get an opportunity to eat so well again. She was wolfing down the last of her cheesy scrambled eggs, when Schmitt limped to her table.

“You seen Darnell?” he said.

“Last I saw he was at the trailer. Why?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ve gotta head back to the trailer anyway.”

“You’re done eating?” Schmitt said, his face was that of a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

“What aren’t you telling me?’

“Darnell’s got some medicine. For my knee. Gotta have it before the show starts is all.”

“Ok,” Rhoda said and pushed away from the table. “What kind of medicine?”

“Painkillers is all.”

When they came to the trailer, Darnell was in the tack compartment fanning himself with his hat. Sweat poured out of him. His eyes flit from Rhoda to Schmitt. He was blinking fast,
struggling to keep his vision in focus. Darnell scowled at the sight of them, but even this was fleeting.

“Got the meds?” Schmitt said.

“Yep,” Darnell said and hopped up. He extracted an orange Rx bottle from his jeans pocket. “Doctor’s in,” he laughed. Darnell tried to retake his seat but missed and hit the trailer floor.

“Jesus. What’s wrong with him?” Rhoda said. Darnell sat giggling in the floor.

“What do you think?” Schmitt said, shook his head, and left.

“Welcome to the trail,” Darnell choked out.

Rhoda had been to parties before, drinking wine coolers, seeing drunk kids and stoned kids, but Darnell on the trailer floor, high on God knows what sent a chill through her. How had she not seen this coming? Everyone had known Darnell could be this way, but she had only seen the sterling silver of belt buckles. She wanted to vomit, to hook up the trailer and drive away.

But to where?

Back to her parents?

She took a deep breath and helped Darnell out of the floor and into the back seat of the truck.

“Just stay there and relax for a little while,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Darnell said and gave her a wink.

She was about to shut the door, but Darnell stopped her saying, “Ain’t you the prettiest damn thing.” He winked again.

She decided it was too early to be winked at twice.

“None of that,” Rhoda said and shut the door.
She would have to stick close to the truck and trailer should Darnell try to leave. Behind the trailer, Pep tugged at her tether. She was anxious to run. Rhoda pressed her head to the white blaze on Pep’s face.

“Glad you bit him.”

***

Her hat flew to the wind. Pep’s hooves pounded out a sure and steady rhythm. A tidal wave of dirt crashed as they made the turn around each barrel. There was no audience, there was no roar. Not to Pep and not to Rhoda. Only wind and dirt and a weightlessness like flight. God, if only she could feel this way all the time, she thought. It was the purest of joys—one they both felt—the horse’s legs stretched to a full gallop. Rhoda could swear they were flying.

But in seconds the feeling was gone. Pep breathed heavy, and Rhoda walked her for a cool down.

A squat old cowboy in a starched pearlsnap and jeans ambled towards Rhoda, her hat in his pudgy hands. He passed her straw hat up to her, having already brushed the dirt from the brim.

“Helluva ride, girl,” he said.

“Thank you. All horse,” she said and patted Pep. “Rider didn’t have to do much.”

“Always takes two to tango.”

Rhoda shrugged.

“The name’s Spence Ricken,” the old cowboy said.

“That’s who I thought you were. Rhoda Carlyle.” They shook hands. She had heard of him before, even seen him from a distance when she was younger. Her father had pointed him
out at a horse sale in Antlers, Oklahoma. Her father had said that if ever there was a man that knew horses, it was Spence Ricken.

“Nice horse you’ve got,” Spence Ricken said.

“Pep’s her name. She’s not for sale.”

“Course not, but you can’t blame a man for trying.”

“She’s the only one I have,” Rhoda said.

“No backup?”

“No money to buy another.” Rhoda smiled.

“That might change when the night’s up,” Spence Ricken said. “Anyway you take this,” he handed her a business card. “That horse you’ve got’s worth two horses and a trailer to boot. You give me a call if you want to talk horses.”

“You know I won’t, but thanks anyway.”

For a moment, Rhoda thought about the money Pep would bring. Spence was right, Rhoda could buy two decent geldings with the money Pep was worth. And she’d never had a backup horse before, but she drove the thought from her mind. Rhoda had broken Pep when they were both younger, and Pep had been the only sister Rhoda had ever needed. Pep had always been there when no one else was.

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While the other racers took their runs, Rhoda ate a brisket sandwich alone. The radio crooned *Mama, don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys*. After a run, Rhoda never hovered around the arena, praying her time would go unbeaten. Instead, she kept herself busy. Rhoda tended to Pep, ate more brisket, organized the tack, bought hay and grain from bigger outfits.
Rhoda did anything but sit and watch. Not that she didn’t care, but she knew that by watching she’d only want to run more.

