Blasting at the Big Ugly: A novel

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Blasting at the Big Ugly: A novel

by

Andrew Payton

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
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ABSTRACT

Blasting at the Big Ugly is a first-person, non-linear novel with two major thru-lines. The first is the story of narrator Ethan and his comrades Jake and Brett as they run around an active mountaintop removal coal mine in West Virginia shooting off flares and evading capture to prolong mining and to cost the coal company profits.

The second thru-line details Ethan’s inheritance of family land at Big Ugly Creek from his grandfather and how meeting his eventual love interest Kate at a protest in Washington, DC, leads him to move to the land, where his great aunt Patsy still lives. Through Kate, Ethan gets involved with the anti-MTR movement in the coalfields but becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress. On a five day march, Ethan meets Jake, a veteran of the War in Iraq who encourages Ethan to radicalize his protest. His friendship with the unpredictable and sometimes violent Jake, along with an episode of infidelity while she visits her sick father in Wisconsin, erodes and eventually ends Ethan and Kate’s relationship.

The mousing operation quickly goes awry when Brett is captured by guards and arrested. Ethan and Jake continue for days until Ethan falls and fractures his rib. Instead of continuing with their action, Ethan surrenders himself to a miner to seek medical attention. Jake does not surrender, and in a struggle shoots a miner with a flare gun to the chest, steals and crashes a miner’s truck. Ethan is hospitalized for frostbite, a concussion, and a fractured rib, charged with trespassing and reckless endangerment, and let out on bail. Once back home, a snowstorm locks Ethan, Kate, Patsy, and Ethan’s father at Big Ugly. A few weeks later, after Jake has been arrested for the shooting of the miner, Ethan learns that Jake has committed suicide in prison.

The book ends after Ethan has already left Big Ugly, on a drive to visit Jake’s family.
INTRODUCTION

I have not been writing fiction for very long. I wrote a handful of short stories in my undergraduate, but mostly focused on poetry and screenplays. A year before entering the MFA Program at Iowa State, I tried my hand at a novel, but eventually shelved the effort as a learning experience. I wrote a few stories in my first semester at ISU, and after a handful of publications and some attention from a few literary agents, I learned what sells in the world of literary fiction is novels. And so, embarrassingly enough, began this project.

I first wrote about West Virginia in an essay titled “You’re Not Welcome Here,” in which I detail my experience in the summer of 2011 visiting family land in Lincoln County a week after participating in the March on Blair Mountain, a fifty-mile walk to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain (an experience I use again in this book). I am drawn to the place and its issues because I see mountaintop removal (MTR) coal mining as a visually, culturally, and ecologically heinous practice in one of earth’s most ancient and diverse ecosystems. While I have extended family remaining in coal country, many individuals, including my grandfather and his siblings, left in a mass out-migration of Appalachians after the Second World War from the impoverished mountains into the urban cities of the Midwest and East Coast. Most of what I know about West Virginia comes from summers spent on church mission trips, countless hiking and camping trips, and from my involvement with the anti-MTR movement while living in Washington, DC, and south central Kentucky. Discovering my own family history, through library research and interviews with my father, has been one of the major joys of writing this book.
A rough idea of this novel came to me in the fall of 2012, and by the start of Master’s Workshop (a required MFA course taken at the end of the second year, designed to help students complete first drafts of their theses) in spring of 2013 with Steve Pett I had a title, the names of my main characters, and a good deal of forward momentum. Initially I intended Blasting at the Big Ugly to be a sprawling multi-generational tale. I was inspired by first-person investigations of family like Jeffrey Eugenides’ Middlesex and Tea Obreht’s The Tiger’s Wife, fractured novels of family history such as Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine and Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, as well as historical fiction set in coal country like Denise Giardina’s Storming Heaven and James Still’s River of Earth. At first I tried to cram five generations of the Hart family into one book. About three hundred pages into my first draft, I decided to narrow my scope and give the narrator, Ethan Hart, more space in the story. Two or three hundred pages of new material later, I had a draft where Ethan occupied about 66% of the story and a collection of family members 33%. What you have here is all Ethan. In talks with my adviser, Kenny Cook, and after three drafts, I decided a smaller, more direct thru-line would greatly benefit the novel. I still wanted it to be steeped in history, lore, and generational patterns, but the simpler first-person narrative seemed a more solid book. Much of what I’ve cut I’m developing into a linked collection of stories, currently titled Overburden, which I will continue to work on after the MFA.

I believe this book fits into many traditions of contemporary literary fiction. The fractured, nonlinear narrative is similar to Obreht’s The Tiger’s Wife, Per Pederson’s Out Stealing Horses, and Kevin Power’s Iraq War novel The Yellow Birds. Initially, the blend of first-person and omniscient third, where Ethan narrates events he is not present for, was influenced by Middlesex, Oscar Wao, Tiger’s Wife, and Wallace Stegner’s Crossing to Safety
and *Angle of Repose*. I was also influenced by the narrative experimentation of works such as Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and Paul Harding’s *Tinkers*, where no single narrative perspective can be said to dominate. While this element is now vestigial in *Blasting*, this initial direction did help shape Ethan’s tone and scope. He is at once taking in the moment—evident in the present-tense “mousing” chapters—as well as considering the ecological and human history of the region where he lives, zooming in and out as needed. The stripped-down narrative that remains, focused on a few central events but influenced heavily by family history, is, in terms of narrative strategy, similar to Larry Watson’s *Montana 1948* or Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints*.

Environmental sensibility has become increasingly important in contemporary literary fiction, and in this regard I believe *Blasting* works in the same tradition as Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* or *Flight Behavior*, Ann Pancake’s *Strange as this Weather Has Been* and *Given Ground*, as well as short story collections like Anthony Doerr’s *The Shell Collector*, Megan Mayhew Bergman’s *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, or Rick Bass’ *The Lives of Rocks*. As with many of the texts already mentioned, *Blasting* investigates the connection between family and place and an individual’s sense of belonging there; I would add to this list Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone*, and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.

It took a considerable amount of research to write this novel. For events in the contemporary times—such as the DC coal plant protest, the Dove Branch Elementary protest (based on Marsh Fork Elementary), and the March on Blair Mountain—I drew from my own experience, but also read articles about the events and watched videos from the protests. Big Ugly Creek is a real creek, but the Hart family land is an imagined place. Likewise, the Hobet-21 actually is West Virginia’s largest surface mine, but Carbow Spruce Mountain, the landscape, and the characters are entirely imagined. Researching various mining techniques is not terribly
easy; I could not find a text or person to describe the practice in technical terms, but instead relied on accounts on the internet and in books. I also had trouble finding sources for the scenes involving “mousing” (a rare strategy of radical environmental action associated with threats of mountaintop removal). I once met two men who had done it in Kentucky, but I found experienced friends reluctant to answer questions over e-mail or phone, given the sensitive and illegal nature of certain practices in MTR resistance. (Considering that the Environmental Liberation Front is the FBI’s number one domestic terrorist threat, I understand their caution.)

However, in order to write some of the historical material and to better understand the cultural history of the place, I found much to read. Bloodletting in Appalachia by Howard Lee gave a detailed firsthand account of the West Virginia Mine Wars. Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945 by Ronald Eller provided a sweeping regional history, especially concerning the transition from traditional below-ground mining to surface and MTR mining. Moving Mountains by Penny Loeb deepened my understanding about the modern fight against coal. Sparrows Point by Mark Reutter offered much needed information about the steel industry in Baltimore and its ties to coal. And Michael Coleman’s American Indian Children at School: 1850-1930 helped me create a background for my character Elma Means.

While writing this book, I did have periods of great productivity. In Master’s Workshop, much of the draft poured out much more quickly than was required for the class, and after only five months I had close to three hundred pages—with probably fifty more already scrapped. But there were also dry spells when I did not have solutions to certain roadblocks in plot, character, or narrative strategy. I also wrestled heavily with the idea that I did not own this story. I am not from West Virginia, and I have never lived there. West Virginia, more than any place I have ever been, is skeptical of outsiders. Writing about Appalachia because of familial ties and sentimental
feelings about ruined mountains felt fraudulent and exploitative. I felt similarly about my
decision to make the family part Native American, even though my own family is similar to the
Harts. I eventually decided, like all fiction writers must, that much of the human experience is
universal: we all suffer and love, and though the circumstances and interpretations of our
obligations to self and family may vary from people to people, I possess the skills necessary to
empathize and imagine an experience unlike my own. It is my duty to write with a big and open
heart, but this is a work of fiction, and it is my work of fiction.

I have read many times that writers often consider their books or stories eternally
unfinished. I don’t think I subscribe to this belief, but right now, this novel is not a finished
work. Writing and redrafting a novel in just over a year is no simple task for any writer. While I
am very proud of what you have here and the many pages written and discarded or funneled into
other projects, I plan to continue to work on this past my MFA and seek publication in the near
future.
First there is a mountain
Then there is no mountain
Then there is

-- Donovan
I wake with the sun and hike the dirt road to the meadow. A frost stiffens the dead grass, wetting the hem of my jeans as I pass through. The air feels raw and sharp and through the bare branches I see down the hollow and to the ridge on the other side of the creek. Everything is blue and still for a long time, and then two crows descend from the hillside above and caw as they pass. The garden is dead, and the ground from summer once black and warm and giving is stiff and gray with ice. A wisp of opaque smoke rises from the house below, which means the others are awake now and adding wood to the stove. I blow warm air into my hands and listen to Jake and Brett talk on the porch. The sun punches through the clouds and all the earth steams around me, and I head back down to them. The road from the shack to the meadow is steep, and I take it in in leaps, watching for ice the whole way. Brett has gone inside and Jake sits on the porch with a cup of coffee and a quilt draped over his shoulders.

“Just made a fresh pot,” he says.

I thank him and take a seat. “Cigarette?” I ask.

He turns to me but doesn’t change his blank expression.

“You know I’m not one to give a fuck, but you told me to cut you off.”