“The announcer will blast the results over the speakers anyway,” Rhoda told herself. *The results don’t matter,* her father would have said. She wished he could have seen her run. She could have knocked over all three barrels, and he still would have hugged her as if she’d won.

But this time results did matter. The money mattered. The money would keep her on the trail, would keep water and hay in Pep’s trough, would keep gas in the Chevy, and food in their stomachs. The money mattered. She had to keep winning to keep going.

Yet, in spite of her efforts, Rhoda migrated to the stands to watch the last of the barrel racers. So far no one had beaten her time, and an anticipation started to swell in her, and electricity playing her heart like a fiddle. Butterflies shot out of Roman candles in her stomach. For a second, she thought of how proud her parents would be, and as soon as the grin crossed her face, it crumbled.

As the last racer careened out of the gate, Rhoda knew she had won it all. The racer’s black gelding was fast, but together they were undisciplined and loose. And when the racer—a tiny girl with blonde pigtails like a doll—rounded the final barrel, her foot must have slid free of its stirrup, and the girl crunched into the dirt.

Rhoda’s smile was inevitable. It felt as if an anvil had been lifted from her shoulders. But as the girl continued to lie in the dirt, surely sobbing from pain or at least humiliation, a hush sank over the arena. A pair of cowboys came out and helped her to her feet. Between the two cowboys, the girl limped from the arena, her face a red balloon. The girl was maybe the age of Rhoda when she started racing. Rhoda could see some of herself in the girl—a fire, a willingness to accept the pain that may come.
“Everyone give this brave cowgirl a round of applause,” the announcer said, and the audience obliged. Rhoda—her eyes blazed predatory with victory—felt like she was clapping at a funeral.

***

Rhoda stashed half of her eight hundred dollar prize in an envelope under some old reins in the tack compartment. The bullriding was about to get going so Darnell was busy stretching, preparing his bullrope, and putting on his protective vest and chaps. He’d calmed down quite a bit, but still had a nervous twitch to him. Schmitt, now dressed in long basketball shorts and a baggy long-sleeved jersey for bullfighting had mumbled that Darnell always got a little hopped up before riding. Schmitt too had more pep in his step, and smile sheepishly as he buckled on his knee brace and tied his cleats.

“Wish me luck,” he said with a high five and a grin.

“Good luck,” Rhoda said, and Schmitt hopped the fence.

Rhoda was amazed at Schmitt’s ability around the bulls. As soon as the rider was in the dirt, Schmitt would scramble to position himself between the bull and rider, juking side to side to avoid the bull’s horns. It was like his knee was brand new. Gone was the dour persona: a new Schmitt grinned as he pulled cowboys out of danger, daring the bull to come after him. Rhoda wondered if the arena did the same thing for him as it did for her, if the lights and animals made her into something bigger and better, as if the dirt were holy ground. Or was it the drugs? Rhoda had heard some cowboys talk about getting the right “mixture” before a ride.

On the back of the bucking chutes, Rhoda could see Darnell scanning the crowd under his straw cowboy hat.

For her maybe?
Rhoda had always admired the bull riders that still wore cowboy hats as opposed to the hockey helmets and cages. Rhoda remembering the black and white photos of her father’s which showed cowboys, thin as rakes, with no Kevlar vests, spurring along bulls with untipped horns. 

*Back when cowboys were cowboys*, her father would say.

Darnell sat in the chute atop a bull named Blackhat—a beast of muscle, horn, and hooves. An animal athlete. Darnell was tightening his bullrope, constantly adjusting his handhold as the rope grew tighter and tighter. Then with a frantic nod of the head, the chute opened and Blackhat flung himself into the arena, hindlegs pitching skyward as he turned and bellyrolled. Darnell came off quickly—arms and legs akimbo—but his hand caught tight in the bullrope. Darnell’s legs dragged in the dirt under the falling hooves as Schmitt and the other bullfighters scampered in to free Darnell’s hand. In an attempt to get the rope, Schmitt was thrown away, swatted like a fly by the bull’s still spinning backside.

Snot and dirt flew, and a bullfighter finally freed Darnell, who collapsed in the dirt before scrambling to the fence.

The crowd gave the bullfighters a grateful, desperate round of applause as Blackhat had to be roped and pulled from the arena, his colossal head jerking at the lariat.

Rhoda descended from the stands and followed the cussing Darnell to the trailer. Darnell punched the trailer wall, and Rhoda said, “Easy, easy. There’ll be another rodeo. Are you ok?”

“Shit,” he said and sat. He rolled up his jeans’ legs to expose his blackening calves. “Hell nah, but they ain’t broke I don’t think.”

“It’s not *if* you get hurt, but *how bad* my dad always said.”