“Today is different,” I say.

“Today is different,” he repeats, and then digs into the inner pocket of his coat and reaches across the porch to offer me the pack. Jake leans back into his chair and kicks his Army boots up onto the railing—I replaced the old boards last year, along with the rotten porch planks and eaves and much of the roof, and I want to ask him to take his feet down but decide not to care. I am trying to get better at letting go. His beard is heavy and dark, threaded with unwieldy
wisps of gray. His hair, which had been buzzed when I met him last summer, now grows out from under his wool cap and over his ears. It is full of grease, just like my own, as none of us has bothered boiling water to keep clean and fresh.

When I finish my cigarette, I lean back in the chair and remove my grandfather’s cap from my head, and then run my fingers through my hair the same way as I saw my grandfather do dozens of times. The habit appeared as if long established, like it must have appeared in my father before me, and if I had not been wearing the dead man’s cap I might not have noticed the similarity. I leave Jake on the porch holding his cold mug of coffee and staring into the frost-choked hickory and find Brett inside cooking breakfast. A whole package of bacon, a dozen eggs scrambled, toast with jelly and butter, and potatoes roasting in the oven—all just for the three of us. The Last Meal, we called it days before, when we were making the final plans and shopping for our last items in Madison. For the next few days we’ll have to survive on beef jerky and granola bars, all while running off trail with three gallons of water and boxes of ammo. Our packed bags rest against the wall by the cot where Jake sleeps, but Brett has his flare gun on the dining table. The breech is open but empty, and a few rounds stand on end nearby. Brett is far older than Jake or me, in his early fifties, but he can scramble up and down hillsides like a mountain goat. His legs are thin and bony and his leather belt always notched tight around his tucked-in shirt. On the small radio and cassette player we keep on top of the fridge he plays Sam Cooke—one of about ten tapes we’ve collected from the random corners of our lives—and he sways and croons to “Nothing Can Change This Love.”

Brett grew up on a conventional corn and soy operation in Iowa, and has that straight-laced Midwestern farmer look to him. When I first met him at a march against Massey’s plan to blow up Blair Mountain, a site not too far from here, I would have never guessed some of the
things he’d been involved with in his life. In the nineties he lived in Eugene, Oregon, and though he’s always vague about his time there, Jake and I have surmised he did some work with the Environmental Liberation Front. And then, in the past decade, he went back to Iowa as his mother was dying and wrecked a few confined feeding operations with the Animal Liberation Front. When he moved to the coalfields a few years ago, he moved here for the fight. When we all train together, drills that Jake designs, Brett can always hold his own against me, only twenty-four and fit enough, and Jake, twenty-eight and still chiseled from humping gear in the Iraqi desert.

We begin each morning two miles down the road, plunked into the creek, and then Jake starts his stop-watch and we’re off, sloshing through Big Ugly’s twists and pools. We cut uphill on whatever path Jake decides, over deadfall and through hawthorn or clamoring up exposed granite edges and the muddy ravines that slice up the property. We pass where the Hart land ends and trespass onto Arch Coal territory, running all the way to the edge of the Hobet, the state’s largest mountaintop removal site, where we look out over the violated earth, the chalk-colored expanse stretched fifteen miles at its widest, and there we stop. I’d hiked to see it when I first moved here, and then once later with Kate, and the thing has lived in my dreams for three years now. It is the moonscape I always find myself lost in, and the explosions and dust have become recurring elements I have to dodge in the otherwise banal objectives of my subconscious. Jake doesn’t like to linger though, he doesn’t like to talk or speculate about the mess like Brett and I. He has his own sore spot: a smaller mine in McDowell County where he grew up, a place he’d hunted as a kid and rode ATVs as a teenager that had vanished when he’d been away at war. At the edge of the mine, Jake allows us each a mouthful from his water bottle and then marches us back down in a route just as erratic and trying as the way up. When our times improved—which
are essentially irrelevant since we never take the same path—we loaded our packs with gallons of water he didn’t allow us to drink. The first time I fell to my knees vomiting at the sight of the house. Jake waited for me to wipe my lip and then ordered twenty burpees on the spot. The ordeal has gotten easier, though we come back to the shack breathless and faint of heart. Jake’s also been the diet police, and in the past month we’ve lived off eggs and meat and peanut butter. When I was eating vegetarian with Kate, when she still wanted to be with me, I got a little flabby and slow. Now that Jake’s been living here a few months, I’ve dropped fifteen pounds and can see the vague shape of pectorals in the mirror. “Protein is the difference between failure and success,” he says if one of us raises complaint against the regiment. “Protein. We need protein.”

The Sam Cooke tape clicks to an end and without missing a beat Brett pops in REM and goes back to the stove. I sit at the table, the USGS map sprawled open. Though we’ve only been to the site twice, once at night by headlamp and once in daylight, I have the lay of the mountain memorized, the topographical changes, the hollows and ravines we’ve identified as potential hiding places. The map is marked-up in several different hands and pen colors and has begun to tear along the fold lines. Jake comes in and tosses his quilt on the couch and then takes a seat at the table. He is already dressed in the camo fatigues we picked up at an outdoor supply store in Charleston. The three of us have the same pants and jackets and gloves and wool caps; they’d been made for deer hunters, but they’ll serve our purposes too. Brett sets three plates and then carries out frying pans and shovels out the food.

We eat in silence. Jake eats fast and moans as he chews, a soft humming in his throat. Brett cuts everything in small pieces that he drowns in ketchup. Several times throughout the meal I find I have let moments pass watching the others eat their food and must force myself to continue on my own. When through, I go to the corner and pick up Huw’s birdcage and the half-
full bag of seed. I wake him from a sort of daze and he looks up at me with wonder. I leave the other two without a word and walk the hill to Kate and Patsy.

A gust of wind blows up the path and Huw’s neck feathers stand on end.

“Peckerwood,” he says.

“It is cold,” I say.

“Coffee, woman.”

“Coffee’s nice.”

They are having breakfast in the house below. They sit across from each other, hovered over bowls of oatmeal. Kate has a book open on her lap and Patsy stares at each spoonful. I set the cage on an end table in front of the bookshelf in a corner of the living room. Huw surveys his new surroundings and then demands a pineapple, which I don’t have. A stack of Gazettes Kate must have brought in with her from Charleston sits ready for the bird shit. She’s come to watch my weak great-aunt and my dead grandfather’s bird. I had no one else to call. I go into the kitchen and try to hug her, but she draws her shoulders up as if to block me. I sit at the table and eat idly from bowls of raisins and slivered almonds set out for their oatmeal.

“All ready for your next arrest?” Patsy asks.

“That’s not how this one works,” I say.

I throw a handful of nuts into my mouth. Though she’s deteriorated since I moved in, the skin on her face a poor disguise for her skull, Patsy’s voice is as strong and measured as ever. She stares a long time in a way she has that makes me feel she knows the ugliest parts of me. She used to be a school teacher, and I imagine this was the look she used to put kids in their place. I want to turn myself inwards, protect whatever she might not see.

“I suppose you got your mind set,” she says, and then returns to her spoon.
I haven’t told Patsy much of our plan, only that I’d be gone a few days. But she often knows what I don’t tell her by assuming the worst and then sniffing out clues. The day Kate moved out and we both watched her go down the drive, her car packed with the few things she’d brought, Patsy told me that she hoped this would teach me how to make promises. “If you don’t find things to be true to,” she said, “you’re just false through and through.”

“I tried, Patsy,” I said. “I don’t know how else to try.”

“Sometimes we only know how to do right once we already did wrong.”

When I told Kate what I was planning, she tried to talk me out of it.

“What’s the point?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Jake is crazy.”

“Jake is motivated. Jake is passionate.”

“Jake is dangerous.”

Sitting at the table, I stare at Kate as she pretends to ignore me with her book. She’s shaved the left side of her head and dyed her hair again, the same jet black as when I met her in DC three years ago. Then she seemed a well-groomed crust punk—torn black jeans, bandana around her neck, and a haircut that seemed hewn with a sword, but everything washed and tidy and the patches expertly sewn. In her time at Big Ugly some of that had gone away—we both grew hair in places we’d kept back for society’s sake and sported flecks of paint and glue and minor cuts from all the work we were doing to repair the old house. Her outfits shifted to flannel and Carhartt and garden boots. But now she’s back to her groomed punk look, and clean again; somehow it makes her feel so far from me—like she’s gone forward or backward in time to a place where I don’t belong.
I eat another handful of raisins. “We’ll check in around nine every night,” I say. “Be by the phone.”

Kate looks up from her book. “I know what to do.”

“What are you reading?” I ask.

She lifts the cover to me. It has a picture of a humpback whale, but I haven’t read the title before she slaps it back to her lap.

“Thanks for doing this,” I say.

“I’d be fine alone,” says Patsy. “You treat me like a baby, Ethan.”

“What if you fall again?” I ask.

She humphs and returns to her oatmeal. If it wasn’t winter, and Patsy wasn’t in her matching sweatpants and sweater, the bruises on her arms and legs from her tumble down the porch might be apparent. Since her fall she’s hardly been able to get around the house; she can’t cook for herself, can’t drive to town for groceries, and if for some reason I don’t make it back on schedule, she wouldn’t be able to hook up the trailer and refill the water buffalo in town. When I asked Kate to watch her I knew she would say yes. They had an unlikely fondness for each other immediately. Kate admired the old woman way up in the hollow not taking shit from Arch Coal for fifty years, and Patsy admired the young woman who didn’t wear dresses and called men on their bullshit. They are full of spit, both of them.

When it becomes clear I’m not wanted at the table, I excuse myself and take the hill to my shack. Jake and Brett are both dressed now. Jake chugs a water bottle and Brett paces the living room with his pack on, jumping up and down to get a sense of the weight. I go into the back room and change. I put on fresh thermal underwear and new wool socks, and then pull on my waterproof camo pants and a long sleeve base layer. My boots are wet from our last run, but
once I get them laced up I can’t tell the difference. We are all dressed identically, except for our minor personal additions. Jake wears his dog tags and a pair of Oakleys, Brett tucks in his shirt so that his cowboy belt buckle shows, and I wear my grandfather’s cap, incorrectly identifying myself as a veteran of the Second World War.

“We look terrifying,” Brett says. “Like a militia.”

“There aren’t enough of us for a militia,” Jake says. “Ready?”

We all nod, throw on our packs, and head outside to Jake’s truck. Our packs beside each other in the bed remind me of hitchhiking to North Carolina with Kate for a folk music festival her first summer here. Then, there was so much promise and freedom in the image of the two packs sliding against each other on a small highway somewhere, but now, as Jake takes the wheel and I see those three black bags, heavy with batteries and water and ammo and food and hand warmers, it feels like a sentence; I want to tell them to go without me, that I’m not ready for this, but of course I don’t. He backs the truck away from the shack, almost into the chicken wire fence of the family graveyard, and then down the family road, out of the family hollow, out along Big Ugly and onto the county road, and to the southern edge of the Hobet surface mine where we’ll hike the loose gravel of a mining road to a clear-cut hillside that Arch Coal plans to blow to hell tomorrow morning.
Ever since he died, I’ve been obsessed with my asshole grandfather. Stories of his past find their way into so many of my conversations, that anyone close to me gets familiar with the logline of his life and character: the chain-smoking, half-Chickasaw, half-hillbilly mountain boy who wore his camouflage cap over his shock-white and military-trim hair and his checkered flannels tucked neat into his straight-legged blue jeans, who smelled like tobacco, coffee, engine oil, and Brylcream, who was born in a company shack to a coal miner and a boarding school runaway, who left his job in a West Virginia mine in the waning days of the war to sort through those piles of bodies the Germans left behind, and who moved to Baltimore in the late forties to escape the maw of the coalfields that swallowed his father only to lose himself first in the bellies of the oil tankers and naval destroyers and then later in the union honky-tonks out on Sparrows Point. One of my first memories of the man is of him pulling a wad of old photos from a desk drawer and handing them to me. “Here,” he said, grinning. The top picture, one that is still cemented in my mind, showed him standing in front of a heap of bone and flesh. The caption on the back read, *Dencil, 1945, at Dachau with bodies*. Elsewhere in the stack were images with captions such as *Dencil, 1945, at Rhine with German whore*, and *Dencil, 1949, at Shenandoah National Park*.

The man was almost comic book in his domestic evils—a cheater, a child beater, a drinker. He once tied my then seven-year-old father to the hitch of his pickup and dragged him down the North Point Road for leaving a baseball mitt out in the rain. He is also reported to have fathered a handful of half-brothers and half-sisters for my father Robert and my uncle Lewis, who in turn gave me an undetermined number of unmet cousins who now stretch from Dundalk.
to Catonsville. He hated my mother so much for marrying his “fairy” of a son that I never once saw him speak a word to her on our Sunday visits to their small acreage out in the county, nor to my older sister Jane, either because she resembled my mother or just simply because she would one day be a woman too. When he died a few weeks into my senior year, he would have left my life as an unfortunate quarter of my genetics—the caveman brow, the dogged hairline, the propensity to cross my legs and slouch, the brooding handsomeness, the weakness for bourbon and late nights and women—if not for the day he asked me to drive him one last time to West Virginia to dig up something he thought he may have buried somewhere on the family mountain.

That summer, seventeen and a recent convert to vegetarianism and organic food, I had the impulse to start my own vegetable garden. In a faraway corner of my grandparents’ seven acres, beyond the shaded reach of black walnuts and pin oaks, I grew just about every vegetable I could buy a packet for at the nearby supply store. I didn’t much know what I was doing—my parents raised Jane and me in Towson and my only experience growing food as a child was picking two or three tomatoes off a potted plant on the porch or watching watermelons volunteer under the azaleas where we spat our seeds. But I’d seen from a distance the plants in my grandfather’s garden, and tasted the fresh beets, cucumbers, and pole beans my grandmother pickled and canned, and after two summers of missing that sight and the food that came with it, my grandfather too old for all that stooping in the sun, I decided to put in my own crops. I enlisted the help of my father to get the beds prepared and seeds sown, and by the time mid-summer came around, when all I had to do was keep it watered and weeded and pick the vegetables when they resembled something from a grocery store, I had things pretty much under control.

I visited several times a week, on days I didn’t have shifts at the multiplex sweeping up popcorn after summer blockbusters. My grandfather never said much about what I was doing,
only grunted when I’d first asked permission and grunted a greeting each day when I came in to
wash my hands or use the toilet. Some days, if the Orioles weren’t playing an afternoon game,
he’d take his coffee to the porch and stare from across the field. I’d stand to stretch my back or
carry an orchard box of tomatoes or squash to the end of a row and I’d catch sight of him, his
cigarette burning in his right hand, his cap pulled just above his eyes, and his legs crossed so that
his jeans rose up to reveal his loose black dress socks slipping down his pale bone legs.

His health had deteriorated in the last few years, and that summer was the first he’d been
confined to the house. A pack or two a day since the war and three decades breathing in the
asbestos insulation torn from the ships’ caverns had caught up with him, and he’d fall into a
coughing fit if he did anything more strenuous than reach for the remote or a book of matches. It
was the sound of his hacking, which resounded shallow and wet from the screened-in porch and
across the dry summer grass that alerted me of his otherwise silent watch.

After rearing two boys and living under my grandfather’s thundering command, my
grandmother had spent most of the last decade away from home. That summer she was making
her first run for the 7th district seat in the House of Delegates. A big billboard protruded from the
southern end of the property, along the county road and visible from the shopping center that’d
gone up just a few years before, that read, “Vote with Hart: Elect Elaine for District 7.” I’d pass
the sign before turning up the long gravel road in my decade-old Pontiac with the busted
passenger door and phantom turn signals. Towards the end of summer, when peppers and
tomatoes and melons were full force, I passed Grandpa’s nurse leaving the house. The road was
so narrow I had to pull to the right, scraping my roof on the low hanging crabapple. Angie rolled
down her window and so did I.

“Gardening today, Ethan?”
“That’s the plan.”

“I took a walk out there. Everything looks nice.”

“You want any veggies? I have way too many zucchini.”

“Next time.”

“How is he?” I motioned towards the house.

“Every day I take his cigarettes and every day he’s got another pack. It’s not you buying them, is it?”

“Not me.”

“Well, be careful. Today he’s in a mood.”

Angie let off her brakes and a rock shot from her tire and plinked against my door panel. I parked the car and went inside. On the kitchen table a cloud of fruit flies orbited around a half dozen tomatoes I’d set out the day before. I swatted at the bugs and then covered the fruit with a dish towel.

Little about my grandparents’ place had changed since I was a kid. He’d bought the place when my dad and his brother Lewis were just out of the house and when Bethlehem money was good and America still produced steel and the suburbs hadn’t yet crept this far into the county. The place was one story, three bedrooms, a den, and a kitchen with a wood stove for heat and an ancient refrigerator with one of those stubborn metal handles. A walk-in pantry that kept shelves of canned food from the garden, pints of purple concord jelly and yellow peaches and quarts of pickled beets and sauerkraut, now held an apocalypse-quantity of store-bought beans, soup, and rice. A deep freezer that once kept massive slabs of venison in plastic bags now held vacuum-sealed cuts of factory farmed beef, pork, and chicken—in such inferior quantities to the wild meat I remember in my childhood and surrounded by opaque layers of ice that hadn’t been
defrosted and cleared in years. In the den the television with the old channel knob and aluminum foil bunny ears showed a subpar reception of the Orioles at New York.

In a dark corner of the room, beneath the fluttering curtains yellowed by cigarette smoke, sat Huw, my grandfather’s red-ored Amazon. The parrot crab-walked on the wooden perch inside his cage and cocked his head to judge me with one solid black eye. My grandfather bought him from a pet shop after returning from the war, and as the story goes, sat the cage on his lap and taught the bird a few vulgar insults on the train ride back home. He was a mean son-of-a-bitch and liked to bite at your hand if you tried to feed him straight instead of placing the seeds or fruit in his bowl and backing away. He fascinated me as a child—the strange, bright animal and sole object of my grandfather’s affection—but he also terrified me with his mock-human cackling and the eerie cocking of his head. My grandfather hadn’t any idea how long birds lived when he bought the thing on an impulse, and now here he was, all these decades later, chewing on sesame seed and squawking at visitors. I stood in the doorway for a moment, long enough to see A-Rod smash a three run-homer to give the Yanks a 5-1 lead.

“Coffee,” my grandfather said, lifting his cup.

“Coffee, woman,” echoed Huw.

I wasn’t sure whether he thought he was talking to me or Angie, but I took and filled his cup from the lukewarm pot in the kitchen. I handed Grandpa the coffee and took a seat on the sofa beside his worn yellow armchair. Dencil Hart, my grandfather, had never been much of a talker. In fact, until about the age of seven I was convinced the man was deaf and mute because he kept completely silent on our Sunday visits and wouldn’t look me in the eye for my obligatory hellos and goodbyes. When forced by my parents or grandmother to show him my straight As, or to politely invite him to see me play the trumpet or graduate from one color karate belt to the
next, he’d stare and smoke in my face until I folded the report card, fundraising pamphlet, or my unsure arms and walk backwards out of the room. Over the years he’d warmed up in unexpected increments, making offhanded comments about becoming a man, about baseball or the war, but had never once sustained much of a conversation with me.

When the Orioles reliever ended the inning, stranding a Yankee on second, he leaned forward and set his cup on the table.

“I need you to take me somewhere.”

He looked at the coffee, not me. I shifted in my seat.

“Angie said no more cigarettes.”

“Can you drive stick?”

“No.”

He muttered to himself and drew his hand across his face. Despite his general lack of activity, he kept himself military-sharp, his white hair always trim and never a whisker on his face, his flannel shirt and blue jeans ironed every morning. Finally, he met my eyes.