“Damn straight,” Darnell said and started for the truck. He opened the backseat door and started to toss out Schmitt’s belongings, a thermos, some clothes, and a few busted knee braces.
“What are you doing?” Rhoda said.

“Fuck that sum bitch.”

“Wait a second,” Rhoda said.

“Nah, bastard shoulda got me out of there.”

“He tried.”

“Shit, he was in the dirt. Plus, the money will go farther with just two of us.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Then you can stay here too.”

“But I’m the money, remember,” Rhoda said and took a step forward.

“I can get more money. Where are you gonna get another truck to haul you and your nag around? You wanna be on the trail? Then get in the truck.”

Rhoda saw Pep’s nose sticking from the trailer’s window. There was no guarantee another truck would take her on, not with their own trailers to pull. Her eyes fell on Schmitt’s clothes. Did it have to be this way? she wondered. Was there no space for kindness on the trail?

“Let’s at least tell him,” she said.

“He’ll figure it out. Get in the truck,” Darnell said.

***

Just outside of Fayetteville, it was Darnell’s turn to drive. Rhoda hoped that whatever it was that he was on had worn off. They had stopped at a Love’s where he had filled up on coffee, and Rhoda walked a stiff Pep around an empty lot.

When Rhoda clambered back into the passenger seat, she was intent on going to sleep quickly. She didn’t want to hear what Darnell had to say.

“You know what my granddaddy always said?” Darnell asked.
Rhoda rolled her eyes.

“Who knows kindness,” Darnell said. “And I didn’t ever know what he meant when he’d say it. One summer we were out raking hay, and he ran over a locust tree, you know, those thorny motherfuckers. Well of course we had a flat tire after that. I remember standing there in the middle of that hayfield and all my granddaddy said was ‘who knows kindness.’”

Rhoda turned and rested her head on the wind-chilled window.

“I think now what he meant was that there’s not a damned kind thing in this world, but you know what?”

“What, Darnell?”

“He never met you.”

“Don’t start with me,” Rhoda said.

“No, hear me out,” he said and looked at her.

“Fine,” Rhoda said with a sigh, “but watch the road will you.”

“Well first, you were right about Schmitt. We shouldn’t have left him. If he makes it to Ft. Smith, I figure we’ll take him back on. I was mad and not thinking straight.”

“You could say that,” Rhoda said.

“And I’m sorry about my behavior, I’ve just been on the trail for so long. It’s hard, but that’s no excuse. I was a real shitheel. Y’all didn’t deserve that. You ‘specially.”

Rhoda was trying to be mad. Be mad, she thought, it’s that easy. Just be mad. She hadn’t expected an apology from Darnell. Had expected anything but smug machismo, but now his eyes red from exhaustion and—she hoped—real tears, Darnell’s tough cowboy veneer seemed to be peeling away.

“It’ll be ok,” she said.
“Yeah, I think it will.”

***

They pulled into the Ft. Smith fairgrounds at around four in the morning. First thing Rhoda did was to hay and water Pep. But Darnell produced a sixer of High Life tallboys from the Chevy’s toolbox.

“Come here,” he said, and led her to the pressbox overlooking the empty arena. Bits of foam flew as Darnell popped two of the tallboys. One for him and one for her. Crickets plucked their fiddle-legs all around them.

It didn’t take long, just a few sips of the warming High Life, and he leaned forward to kiss her. His tongue tasted of beer and coffee. She’d seen this coming for hours, and in spite of herself, she caved. Rhoda knew what came next: him pulling her t-shirt over her head, she unbuckled his belt. It was as easy as undoing a saddle belt. The humid night was a wet blanket as he bucked atop her. No rhythm, just a frantic ick of sweat, and his weight all over her.

It didn’t take long, and it was over.

He buckled his belt and fished on his boots.

What now? she thought. Would they watch the sun come up, hold hands, cuddle for God’s sake? She knew better. He went to the truck, and she drained the last of her tallboy. The crickets had gone silent.

***

Rhoda sat in a fold-out chair in the shadow of the trailer. Pep was tied nearby, munching on some grain. Occasionally, the mare would blow air through her snout with a snort, or paw at the ground. She wanted attention, but Rhoda just pitched her hat a little lower over her eyes and tried to fall asleep.

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She wanted a shower. A shower and a bed.

Sleep refused her, so Rhoda watched the trailers start to roll in, constantly moving her chair to follow the shade. She kept an eye out for Schmitt, but wondered what she could say to him.

The blonde pigtailed barrel racer rolled in a little past lunch. Rhoda was munching on a fried baloney sandwich, when the girl’s red Dodge pulled in next to Rhoda’s trailer. The girl, who looked to be maybe sixteen on a tired day, was out of the truck almost before it could stop. There was no trace of the humiliation she’d suffered in Rolla. The girl just went about the business of tending to her horses. A tall graying man helped her, and still in the truck, a woman with the same blonde hair and rhinestone look of the girl sipped coffee. The pigtailed girl saddled her gelding and rode, and Rhoda thought it might have been the most joyous thing she’d seen. If only she could have had that. A better trail. A trail with her parents. Just her parents and Pep.

***

Rhoda forced herself to take deep breaths. This was part of her routine as she waited her turn to run. Pep had prepared well and was ready; Rhoda could feel it through her saddle, with every breath of the mare. The announcer called her name, and Rhoda kicked Pep into a gallop. But just as she passed under the pressbox, Rhoda caught sight of Schmitt, watching her from the bucking chutes.

Rhoda rounded the first barrel and then the second, but on the third and final barrel, she cut Pep too close, and they clipped the barrel. She didn’t have time to watch it fall, or to consider the penalty that would be applied. She ran Pep like she’d never run her before, trying to make up for the time that was lost.
“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter,” she lied to herself afterward. It’s what her father would have said.

Rhoda walked Pep slow around the lot, the mare keeping her head low. Rhoda dismounted. She held Pep’s head in her hands. She wanted to apologize. Pep blew air out her nose.

“I’m…”

Pep flicked Rhoda’s hat off her head, and Rhoda laughed a little.

Schmitt waited for her back at the trailer. The blue Chevy was gone, her trailer resting on a cinderblock. Schmitt helped her unsaddle Pep. Neither said a word. The tack compartment was a mess, and Rhoda’s saved money was gone. She thought of the business card in her jeans pocket. She thought of her parents, worrying alone back in Texas.

“You got a phone?” she asked.
It was early morning, and Glory was watching a cardinal streak from the yellow light of the East to the blue lingering dark in the West. Her mother smacked Glory’s shin with her walking cane. This had become a common occurrence around the house, a whack of the shin and some demand or decree would issue forth.

“We’re going to town,” Glory’s mother said. “Load up the dogs in the truck.” Glory wanted to see where the cardinal nested. Glory’s mother coughed and spit into the yard. “What are you watching?” she said.

“A cardinal.”

“My granddaddy used to tell me that cardinals were the spirits of dead relatives, sent by God to watch over us.”

Glory rolled her eyes. Of course this is something her mother would believe. College—or mostly the perceptions of her friends—in Austin had drummed religion out of Glory, but now Glory was under the dominion of her mother, whose ravaged lungs clung to God, a prayer on every harried breath.

Glory’s mother smacked her shin again. “Don’t roll your eyes at me. Get the dogs in the truck.”

The dogs were a border collie and a little shit mountain feist that used to be a good cowdog before Glory’s mother let come inside the house where it got used to lounging in what had once been Glory’s father’s armchair. The dogs were eager for a ride in the truck and loaded easily. Glory’s mother pulled herself into the truck’s passenger seat. Glory thought for sure her mother believed lung cancer prevented her from driving.
With the dogs crammed between them, Glory and her mother headed to town on dirt roads lined with trees whose canopies created a vaulted ceiling. The dirt roads cut around hills protruding with flint and shale, and snaked over slow green rivers, the backs of turtles making tiny islands in the current.

***

Glory had guessed, and guessed right, that her mother wanted to come to town to go to the lumber yard. Likewise, Glory had guessed that her mother wanted to speak to Billy Sam, who had been the owner of the lumber yard for going on fifty years. Billy Sam was a hunched man of nearly ninety. Glory’s mother liked to drive in from the ranch to visit him every few weeks. Glory supposed it was so she could look back at the way the town had used to be, before the pallet mill and the drive-in theater had closed. Time would turn this place into a ghost town along the Comal, and Glory was determined not to see. Better to leave before all the good evaporated from the town. Cut ties. Let the memories age golden. If only she could take her mother and leave. Anything so they didn’t have to see the decay and rot.

When they stepped in the door, Billy Sam said, “Look at these two. My favorite von Graeve girls.” He hugged Glory’s mother and then pinched Glory’s rib as was Billy Sam’s custom with all the young ladies.

“My name is Glory Patton,” Glory said with a sneer.

“Girl, your daddy left. You’re Glory von Graeve, if I ever saw you.”

Glory laughed. It was people like Billy Sam that made the town bearable. The old people. The ones not soured by what the town had become. Glory thought that she might be poisoned by her time here. That’s why she wanted to sell the ranch. Or wanted her mother to sell. But there would be claw marks in whatever Glory’s mother let go of.
Billy Sam eased himself onto a stool and tilted his straw hat back.