“We’ll take yours then,” he said, and then pushed himself out of his chair and stood. He patted his chest and pants until he found the pack hidden in his back pocket. He withdrew a cigarette, one of those unfiltered Lucky Strikes, struck a match, and brought the flame to his mouth. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Why do you ask so many damn questions?” After a few drags though, he told me. “I figure I ought to see home once more.”

“Here?”

“No, not here. West Virginia.”
“You want to go to West Virginia? Now?”

“When else?”

“Should we call someone?”

He dismissed the suggestion by swatting at the air and I followed him to the door, watching him shuffle his feet from the hardwood of the den to the linoleum of the kitchen and then down the gravel to my Pontiac. I had to heave my shoulder from the inside to get the damaged passenger door to open, and then after he got in, had to throw my hips against it for it to close again. Without a word he pointed down the drive, and then north on the county road to the highway.

We drove in silence. The A/C didn’t work so we kept the windows down, though his side wouldn’t roll all the way, since the dent from my most recent collision obstructed the pane from fully descending, so there was a kind of vibrating going on inside the car, the wind entering and exiting unevenly. I turned the radio to the station with the same 90s rock that had been playing since I was ten, but when we got out of the sprawl the radio cracked with static and we returned to silence. He rolled up his window and I followed his lead. He cleared his throat and I expected some further explanation, but he sat with his hands folded in his lap. I waited for a long time before he began to speak.

“There’s something I want to find,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see it if we find it, won’t you?”

I agreed and knew not to say anymore.

I’d only ever been to the family land in West Virginia once, when I was a boy of maybe eight or nine. My memory of the trip is faint, colored like a dream where the people are
interchangeable and everything in the room not quite pinned down or permanent. But I do remember Elma Means, the dying great-grandmother we’d gone to see: Elma was a full-blooded Indian, which my father said accounted for our dark hair and stern faces—of what tribe no one would know until my grandfather’s brother combed the National Archives in College Park, since Elma never told anyone, not even her husband Bobby Hart, where and who she was before the boarding school. I remember my father knocked for minutes before his Aunt Patsy opened the door, just another old woman that I didn’t know at the time, and she led us past a small kitchen into the main room. We sat there for a few long hours, the adults retelling old stories. Both couches were upholstered in plastic and I occupied myself staring at tears and discolorations in the wallpaper. I remember my mother wouldn’t let Jane or me run off into the woods. “You’ll come back covered in ticks and snake bites,” she said. And I remember that Elma scared me—she spoke with a kind of growl, and didn’t pay me the attention I expected from someone attached to the title “grandmother.” Before we left Aunt Patsy gave Jane and me birthday cards with five dollar bills and told us she hoped we’d visit whenever we liked. They made me give Elma a kiss on the lips, and I remember the texture to her breathing, and how, after I pulled away, she grabbed my hands and held my gaze.

“Robbie’s boy, huh?” she said. “Okay.”

My grandfather interrupted my daydreaming with the first question he’d ever asked about my life or interests. “You like the garden?” he said.

“I do.”

“When I’se a kid, we use to grow and put up all our own food. Didn’t need store food, except for flour and corn meal. And pinto beans, I guess.”

“What’d you grow?”
"Bit of everything. Had hogs, too. Used to cut honey bees out of their trees. I’d hunt mushrooms, sang."

"You sang?"

"No, damnit. Gin-seng." He pronounced the word in two long syllables. "I sold it in town to buy cigarettes. It makes a Chinaman’s prick hard. That’s what they say."

The far-reaching sprawl had dropped away and farmland was rolling off from the road. I had no idea how long it would take to get where we were going.

"All anybody eats anymore is this store food," he continued. "I figure it’s what will get me in the end."

"Not the cigarettes?"

"You got a girlfriend?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Well, I had one, but she’s going to school in New York next year."

"New York," he repeated with such disgust I thought he might spit on my dash. "Take it from me, don’t ever get married. Worse decision I ever made."

"You know," I said, changing the subject, "I’d like to grow my own food one day."

"Never in a million years would I expect someone your age to say that."

"I think I might study agriculture in college," I told him.

"Agriculture," he said, in the same tone he used for New York. "It’s called farming and you don’t do it in school."

After that we fell into silence again. But in that span of just a few minutes, more words had passed between my grandfather and me than had in the first seventeen years of my life. Never had he shown interest in my existence or offered personal advice, no matter how unsound. The welcome sign for West Virginia appeared ahead and he reached forward and set his hands
on the dash, like he was leaning into his old home and away from the one that had kept him for the last sixty years.

We eventually passed through Charleston, the gold dome of the capitol building lifted over the eastern edge of the city, and exited the interstate to follow a series of local highways. On some, I had to slow dramatically at every turn, when an exposed rock face jutted into the road and the path careened to match a hidden creek below. He gave sparse but clear directions, often saying nothing, until pointing to a junction and muttering, “Left” or “Right,” or just pointing and saying, “Uh huh.” We turned onto a road called Big Ugly Creek, and the name surfaced in my memory.

“We’re close,” I said.

He grunted. At first Big Ugly Creek was little more than a ditch off the driver’s side, gouged into the mowed lawns of the sprawling lots, their houses set towards the rear where the valley met the foot of the mountain. The creek grew in size and the valley widened, and then my grandfather pointed up a random gravel road.

“Used to be some McComas up there,” he said.

“You knew them?”

“They was my grandmammy’s people. Yeah, we knew each other.”

“Are there lots of other Harts around here?”

“Ain’t no other Harts,” he said. “My daddy was a McKitrick, and his daddy was from Scotland.”

“So where’d the name come from?”

“He made it up, I guess. Had to be somebody new in a hurry. Easier to do that back then.”
I wanted to ask him more but he pointed up a dirt road and I followed his direction. The road climbed and my tires lifted the dry yellow dust into the air. I had to slow to cross a small creek that went directly through the road, and my bumper dug into the dirt ahead. We drove for a few minutes with no houses on either side, just a riot of green hanging off the narrowing mountains, which were now closing in over us, and when we came to a one-story prefab with an off-white façade, black shutters, and two windows on either side of the front door, I had the faintest recognition of the place. I started to pull into a small paved area next to a boxey Volvo, but my grandfather said, “No,” and pointed up a steep path of ancient gravel.

I turned, driving over tall weeds and navigating the washed-out road, until we reached a small tarpapered shack in obvious disrepair. Wild grapes choked the banister and sumac struck through the crooked floorboards, and an old whitewashing on the banisters and window trim had long cracked away. The shack stood at the back of a small level clearing, and only a few steps from the door sat a graveyard hemmed in by chicken wire. I hadn’t any clear memory of the place, but sensed I’d been here before; it was as if I could have drawn or conceived its layout from my subconscious, as if the specifics of the house and small gravestones were imprinted into a memory deeper than my life.

The house tilted to the left and the porch slanted to the right, and through a broken window pane I could see dishes left to dry in a rack, for I don’t know how many years. We got out of the car and my grandfather took in the surroundings. He pointed out a large tree a few steps away from the front of the house. Its bark was black and riddled with scars and its gnarled branches swept out across the grass and toward the house and then away over a small hill on the other side.

“Used to climb that damn near every day,” he said.
“What kind of tree is it?”

“Hickory nut. You can eat them.”

“Did you?”

“Sometimes.”

He ascended the porch, shook the doorknob, and then entered the house. Wasps moved freely from a hole between the peeling tarpaper and eaves, and I ducked to avoid them when I followed. He stood at the center of the main room in the faint light that filtered through the clouded panes and cobwebs. The floorboards beneath protested every step I made forward. To the right was a kitchen; or, more appropriately, the place in the room where all the things you’d find in a kitchen were found—plastic washtub set in a sink, dish rack with dishes, and a two burner stove with cabinets above. A small bed was tucked into the far corner of the room, but its mattress had been shredded by whatever animal might do such a thing, and the floor there and everywhere else was covered in stuffing, dust, and mouse shit. Besides the bed the room held a chest of drawers, a bookshelf, a couch, a small round table with two wooden school chairs, and a stove with a pipe leading through the ceiling. There were also various cardboard boxes stacked in spare corners of the room, poorly integrated into the otherwise simple and minimal interior.

“My daddy built this house,” he said. “John and Patsy were born on a bed right there in that back bedroom.”

“Were you born here, too?”

“Nah. I’se born in one of the camps.”

He turned a few times, took off his cap and ran his fingers through his ghost white hair, and then replaced it on his head and went to the chest of drawers. While he dug through a top drawer, he coughed with his mouth closed and then spit on the hardwood floor. The green lump
of mucus shined in the dust. He found a set of keys and then grunted for me to follow him outside. A small shed was attached to the back of the house, and he instructed me to open it up and find a shovel.

“And watch for snakes,” he said. “Use to have a copperhead nest round here.”

Though there was no lock, the rusted hinges had to be forced open with a kick. I stepped in cautiously, letting my eyes adjust to the dark and then saw a pile of tools leaning against the wall close to the door. One of the shovel’s blades seemed eaten with rust, so I dug through and found a second, more intact tool. I stepped outside and showed it to him and he nodded and began walking up the road from the house. It led past the graveyard and straight up the hill; at some point, years ago perhaps, the path may have been wide enough for a pickup, but now pine saplings and hawthorn shot up in the wheel ruts and every ten feet a mudslide had washed out whatever gravel was once laid. A stream trickled on our right and I swatted a horsefly from my calf. It was slow going, and only a minute in my grandfather resumed the cough he’d begun in the house. I moved toward him but he held me off with a raised hand and dabbed his lip with a yellow handkerchief from his pocket and came away with more of the green mucus, this time streaked with blood.

“Get on,” he said.

After fifteen minutes and three coughing fits we made it to where the road ended in a small meadow. Grass grew as high as my waist and at the opposite end, before the trees and incline began again, a rusted out single-wide trailer hid amongst the grass and tall daisies. A couch and cook stove stood beside the trailer, and off to our right a maple grew from the bed of a blue Chevy. The truck was obviously decades old, but I knew so little about trucks that it was the
height of the maple that suggested how long it had been since anyone had disturbed a thing up here.