“Do you remember where Effie was buried?” Glory’s mother said.

“Do I remember where your granny Effie was buried? That was back in sixty?”

“Fifty-nine,” Glory’s mother said, “I was five.”

“I remember she didn’t want to be buried in the churchyard because of that sanctimonious lizard of a preacher,” Billy Sam said.

“She would say that,” Glory’s mother said.

“She was buried by the Comal, I remember. Few miles off the highway. By a grove of willow. That’s what I remember.”

“That’s it?” Glory’s mother said. There was desperation in her voice. Glory wondered how long she’d been thinking about Effie. And what was so important about where she was buried? Glory heard the sound of a ticking clock. She imagined the things her mother hadn’t said to Effie, and now, with the end looming, did she want to say everything? And when the time came, would Glory be able to face her mother and say she would sell the ranch when she was gone. No. Some things are better left unsaid.

“Sorry, but I don’t remember much else, Liz.”

“That’s ok,” Glory’s mother said and kissed Billy Sam on the cheek, “but we’re gonna need a shovel and your sharpest hatchet.”

***

Glory drove them back over the snaking roads, a cloud of dust thick yet dissipating behind them. As they neared the bridge over the Comal, Glory’s mother directed her to pull the truck over.
“What?” Glory said, “Is everything ok?” Glory’s mother exited the truck with the hatchet. She made for a hazel tree and lopped off a branch. Dust was catching in her lungs, and when Glory heard her cough, she too exited the truck.

“You see here?” Glory’s mother said, pointing out a spot on the limb that made a Y shape. “Chop that part out,” Glory’s mother said.

Glory cut the limb, careful not to break the fork in the branch her mother wanted. “What are we doing? Making a slingshot?” Glory asked.

“No, a witching rod,” Glory’s mother said, “Now trim the bark off so it’s smooth. I’m gonna sit in the truck.”

The sun was at its zenith, and the heat beat down on them. Even the breeze off the Comal was hot, a humid blast of baked algae and boiled frog. The dogs hid in the shade of the marred hazel. They breathed hard and fast, mouths open and tongues lolling. Glory’s mother seemed to be hacking up a lung in the truck. The doctor in San Antonio said she didn’t have long, especially after popping a hole in her left lung not three weeks prior.

They had been stacking hay when it happened. Glory saw her mother sit down on a bale and cough, a deep cough that made even Glory’s ribs ache. Glory’s mother’s hand came away from her mouth bloody and Glory thought that it was the day, the last day she would speak to her mother. Glory drove her mother to the clinic in town, slinging hay bales from the truck bed as she rounded curves. Glory saw the bales explode in the rearview mirror, and her mother cussed under her breath.

Glory brought the debarked rod to her mother who was flushed and breathing hard.

“Good,” her mother said and took the rod by the Y forks. “This’ll work,” she said.
“Mom, what are we doing? I should take you home. It’s too hot for you to be out,” Glory said.

“Do you know how to witch up a grave? They teach you that in college?” her mother asked.

“Can’t say they did.”

“That’s what I thought,” her mother said. “Let’s go find granny Effie. Take the shovel and hatchet.”

“I was hoping you had some idea of where Billy Sam was talking about,” Glory said.

Glory’s mother shrugged and said, “Would have been easier had the gravestone not been pitched into the river by drunks. That happened round sixty-five, before granddaddy died.”

“Your granddaddy?” Glory asked.

“Yes, darlin’, mine. Yours is still out there somewhere.”

There had been a history of the von Graeve men—those born to the name or marrying in—and they all left. Glory’s father had gone, taking nothing but the beer from the fridge. Glory’s grandfather had gone too with a whisper in the night. “I love you more than you could know, and I’m so sorry about that,” he’d whispered in Glory’s ear as she had pretended to sleep. Then he was nothing but a memory and the sound of the screen door shutting. Glory never told her mother about that midnight message.

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Glory parked the truck just off the dirt road under some shade trees. She rolled down the windows and took the keys. Her mother had her cane tucked under one arm, her hands on the forks of the witching rod. She inched along, eyes glued to the end of the rod. In Glory’s brain,
witching graves was filed away next to Bigfoot and the ghost of Blue Lady Bridge. Glory wondered if there were Tarot cards in her mother’s pocket.

“Don’t give me that look,” her mother said. “My granddaddy used to get paid fifty dollars to witch up wells. He witched the Atkins’ well. And don’t forget the hatchet and shovel.”

“What are we going to do? Dig up granny Effie?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What are you so concerned about? You never even knew Effie?” Glory’s mother said.

“We’re talking about digging up a body. Your grandmother’s body,” Glory said.

“You so concerned about the state of your soul all of a sudden?” her mother said.