“That’s mine,” my grandfather said, gesturing to the trailer, “Bought it after the war. The truck’s Johnny’s.”

John, my grandfather’s brother, I remember mostly because my family had never stopped talking about how he walked out of my sister’s seventh birthday party, stole my grandfather’s truck, and never returned. My grandfather parted the weeds and moved onward, not in the direction of the trailer or truck but farther on into the trees. Soon we were climbing without any clear path, him taking one small step at a time. He fell twice more into coughing fits and on the second had to sit down. His face had gone white and purple and he had soaked his flannel in sweat. Positioning himself on a fallen trunk, he breathed through his open mouth. I waited, not offering help or asking questions, and then he reached into his pocket and handed me the keys from the dresser. He motioned up the hill with a tilt of his head.

“Not too much farther that way you’ll come to this boulder, big and mossy, like it fell out of nowhere. At that keep going through to this rotted out chestnut, big thing. It’s dead, but still big. Just farther on, no more than a few feet from the tree, you dig. If you find a box, probably a foot or so underground, this key will open it.”

“What’s in the box?” I asked.

“I don’t remember.”

I stood there with the shovel and the key, understanding his directions but unsure of how to follow them. He told me to go and so I did. Sure enough, less than a minute straight ahead, the way up now more of a hands-and-knees scramble, I found the boulder. It came to about my breast and rested in the hole left by a root clump yanked from the ground. The fallen tree didn’t
seem that old but there was no other boulder in sight anything like this one. Straight on from there I searched for the chestnut, not sure what a chestnut looked like, especially a dead one. When I didn’t find it, I doubled back to the boulder and tried again. I did this twice more, keeping track of the boulder to keep from getting lost. It was late in the day now and a cool air fell over the mountains, but summer light held strong in the sky. I was afraid of what my grandfather would say if I returned without using the shovel, so I kept on until I recognized the trees and their hold to the hillside. I was on a return trip to the boulder when I heard a distant crack and felt the ground shift beneath me. The trees quivered, and birds I hadn’t before seen shattered and lifted themselves into the sky. The quaking lasted around twenty seconds, and while it did I kept my gaze uphill for falling trees. The movement stopped and I returned to check on my grandfather.

He was on the same trunk where I left him, staring off absently.

“Did you feel that earthquake?”

“That wasn’t no earthquake,” he said. “Just Arch Coal.”

“What’s that?”

“They work a surface job on the other side here.”

“Coal mining?” I asked.

He nodded. “Find anything?”

I told him I hadn’t, but that I had tried. He nodded again and worked himself to his feet.

“Want me to check again?”

“Nah, we’ll leave her alone.”

“Who?”

“My mother,” he said.
“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She’s buried up there somewhere.”

I stared at his back as he started down the hill. I’d been on a mission to dig up a woman almost ten years dead and had no idea. He didn’t offer any more conversation on the slow march down, and when we got to the graveyard by the house I asked if he wanted to visit.

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

He had me replace the keys and we got back in the car.

Before driving back, we stopped in the house at the bottom of the dirt road so that he could get water. He went inside without a knock and walked right through a living room where an old woman I figured to be his sister, my great aunt Patsy, was watching television. He poured himself a drink from the faucet and I stood in the doorway.

“Dencil?” she called into the kitchen, shutting off the TV with a remote but not getting up from her seat. “What ya’ll doing here?”

“Water tastes like shit.”

“I don’t drink from that no more. It’s gone bad.”

“I drove him up this morning,” I said, and she turned to me.

She got to her feet. The top of her head was bald and through her nightgown I could see the soft and thinning flesh. She opened her arms and I took a few steps to receive them.

“How you holding out, Dencil?” she asked.

She held out her arms to him so long that he obliged, lifting an arm around her back.

“How long’s it been?”

“Can’t figure,” he said.
They were both quiet then, each in their own senile haze. He removed his cap and gave his hair a finger-combing before replacing it and heading for the door.

“You tell your father hello,” she told me. “And visit anytime you like.”

I told her I would and then she stood in the doorway to watch us leave, not waving, just stepping barefoot onto the concrete porch and holding open the screen door.

Back at his house, I walked him to the edge of his bed and watched as he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off his boots. He flicked on a night stand. In the orange light of the old bulb his face was pale, almost the same color as his hair.

“Well, alright then,” he said. “That’s enough for now.”

I said goodnight and went into the den. Huw stirred as I approached to throw the blanket over his cage. As I was leaving the house, my grandmother and I met in the long driveway. I pulled aside to let her pass but she got out of her car and came to my window.

“Get out of there and give me a hug,” she said.

I put the car in park and we embraced, my headlights shining on a cluster of tall milkweed and hers on the clapboard exterior of the house. She smelled like perfume, sweat, and red wine. She was only a few years younger than my grandfather, but she managed to make the gap look like twenty years instead. She wore a dark-colored pant-suit and her heels sank in the gravel. A few months before I’d appeared in one of her television ads with Jane and my cousin Rebecca, who wore her naval uniform for the shoot; my grandmother told the voters that she cared about Maryland’s future and the success of the young people. They made me wear a tie.

“You’re here late,” she said.

“I was spending some time with Grandpa,” I said.
“Did he get you drunk? Make you buy him cigarettes?” she asked.

“No, we just went for a drive.”

“Well, that’s something.” When she let me out of the hug, she held my hands and stared through the dark into my face. “I was schmoozing with donors. I probably shouldn’t have been driving.”

I shrugged and she laughed. “Whatever you do,” she said, “don’t become anything like your grandfather or me. We’re a mess.” She laughed again and then told me to go home. I didn’t see her again for weeks.

For the rest of the summer my grandfather never said another word about West Virginia and soon I stopped wondering about our strange mission there. The summer crops died out and school started and my visits were reduced to weekends. He still watched from the porch, his cigarette and his coffee, his cap over his eyes, but he offered even less conversation than he had before. On a Sunday morning late that October, days before my grandmother would win her election, I went to find my grandfather when he didn’t show to his post on the porch. Inside the house Huw called maniacally from the den. I passed the door and went into the bedroom where my grandfather was in his bed, still. Before I touched him I knew that he was dead.

I didn’t cry, gasp, or call anyone. The bird continued to shout for me in a regular, measured shriek, and I reached out to touch the man but then pulled my hand back and stuck it in my pocket. Never having directly encountered death, my response has always surprised me: I took up his pack of cigarettes from the bed stand, went to the porch, and smoked my very first cigarette, looking east over the field I’d worked all summer, most of the vines and stalks gone brown and empty. My head went light with the smoke so I threw it into his pale of sand and rain
water and walked across the dead grass, past the Chinese chestnut and the trio of elms, and into the winter squash beds. Pumpkins and butternuts were plump and giving, and I took the knife from my pocket and sliced the cords that connected them to the plant. I walked the row, a bed on either side, and cut every ripe fruit. I imagined myself a doctor, severing dozens of newborns from their mothers. Then I drove my car into the field—something I had never done—and loaded the trunk with the harvest.

When I got home my father was reading the Sun at the kitchen table, the same thing he’d done every Sunday for as long as I could remember. I set a large pumpkin in front of him and told about my grandfather. He sighed and folded his paper.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel,” he said.

“He was your father,” I said, trying to comfort him. I had never tried to comfort my father before. “It’s a big deal.”

He touched his fingers lightly to his face, his weekend stubble of a beard.

“I guess I’m not going into work tomorrow,” he said. Then he stood up and asked me for a hug.

A week after we put Dencil Hart in the graveyard at Big Ugly, on a sunny day in September, the mountains just beginning to catch the scents of the autumn, my father got a phone call from a lawyer about the will. From the living room I could see the cord of the phone stretched from the wall to where he sat at the kitchen table. Waves pulsed through the line with his sudden movements. “Okay,” he said, over and over. “Really?”

Eventually he hung up and stood in the doorway. Jane switched off the television.
“Well, Ethan,” he said. “On your eighteenth birthday you will become the proud owner of one hundred acres in Lincoln County, West Virginia.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father left you his half of Big Ugly.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Apparently he made the change earlier this summer.”

“What did Grandma get?” I asked.

“The money from the life insurance. She still has her house, of course.”

“What’d I get?” asked Jane.

My father shook his head and shrugged. “Same as me. Nothing. Ethan, he also left you his guns, his pickup, and his parrot,” he said.

“The bird?” I said.

“Fucking sexist,” said Jane.

My father shrugged and then took the remote from where it sat on the coffee table. He switched on the television and we said nothing more of the matter. It would be years before I returned to Big Ugly, and for my last year of high school and a while in college I mostly forgot about the place. Sometimes it’d serve as an anecdote to share at parties—the fact that I owned a handsome chunk of land in the middle of nowhere bequeathed to me inexplicably by a grandfather that had never shown any interest in my life, bypassing the normal chain of command that would have left it to Patsy, my grandmother, or even my father—but for a long while the place was useless to me. Until it wasn’t—until I decided that it was all I had.
Jake, Brett, and I are face down in the still-thick woods near the clear-cut, taking cover under the sparse winter brush, and have been for the past two hours, waiting for a security guard to return to his pickup parked on the mining road and give the signal to commence the blasting. He’s two hours past schedule, though, and we’re all eager to continue on and drop our water and backup gear at the predetermined stash spot and hightail it to our first posts of the morning.

“We should just go,” Jake says.

“He can’t see us,” Brett says. “That defeats the purpose.”

“They’ll know we’re here soon enough,” Jake says. “He couldn’t catch us anyway. We’re faster.”

“He’s got a truck,” I say. “He can catch us.”

“Not on this terrain,” Jake says. “This—” He sweeps his hands around at the rocky, debris-ridden hillside “—is our advantage.”

“Just wait,” Brett says.