“And you aren’t? Bit of a flipped script, ain’t it?” Glory said.

“Effie was buried with something I’d like to have. We’ll dig her up, get it, then put her back,” her mother said and turned away.

“And what’s so important that you want to dig up Effie to get?”

“Something my granddaddy gave her. A silver dollar. He set it on the railroad tracks as a kid and the midnight freighter smashed it. He had it stamped and put on a chain and gave it to Effie as a fortieth anniversary gift.”

“What was stamped on it?”

“A line from his favorite book: Love you as ever. Effie wanted to give it to me near the end, but I told her to keep it. I was too young to think about heirlooms.”

Glory had heard the story from her granddaddy when she was young and first became aware of death. Her granddaddy had sat at the edge of her bed, his rough hand over hers, and
said that Glory’s mother was the bravest person he knew, that when she was only a child, kneeling at her granny Effie’s deathbed, Effie had said, “Take this, child,” the silver dollar in her hand, and Glory’s mother swallowed, wiped away a tear, and said, “No, granny. You keep it.”

And now the black winds of death racked Glory’s mother, her lungs fighting every breath. The child that was sought out her grandmother.

Glory watched her mother, feet shuffling through the dry dead grass, following the movements of the witching rod.

“It’s like a metal detector,” Glory said with a laugh.

“What?” her mother said.

“You’re like one of those retirees combing the beach with their metal detectors. Looking for Spanish doubloons.”

Her mother laughed.

“All I would need is a big floppy hat and some sunscreen on my nose huh?” she said.

“You’re close to it already,” Glory said, the words slipping out before she could catch them.

Her mother said nothing.

Glory watched their shadows, her mother’s stooped following a pseudo-compass, and her own, the shovel and hatchet made huge by the sunlight.

“How does it work?” Glory asked.

“The witching?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t rightly know,” her mother said, “my granddaddy taught me. Just before he died. He knew more, I think. But the trick is to make a good rod. Hazel works best. Then you walk
and when you pass over something, a well, minerals, a grave, the rod will pull down to the ground.”

“Sounds like hocus pocus,” Glory said.

“Maybe so. Granddaddy always said that the walking was the best part. Just walk and listen to the trees, but he said lots of stuff then,” her mother said.

“Like what?” Glory had never heard her mother speak so freely of her family before.

“Well, granddaddy wasn’t right after Effie died. He used to say he could hear her in the wind, calling his name. He told me about cardinals. I remember he disappeared for a week once. Just walked off into the woods. Said he was following a cardinal. The police found him outside of Austin and took him to the hospital. He was dehydrated and babbling about Effie.”

“He went crazy?” Glory said.

“Maybe we all do,” her mother said, “near the end.”

***

An hour in the woods passed slowly, but still they followed the drift of the witching rod. The heat robbed them of strength, and when Glory saw her mother stumble into a bois d’arc, she demanded that they take a break. They sat in the shade by the river. The dogs flung themselves like cannonballs into the green water. Glory wished she could follow.

“I’m thirsty,” her mother said. “Fetch me some water.”

“From the river?”

“The cancer will kill me, sure enough. So, I don’t mind some river water.”

Glory’s mother panted heavy, and sweat rolled off her. Glory took a handkerchief from her pocket and dipped it into the warm river. She watched crystal droplets fall off the cloth as she rolled the kerchief into a wet necklace that she draped over her mother’s shoulders.
“Suck on the ends if you need to,” Glory said and her mother did.

Glory wondered how long her mother could keep this up, how long she could keep believing in her own strength, how long she could cling to life so desperately. Glory thought of her time in Austin, her time away from her mother. Of times in coffee shops and bars and the fullness that came from being around friends. And had her mother not been in the background of those memories even though she was miles away? Had Glory been aware that she was someone’s daughter? That she had a mother? Had she been grateful?

“We should head back,” Glory said and kneeled by her mother.

“No.”

*Is a coin worth it?* Glory wanted to ask, but she already knew the answer.

“Then give me the stick,” Glory said. “Let’s get this over with.”

Her mother leaned on her cane as she rose to her feet. She handed Glory the witching rod. Glory held the Y-forks as she had seen her mother do. She felt nothing. Her mother and dripping dogs watched her.

“Just like a metal detector,” her mother said. So Glory started to slowly rotate left and right as she walked. It all felt like guesswork. So unsure. So tenuous. But they continued on through the woods.

***

They came to a bend in the Comal where the banks rose high into a hill. Atop the hill there had once been a grove of willow, but now there were only shorn stumps. Glory moved slowly amongst the stumps, a sweeper moving through a minefield.