“What if there’s no guard with that truck? What if they just start blasting?” I ask.

“You don’t just leave a truck,” Jake says. “Who would leave a truck?”

“He’s still out there,” says Brett. He turns over from his stomach and leans against the pack clipped to his body. Brett faces the pale blue winter sky and hums a Sam Cooke tune from the morning. I burp coffee and bacon, checking my watch. They’re only two hours from the scheduled blasting and we’re two hours off schedule, far from the beginning of the routes we’re meant to run today. We knew there would be a guard up here before the blasting, but we never knew they’d cut it so close. Jake stands up.
“I’m going to my spot and I suggest you get to yours. None of this is going to work if we don’t spread out over this mountain and soon. And if we fuck our schedule up now we fuck the whole week.”

“Man,” I say, “hold up a minute.”

“No, we have to go. Follow me.”

“Okay,” Brett says, and stands up. As the youngest, I’m often outvoted like this.

I get up, wary of the truck and the potential eyes somewhere along the road, but we shoulder our gear and hike along the road. A smaller path fit only for foot or ATV forks to the left and the road continues right and back down the mountain. North of the fork we find a felled oak, split down the middle. The forest here is inconstant, spotty, and though I’d never been west or seen a forest after fire, this is how I imagine it—wasted, empty, the morning sky punctured by the desperate wisps of surviving trees that appear to be reaching for the sky and attempting take off with whatever limbs remain. All around us the severed trunks from the feller buncher the loggers ran up here late spring poke out of the ground like some prehistoric beaver had his run of the place. A few small, knotty trees of undesirable size or species have been left to remain and die with the topsoil and rock beneath. Maybe if this place is around next spring, which, realistically, it won’t be, pines and maples might start to claim the vacated ground and save the soil that hasn’t already eroded from almost a year of rain without cover or live roots. But all this soil will be in the streams by then—choking out whatever wildlife still clings to southwestern West Virginia—and the only thing green over all this will be the chemical moss they spray so that they can espouse reclamation. We can see the mine from here: It’s a sprawling and flattened expanse with a few steepened ridges jutting in almost like manufactured mesas. The Hart land is west of here along this artificial edge. When Patsy got the letter in the mail that they’d be
blasting less than two miles from her home, she showed it to me and told me I better take everything breakable off the shelves and check the trees over our houses for loose limbs.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” I asked. “It’s going to mess with the foundation of the house.”

“Do,” she said. “What do you mean do? This is West Virginia, Ethan.”

We unload our extra water, ammunition, food, and batteries. We have five hundred rounds each for our bright-orange Orion breech-loaded, twelve-gauge flare guns. We’ll carry one hundred rounds at a time and shoot off four once every hour at staggered twenty minute intervals. This way at the site below, from the road, and for whoever they send up here chasing us down, they’ll see four flares go off every twenty minutes for the next six days. At night, when we’ve planned to stagger our five-hour sleeping blocks, each of the two persons still on the run will have to unload every forty minutes until it’s his shift to sleep. That means for six days—from Monday to Saturday—they’ll have their thousand-some tons of explosive set and ready to blow, money burning up in those floodlights and in the machinery below and on all the miners sitting on their asses waiting to work, and one more week that this chunk of Carbow Spruce Mountain still exists on earth. The coal trucks will idle. The trains will remain parked at the mouths of the hollers, their cars hollow and waiting. They might even have to fly a helicopter up here looking for us. We’ll create a jam that echoes up the supply chain and hurts the company everywhere. And, best of all, Arch Coal will lose tens of thousands every day they can’t work, and so by the end of this week, our little hike in a southern corner of the Hobet surface mine the shape of a mucus rocket—the last hike anyone will ever take on this mountain—will cost Arch upwards of half a million. More than any fine ever paid for violating the repeatedly violated EPA
regulations. More than any settlement paid for destroying the homes and communities and health of local residents or the settlements paid for neglecting and abusing their own workers.

And then after this mountain, we have five more planned and ready to go. Two in eastern Kentucky, one in the corner of Virginia, and two more here in West Virginian coal country. If we strike long and hard, maybe the giant will feel something.

Besides the flares we’re carrying four liters of water, five pounds of nuts, seeds, dried fruit, and jerky, radios and batteries, a cellphone each, which we’ll use at our highest peaks to touch base with Kate, extra socks, First Aid kits for blisters and cuts and sprains, sunscreen because even though it’s winter we’ll have no cover most of the day, zero degree mummy bags compressed to the size of watermelons, ponchos, multi-tools and lengths of rope, headlamps, compasses, and USGS topographical maps marked with our determined locations. Our bags amount to about thirty-five pounds each—and that’s after we’ve dumped the extra gear—all of which we’ll be running up and down this mountain the next six days. We’ll be sticking mostly to the clear-cut, as that’s the area with the explosives set, but we’ll be using the still-forested land on the periphery, too, as it both provides more cover and is technically in the blast zone, which means they can’t blast if any human is present.

We stuff the extra gear into a dry bag and wedge it between the split oak and a rock, out of sight of the road, but easy enough to find each day. For a moment we study the three directions the road travels from this intersection, as if we might learn something we don’t already know, and then we face each other and shake hands.

“Gentlemen,” Jake says. “I guess I’ll see you next week.”

“Wait,” I say, “Come in here.”

I put my hand on each of their shoulders and bow my head.
“What’re you doing, Hart? Praying?”

“No,” I say. “Let’s just take a moment.”

Jake obliges and we lean our heads into each other. We’re silent for a moment and in my head I’m running through the checklist of gear and the schedule and map and thinking all the time of everything that might go wrong. That’s when we turn at the soft humming of a motor and see a miner in a jumpsuit barreling down the smaller path on a muddy red ATV. We all drop to the ground as he passes and turns right at the fork in the direction of the abandoned pickup.

“There’s our guard,” Brett says.

“Never been a better time,” says Jake, and he stands up and brushes himself off.

“Best of luck,” Brett says.

We pull our arms into the now lighter packs and set off in opposite directions. We’ve got about thirty minutes to get to our first points and start with the scheduled firings. Jake takes off without another word downslope and in direction of the mine and Brett heads along the jagged path from which the ATV just came. The most direct route to my first point is the mining road, in the direction the truck was facing.

I walk in brisk strides, the pack digging into my lower back, careful of my footing on the washed-out, gullied road. The sandy, chalky color of the site I keep on my left. It’s a difficult thing not to just stare at, knowing what it’s supposed to be and how quickly it went to ruin. Modern satellite images show the mountain without any surface mining apparent, but in just a few years Arch has managed to mutilate the northern face of Carbow Spruce, tearing at it from the first plateaus to get into the lower seams and then blasting their way up. I make out a dragline excavator standing in wait in the middle distance, its maw sky-high and hungry for earth.
Before long a truck comes up the road and I scramble for cover in the brush. There’s nothing large to hide behind, so I choose one of the thicker stumps and lay flat on the ground, banking on the effectiveness of my camouflage. The truck passes without slowing down, the driver of the ATV now in the truck and the ATV now in the bed. Once he’s made his way around the bend I stand and continue down the road after the truck, only slower than before. Then I hear a voice behind me. I turn.

There’s a second miner on foot. He’s already got his radio out.

“You,” he shouts, pointing at me, “What’re you doing?”

I run. North from the road in direction of my first point. I leap over a fallen trunk, stumble on my landing but keep going. The guy follows, yelling numbers into his radio. Ahead is a ravine, where maybe water used to flow, and normally I’d scramble down and up but I have good speed and I’ve been training with Jake and I take the whole thing in one jump. Before I know it I’m on the other side and up and running. I slow and turn and the guy is already winded, one hand on his knees and just making it to the far bank of the ravine. In five minutes I’ve made a few wild switchbacks and lost the guy completely. I can’t hear the truck in the distance or the ATV making its way. With the road to my right I have a general idea of my location. I take out the map and compass and find my way to the first point.

I remove my radio from the head of my pack and press in the talk button.

“This is Carolina Parakeet,” I say, almost out of breath. “Sighted by Dementor on foot but lost him. At point. Over.”

“10-4 says the Bison.”

“10-4 says the Red Wolf.”
At the underside of a ledge, an exposure of solid mud and tufts of dry grass, I squat down so that I’m hidden from anyone above. We’re calling this Operation Mountain Ghosts. Jake thought up the name after I told him about the extinct Carolina parakeet. He’d come to visit me at Big Ugly and saw Huw staring out the window.

“Wouldn’t it be crazy if we had birds like this around here?” said Jake.

“We used to,” I said, and told him about the tropical bird native to Appalachia that went extinct in the early twentieth century because its feathers looked good in hats and farmers considered it a pest.

“We gotta be like ghosts up there,” he later said. “And we’re fighting for the ghosts too.”

We all took codenames of animals gone from these hills—me the Carolina parakeet, Jake the red wolf, and Brett the bison. It made us feel hidden, special, and I think more prepared. We decided to call any security guards or miners Dementors because the _Harry Potter_ series is just about the only thing Jake has ever read.

My heart thunders in my chest and head waiting for the miner to find me, and then, from about two miles west, on the opposite end of the mine, I see the first four flares—Jake—each thirty seconds after the previous, and for the next ten minutes the streaks of smoke drift east with the wind. The sun is clouded over and dim. The air is bone-sharp and empty, and every noise—birds, branches, the mountain settling after its rape—carries over the bare rock.

Ten more minutes pass and my turn arrives. I remove the gun from the side pocket of my pack and dig out four flares. I open the breech, load a flare, cock the gun, turn northwest toward the mine, find a clear path free of snags, and fire. The kickback is just like a .38 and my forearm recoils against my shoulder. A memory of firing Dencil’s twenty-gauge one summer when I was young surfaces from some unknown depth—my grandfather watching from the porch as my
father slings the clay pigeon and I hold the gun, patient like they taught me, squeezing the trigger and shattering the orange pieces over the field. The flare sparks and the smoke cuts through the air. It burns up mid-sky and then drifts back down to earth. I dump my empty cartridge, load again, and fire. I do this twice more until there are four lines of smoke drifting east away from the mine.

I stuff the gun in a side pocket of my bag and head east with the smoke toward the far edge of the clear-cut. As soon as I arrive at my next point I find a good spot to hide and check my watch. Three minutes until Brett’s first turn and more than forty minutes before the next time I have to shoot. I take off my bag, recline against the outcropping, and retrieve a few strips of beef jerky and one of the water bottles. I chew slowly, grinding the meat in my molars, and the sun goes in and out of the clouds. No helicopters yet. No sirens. No platoons of miners scouring the hillside.

A few minutes go by and now Brett is a full minute late. The sky to the west is clear.

He’s five minutes late, then ten.

“Red Wolf to Bison,” Jake says over the radio. “Do you read?”

No response.

“Red Wolf to Bison. Do you read?”

No response.

“Parakeet, you there?”

“Here.”

“Know what’s up?”

“No idea.”

“You see which way that Dementor went?”
“Negative.”

Silence. I’m staring at the sky, waiting for that flare to shoot through. It’s been half an hour now since our last signaling. The blasting is set to commence any minute now.

“Parakeet,” Jake says. “Do you read?”

“I read.”

“New plan,” he says. “Every forty.”

I don’t respond but curse aloud with the radio at my side. This means I’ll only have forty minutes, not an hour, to reach each new point and fire my flares.

“Do you copy, Parakeet? Every forty.”

“I copy, Red Wolf.”

Just then a flare goes off a quarter of a mile farther west from Jake’s last point. Then three more.

“Bison,” I say into the radio. “That you?”

“Negative,” says Jake. “That was Red Wolf. Forty minutes, Parakeet. Forty minutes.”

“Copy.”

“Parakeet,” Jake says. “Meet at stash at 22 hundred. Do you copy?”

“I copy.”

“Over and out.”

I kick at a small stone until I dislodge it from the soil and it goes tumbling downhill and over a ledge. I lean my back against a small cove of leaf litter and wood chips and ready the flare gun. When it’s time to shoot, I’ve had it aimed and in position for a full five minutes. I shoot and reload. Shoot and reload. Four wisps of smoke travel east over the bare winter trees and the
choked-dead mountainscape and then I stand, brush myself off, and hike south uphill to the timbered edge of the clear-cut.
I first met Kate at the intersection of 7th and New York Avenue in downtown Washington on the first day of March. Over the weekend there’d been a youth climate change conference across the street at the Convention Center and on Sunday night a group took a generator and a couple kegs into an abandoned building on the corner and threw an impromptu show. A friend of mine from high school was the drummer. Hundreds of people forced themselves into the small storefront, and though the building had no power, or no one could figure out how to get it on, all the bodies generated enough heat and everyone shed their coats into a massive pile behind a counter that had probably once served as a register.

I’d been drinking for two hours and had to pee. I tried going at the Center but the guard wouldn’t let me in, and I knew all the restaurants in Chinatown would want me to pay for something and that McDonald’s was a fifteen minute walk, and I was drunk and didn’t care so I ducked under some yellow construction tape and went upstairs to find a corner. Drywall hung loose and piles of lumber and sheet metal lay in the center of the hardwood floors. It was dark; the only light came from the streetlamps outside. I didn’t see a bathroom, but there was a line of guys waiting for their turn at a five gallon bucket. I queued up and shared a guilty shrug with the guy in front of me. Right before it was my turn she got in line—a girl with messy black hair and a Dead Kennedys t-shirt and a pierced eyebrow and a red cup of beer. I turned to her.

“Women have to pee, too,” she said.

I laughed and pissed and then left her to the bucket. The cops were outside when I went back downstairs, and pretty soon there was a crowd of us in the intersection forcing the cops to line up and make threats over a megaphone. It started to snow. The flurries swirled violently in the city light against the black of the night.
I was twenty-one then. I was back at Maryland, taking classes after a couple semesters off working as a part-time office assistant at my father’s firm. I’d been angry for months. I opened my eyes and had become aware of the flood of shit in the world: the bulldozing of the Amazon, the ongoing extinction of everything except the boring stuff like deer and raccoons, the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, the overfishing everywhere, the drying up of aquifers worldwide, the droughts, the floods, and of course the blowing up of mountains on the other side of Big Ugly and all across Appalachia. I had to accept that the world with which I’d just become cognizant, that world beyond my everyday life, was disappearing more rapidly than I could discover it.

I didn’t know what I was doing here. But inside, all those kids knew something was wrong and they were mad too, and outside, here were these cops, and I knew they just needed to do their jobs and get us out of the intersection, but I hated them for the uniform they wore and the order they tried to marshal out of chaos. One of the bands, a bluegrass trio with a banjo, fiddle, and washtub bass, had moved to the steps of the storefront and backed the scene with music, though distortion and crash cymbals from my friend’s band drowned out the acoustic guys every time someone opened the door to exit or enter. More cops kept showing up and a lot of people were shouting at each other to stay off the curb or go back inside or to lock elbows and sit in the wet street.

The tension between the two groups, cops and teenagers, felt emotionally palpable, even physical: about six feet existed between the line of protestors and the line of cops, them taking the southern end of the intersection and us blocking the northern. Just when I thought someone might cross into the trenches and unleash whatever madness we were constructing, one side of our crowd fractured and marched on the curb down 7th toward K Street. I was closer to the
building and the cops pushed our weakened mass back onto the sidewalk. In the group leaving I saw the girl from the line for the pee bucket. She turned and shouted back: “We’re going to the White House. Come with us.”

I didn’t know if she was talking to me or not, but I took a step back into the street, almost slipping on the snow-slick pavement. A cop stepped in front of me, his nightstick held at either end to bar my exit.

“Back,” he said.

I stood for a moment challenging him.

“Back,” he said again. “Now.”

I would have pushed forward but I was saving myself for the morning, for the action the next day, where I had been planning and dreaming for weeks of my first arrest for civil disobedience. I had images of King and Gandhi and Peltier, Mandela and Malcolm X and Chavez—in my mind it was that righteous. I reentered the music- and smoke-filled storefront, but it wasn’t long before the cops confiscated the generator and sent everyone home. I rode the last metro train to College Park and then walked two miles to my apartment near Maryland’s campus, wet and drunk and cold and pissed-off excited.

I learned her name the next day. We were standing next to each other with hundreds of others, maybe a thousand, surrounding the coal plant on Capitol Hill. The event had been hyped for months, and I had never done anything of the sort. I’d learned about mountaintop removal coal mining from a sociology professor a few semesters before and after I’d expressed rage in class he started forwarding me e-mails from a dozen different organizations active in the region. Then a few weeks before the conference he sent me the e-mail about this action and told me he’d post
my bail if necessary. The e-mail blasts had promised ten thousand protestors, had called this the largest action against climate change in American history, but then two days before the event Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced the power plant would switch from coal to natural gas and the news began portraying us as insatiable rabble-rousers. Now it was the coldest day of the year and most of us didn’t know exactly what we were protesting anymore. But I wouldn’t be so easily deflated, and so I joined the highest risk affinity group, tasked with the privilege and responsibility of blocking the gates. I had my professor’s phone number written in Sharpie on my forearm so that I could call him that afternoon from jail.

I was also underdressed for the cold. In the gray slush of the streets from last night’s snow, the steam from smokestacks at my back, the railyard and highway to my left and the tip of the Washington Monument visible far to my right, I blew warmth into my hands and hopped in place to keep my blood flowing to my toes and ears. We were three rows of protestors deep, and in the march from the park a few blocks away to the plant, Kate and I had been incidentally lined up beside each other. She was more appropriately dressed, wearing one of those puffy arctic jackets, Doc Martens, and a fur trapper’s hat. We listened to whatever speaker had the microphone on the distant stage—a platform hitched to a pickup and a PA system plugged into a generator in the truck’s bed—and chanted when we were meant to chant and cheered when we were meant to cheer.

“Here,” she said to me, after I’d accidentally bumped her in my fidgeting for warmth. She turned out of her backpack and fished out a baguette. “You need calories.”

“Thanks,” I said, and took the loaf from her.

“Also here,” she said, giving me an already activated hand warmer. “Do something with this. You look like you’re going to get hypothermia.”
“I guess I came unprepared.”

She pulled out three more loaves, gave them to nearby protestors, and told them to just pass the bread around.

“Where’d you get all that?” I asked.

“Out of a dumpster in Bethesda,” she said. “I have a bazillion more in my car. I’m staying with my friend who goes to American and we hit a few spots last night. It’s ridiculous compared to what I can get in Charleston.”

“West Virginia?”

She nodded. I told her I owned some land outside of Charleston. She asked me where and when I told her she shrugged.

“I grew up in Wisconsin mostly,” she said. “My dad lives up there. Sometimes I lived with my stepmother in Charleston.”

“I grew up in Baltimore,” I said. “Not far away.”

We shook hands and traded names. Kate Stefanowicz.

“It’s Polish,” she said, and then repeated the name, annunciating each syllable.

I nodded.

“Did I see you peeing last night?” Kate asked.

“You did. Did you march to the White House?”

“I did.”

“And what happened there?”

“We shouted. The cops told us to go home. Eventually we did.”

After the congresswoman from D.C. left the stage they brought on a guy with a guitar to keep everybody entertained. There weren’t nearly as many police as I expected. On the corner
across from the plant a Capitol police paddy wagon was prepared to throw at least a few of us away. But near our line were only three officers. They watched us from their street corner post, talking as if around a water cooler, as if meeting in an elevator. They didn’t shout. They didn’t try to disband us. I’d spent the past summer in my dad’s air-conditioned office in downtown Baltimore finding YouTube videos of the protests surrounding the 2008 Republican National Convention and I had come here expecting them to crack skulls with their batons and throw canisters of tear gas just like they did in the videos from St. Paul. I had expected to be carried away screaming and to find my picture in the paper tomorrow.