The rod pulled, as if by magnet, towards the ground.
Glory couldn’t believe it. The damned stick actually worked. She could feel it pulling against her grip.

“Here. Here!” she said.

Her mother took the shovel and started to dig, her breaths ragged.

“Mom,” Glory said and took the shovel. The digging was hard, the shovel blade thudded into roots and sparked off flint. Glory used the hatchet to chop out sections of thick roots and then pitch them out of the hole. The dogs took to chasing the bits of root and flint-rock as they rolled down the hill to the river. She dug and dug, while her mother paced anxiously above the pit that only grew deep. The soil turned from a gritty tan to a coffee-like loam.

Glory dug until her head passed below the drying grass of the hill. She dug deeper than any casket would be. But she did not stop, not until she heard a stifled sob from the surface.

From the grave, Glory saw her mother, the woman that had raised her, who threw hay bales and chopped firewood, skinned deer and branded cattle, Glory saw her tremble, her graying hair a sweaty veil over her face.

Glory crawled from the pit. The grave, she thought, looking at the pit for what it was. And Glory knew that this wouldn’t be the last time she’d dig into the earth. There would be a time when she no longer had a mother. There would be a time when someone dug a grave for herself. There would be a time when their gravestones would be pitched into the river. A time when a trainsmashed coin will mean everything. So she took a quarter from her pocket and pressed it into her mother’s palm. Glory whispered, “We’ll put it on the tracks and stamp the words. We’ll put it on a string, Mom.” Her mother sighed, cicadas keening away the dying sunlight.
The Better Part of Fishing

The wind pushed his float-plane into a Canadian lake. He survived the impact, the breaking of wings. “Everyone ok?” he yelled, and the water poured in. She would hear about this. He wondered if she would hurt. He couldn’t know that they would only find his gear: the tackle box busted open, his fishing rods snapped, the lures glittering on the plane’s floor. The fuselage—separated from its pontoons—had started to sink. He shrugged free of his seatbelt and dove for the submerged door. His breath was taken by the cold, his lungs aching. No one would know how long he struggled with the door. Had it opened as the water filled him? Had he pleaded please God, make me a fish?

***

They met in a fish house, out on the ice. He was the brother of her friend and a fisherman by trade. With an auger he drilled a hole in the ice. Vodka passed amongst them, and Polly wondered if they would catch a fish in spite of the laughter.

She was impressed with him. A smile like new snow as he pulled on a line. “Gotta jiggle the line every once in a while,” he said. Dedication was the word she was looking for. While the others drank and chatted, he fished.

“The better part of fishing is waiting, isn’t it?” she said.

He laughed.

“So it may appear, but no.”

“Then what is it? Drinking?” she handed him the bottle.

He thought for a moment, took a swig, closed his eyes. “My family, we’ve always fished,” he said, “it’s not because we need to. Hunger would rob fishing of its beauty, I think. No, I think the better part of fishing is just fishing to fish.”
“So it doesn’t matter if you catch anything?”

“Not really, just being out on the water or the ice with some good company. That’s good enough.” He seemed to believe it, so she did as well.

They drank, occasionally dragging a lake trout out of the ebon water. Polly wormed in next to him, leaning on him as she laughed. He did not pull away. When they had enough, he cleaned the fish outside and cooked the filets on an electric griddle. He knew that in his absence her friend—Sarah was her name—would give her a look. “Are you hitting on my brother?”

Polly would want to lie but would only manage a shrug.

“Don’t,” Sarah would say, but let slip a wry smile. A blessing perhaps?

They ate the grilled filets and polished off the last of the vodka. A weariness settled over the fish house. Content, they resolved to go home.

When Polly stumbled, it was him that caught her.

“I’ll take her home,” he said.

She gave him her address and slept as he drove through a world of black and white, snow banks at the edge of the road, flakes blurring through the headlights. Pulling into the drive he spoke her name, and she awoke.

“Here we are,” he said.

“I’ll probably need help getting to the door,” she said. He steadied her, his hands on her shoulders, and they walked up to the door.

“Will you be ok to get home?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine.”

“It was a good time.”

Yes, it had been.
She moved forward—almost falling—and hugged him. Her cheek melted the snowflakes on his jacket. He kissed her forehead then opened the front door for her.

“Goodnight,” he said.

“I’ll see you again?”

***

The jacket was his, blue flannel and fraying at the shoulder seams. He left it at her little apartment the day he cooked beef stew for her. Polly had been sick at home, and when he had received word he showed up at her door, wrapped in the blue flannel a full Tupperware bowl in his hands.

Polly insisted that he leave, that he shouldn’t see her this way. She said he would fall ill too.

“It would be worth it,” he said.

He warmed the stew on her stovetop until steam rose from the pot. Polly sat and ate, cloaked in blankets and pajamas. He sat with her, saying nothing, yet it occurred to Polly that it was not because there was nothing to say, but rather because their being together required no effects. A cake that needed no icing. Perhaps he had felt that way.

When Polly finished her stew, he stood to leave.

“I’ll go and let you rest.”

She thanked him for the stew and he hugged her. But this time when he moved to kiss her forehead she pulled him down and her lips touched his. When they had released each other, he removed his jacket and hung it from her coatrack. He made to leave.

“Won’t you need the jacket?” she asked.

“Nah,” he said. He would have to come back for it when he got back in town.
“Where are you headed?”

“Up to Canada. I’m taking some rich fellow fishing.”

“I hope you catch a lot of fish,” she said, “even if it doesn’t matter whether you do or not.”

***

There’s no accounting for anything. Polly knew it at once. The phone call. Sarah’s tears would have dripped through the mouthpiece and all the way to Polly’s ear. Driving to her friend’s house, she knew the whole time. There were more cars than usual parked in the driveway. Sarah sat crying on the stairs. She hugged Polly, her wet cheeks cold against her own. She said, “They can’t find him. They can’t find him.”

Polly knew better than to hope, but hope she did. She fought the urge to explain or reason any of it. Instead, she asked, “What can I do?” She thought of what she could cook for them. She answered the phone for them when people called. She washed their dirty dishes.

After she left them, in the still of her apartment Polly could hear the word never. She sat in the dark, telling herself not to look at the coat rack. She wanted to tell herself that it would have been better had they never met, even if that wasn’t true.

***

The family waited and hoped for two cold months before they arranged a funeral. The town, though small, had poured into the funeral home. Polly had arrived early enough to catch Sarah before the service had started, to see if she or her family needed anything.

“You have done enough for us. Thank you.”

Polly took her seat at the end of a crimson cushioned pew, her eyes eschewing the walnut casket, the hollow centerpiece of a tragic tableau. Instead, she caught herself eyeing his family,
his mother spangled in black, father resting his head in his hands. She wished desperately to sit among them, separate from all the friends and acquaintances, and when she realized this she felt herself blush. Who was she to compare her grief to theirs? She had barely known the man, even if that little knowledge had seemed enough. Had the family known what he had become to her? She was still dismayed at how his brief presence had left her with such marvelous wounds. Or was it her that had left the wounds? Had she not carved out a little of herself to allow for his inclusion in her life? Now there was only a cavity—hollow as his casket—that ached and could not be filled.

By the casket was a photograph of him, younger than she’d known him. How had that young man turned into the man of dedicated stillness? Her eyes fell to her feet. She wouldn’t let them see her cry. Better to keep what she had to herself.

After the service Polly shuffled and twitched in the line of mourners. What could she say to the family, waiting patiently beside the casket? Would she tell them that she had loved their son, even though she had never really known him, that she felt hollow when he was not around? Who was she to tell them that?

When Polly came before them, they recognized her as Sarah’s friend. She shook their cold hands and said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She couldn’t meet their eyes. And she found herself at his casket, struck dumb by the fact that he wasn’t in it and never would be. All she could do was reach out to touch the smooth walnut. So she pretended it was him she was touching.

***

Polly woke on New Year’s Day at her parents’ house, head throbbing from the night’s celebrations. Dirty wineglasses littered the sink, paper plates stuffed the wastebasket. She
thought everyone would sleep until noon or later. How they had danced! Blue Swede blasting in the air *I’m hooked on a feeling*. Polly had faked it well, dancing with them, yet not willing to tell them she’d rather sleep, because in sleep she might dream, and in dreams the dead could come alive.

Polly finished a cup of coffee and drifted into the mud room. She put on her snow boots and his blue flannel jacket even though it swamped her. She had taken to wearing it, one last ditched effort to hang on to him.

In the garage she found what she was looking for: her father’s old rod and reel, a spin-caster with a neon green jig, and a splitting maul.

She trudged through the morning’s snow and down the drive to the frozen pond at the edge of her parents’ property. Her father and his father before had always kept the pond stocked with fish, smallmouth bass she remembered. She had always ignored the fish, preferring to swim in the summer or skate in the winter, but now she would not ignore them.

Polly walked out onto the little pier and set the spin-caster down. She took the splitting maul, and even though she knew it would scare the fish, she started to chop away at the ice. On her third swing, the maul buried into the ice, stuck. She had to kick it free and lean over the ice to recover it. She kept swinging until she finally broke through the ice and showered her with cold water, droplets like diamonds hung on the blue flannel. Steamed breaths wheezed out of her. She dropped the little jig into the pool. She could see it three feet down, a tiny light shining in the dark water.