After the guitarists was another speaker, and then another. I couldn’t understand much of what they were saying. Everyone was talking. After Kate passed out her bread she passed out cheese, dried fruit, and nuts, also from the dumpster. One of the main organizers, a guy I recognized from the videos about the event, a gray-haired, all-business sort of environmentalist, spoke with a trio of cops. Soon they all nodded their heads and shook hands and the organizer walked over to the stage and took the microphone.

I was chewing on a dried mango when he thanked us all for coming and told us we could go home now. The line immediately began to disband. The cops directed traffic to the nearest metro stop. Most of the protestors were laughing, giddy, and in just a few moments the entrance to the coal plant, which we had been proudly obstructing, was open and clear to operate freely. I don’t know if we’d even caused a minor delay.

“That’s it?” I said to Kate.

“That’s it.”

“What the fuck?”

She shrugged.
“What are we supposed to do now?” I asked.

“We go home.”

Kate had lost track of her friends and so we rode the train together to L’Efant Plaza where we both had to transfer to the green line. Sitting next to each other on the crowded midday train, headed north from downtown, she told me that if I wanted real action against coal, I had to come to Appalachia.

“They aren’t fucking around there,” she said. “It’s more than just climate change there, it’s about cancer and polluted water and whole towns and mountains just wiped off the map. When they block something, they don’t leave until they’re dragged away and everybody’s got court dates and cameras in their faces.”

The train came to a stop at Petworth and Kate quickly said goodbye and hurried off. I was staring ahead blankly at the person in front of me when she smacked the plastic window by my head. Kate was waving frantically and shouting something. Her blonde roots appeared white against her face flushed from the cold. I only had a chance to smile before the train moved again and carried me out from underground to the suburb where I lived.

That could have easily been the last time I saw her, but before I returned to my dorm room she friended me on Facebook, and over the next few weeks we liked each other’s photos and commented on statuses, keeping at least our names alive in the other’s mind. Eventually she invited me to a party at her house in Charleston. I skipped my Friday classes, took my backpack into the dining hall to wrap bagels and pizzas in paper towels for the long drive, and walked across campus to the student lot where the last pickup of Dencil’s life, a gas-guzzling F-150,
towered over the graduation-present Camrys and Satsums the kids drove back to Jersey and Long Island every weekend.

I fed the stereo CDs and made it to Charleston just in time for dinner. She lived in a neighborhood near the university, hemmed into the narrow valley between the ridgeline and the Kanawha River. I parked next to a construction site across from the house. In a raw patch of dirt a crane stood idle over a hole, its shovel tired of chewing at the land for the weekend. Tree stumps lined the curbs and when I got out of my truck I noticed that one had been written on in blue paint. A line I recognized, from *The Lorax*: “WE SPEAK FOR THE TREES FOR THE TREES HAVE NO TONGUE.”

At the given address furniture arranged in the yard held about a dozen people with plates of food. When I met eyes with Kate, she set her plate down and ran into the street. She threw her arms around me and kissed me on the mouth. I froze, and then laughed when she backed away. “Come,” she said. “Eat with us.” She introduced me to those eating, mostly college hipsters and thrift store intellectuals—septum piercings, engineer caps and bandanas, and then a few with long hair, beards, corduroy cut-offs and t-shirts older than the wearer—and then led me inside toward a kitchen counter of brimming pots and frying pans carried over for the potluck. As Kate loaded my plate with quinoa salad, sautéed kale, fry bread, chunky homemade hummus, and roasted potatoes and beets, I studied the main room and floor-to-ceiling trash art and bric-à-brac decorating the walls—photographs of industrial wastelands, a chandelier of clamshells, family portraits from the early twentieth century, a hand-painted anarchy sign on a black flag, a grass skirt around a lampshade, and so on.

Since the protest, Kate had dyed a teal strip into her hair and wore a loose floral pattern dress with padded shoulders. She was barefoot and her feet were filthy.
“This place,” I said, searching for the word, “is awesome.”

“My friend’s band from Kentucky is playing tonight.”

“Thanks for inviting me.”

“Thanks for coming.”

I ate on the couch outside and drifted through conversations until the house filled with people. Most of them were students at the University of Charleston studying English or art or politics and most were in some way involved in the MTR movement, which they repeatedly brought up to me since I had been introduced by Kate as an “anti-coal activist from DC.” I thought of myself as an “ag student from Baltimore County,” but enjoyed the clout the misidentification offered. Kate knew everyone, and though she circled back to me every fifteen minutes to ask me how I was, she floated in and out of a dozen different conversations. I drank freely from the PBR-stocked fridge, and in my many moments of awkward solitude, waiting for conversation or half-listening to a series of singer/guitarists from decent to terrible that were prelude to the main act of the night, I worked myself into a warm and dizzy drunk.

Then came the band: Arthur Leonard at the Furious Ohio. There were ten altogether: a drummer, two fiddles, a banjo, a mandolin, a keyboardist, an upright bassist, a steel guitar, a male acoustic guitarist and a female with a tambourine that shared the lead vocals. Most were barefoot and dressed in torn denim overalls, unbuttoned flannel, flowing dresses, and everyone was white but the lead singer, a black guy with a mess of short dreads and a missing front tooth. The men were bearded and when the women lifted their arms they showed the tufts of armpit hair that claimed they didn’t give a fuck. After their first song all but the singers traded instruments. They started up a song that everyone knew the words to and Kate slid in next to me and took my hands to make me dance. The room stank of human and as we swung about I
collided with the sweaty backs and sides of strangers. Outside the mountains had brought in a chill and now the windows fogged and the floorboards felt as if they might collapse.

After the dancing song, the singer silenced everyone by lifting his hands.

“This next song is a new one and we wrote it about Kentucky, but it’s all the same here in West Virginia. I’m looking out at you all and it’s beautiful and I love you and I know so many of you personally from the fight against coal. Coal is killing us and strangling us and this fight we’re fighting is a beautiful and just and selfless one and I want to thank you all for being together in that.”

The room cheered maniacally and it took a whole minute to settle down again.

“This is for all you young Appalachians,” he said.

The song began with the two fiddles, in a rapid and persisting riff that sounded like punk rock executed through folk instruments. Then the drums and bass came in and he sang:

\[
\text{We bomb the mountains and torture the trees} \\
\text{strangle the streams, the land's on its knees} \\
\text{this ain't a business this is a war} \\
\text{is keeping the lights on worth killing for?} \\
\text{I'm not from Appalachia, but I do live just downstream} \\
\text{and here's what I know for sure} \\
\text{our Kentucky blood runs deeper than coal seams}
\]

They came to an abrupt stop, and in the silence the crowd hollered and lifted their fists. The singer took the mic off its stand and let the guitar hang loose around his neck, and then the whole band struck in simultaneously singing the chorus.

\[
\text{Coal keeps the lights on} \\
\text{but that's not what I know} \\
\text{because the sun has stopped shining} \\
\text{on my old Kentucky home, Kentucky home}
\]

\[
\text{I'm not a coal miner's son} \\
\text{but I know a smoking gun when I see one}
\]
and it's not my job on the line
but I won't stand by as they bury
paradise under another strip mine

By the time they’d reached the chorus again, everyone knew the words and sang with them as
they repeated it over and over until everyone was shouting.

Coal keeps the lights on
but that's not what I know
because the sun has stopped shining
on my old Kentucky home, Kentucky home

They ended their set a song later, after a John Prine cover, but the music had set my heart to a
wild beat and filled my head with such love and anger and potential energy that I took a step
onto the porch and lit a cigarette and tried to make out what stars I could through the light
pollution. I felt as I imagine soldiers must before the battle or hunters before the hunt, when the
body is prepared to endure pain and exhaustion and the road ahead seems long and torturous but
the muscles swell beyond their capacity and every breath of air is charged with electricity. But
for those with no war or hunt, that feeling must be suppressed—it must be imbibed and muzzled
and let loose slowly through cigarettes and beer and staring at blank sky. This is how Kate found
me.

“You alright?” she asked. “You were crying in there.”

“I was?”

She nodded. I pitched my cigarette into a flower pot already full of butts.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said.

It was fully dark now, and I could feel the river before we reached it—dank air moving
west through the valley, a humid stink. We walked the street nearest the river, where the
neighborhood’s largest homes hid under the spring green of oaks and maples, and over their
manicured floral arrangements I could see private marinas along the riverbank.
“Come on,” said Kate, heading up a brick drive. “Let’s go to the river.”

I hesitated, but followed her when she didn’t wait for me. We passed between a four-story brick colonial and a colonnade-fronted mansion, both with private swimming pools in the back, and went straight for a marina guarded by a solitary yacht. Kate walked onto the dock.

“This is private property,” I said.

“I don’t believe in private property,” she replied.

She sat at the end of the dock and hung her feet over the side, the river just a few inches from her bare feet. Across the river spotlights beamed into the Capitol building’s gilded dome. Downriver power plants burned their all-night flames and the bright lights of human habitation crawled up into the distant hillsides. A cellphone tower blinked. I lowered myself next to Kate and hung my legs over the dock.

“Why do you smoke?” she asked.

“I know,” I said. “I want to quit.”

“Then do it,” she said. “Quit. We can’t make all the badness in the world go away but we can control our own behavior.”

“You kissed me earlier,” I said.

“Sorry about that,” she said.

“No, it’s fine. It was just unexpected.”

“Where did you come from, Ethan?” she asked.

“The suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland.”

“No, I mean, you don’t seem as hardened as everybody else,” she said.

“I don’t know if that’s true.”

We kissed. She pulled away after about thirty seconds, saying, “You taste like smoke.”
“I’ll quit,” I said.

“Give me your cigarettes,” she said.

I pulled them out of my pocket and handed them over. She pulled the remaining from the pack and crushed them in her hand so that the tobacco broke free and fell into the river. She stuffed the filters and paper into the pack and gave it back.

“Thanks,” I said, stuffing it into my pocket.

“There’s this guy,” she said, and paused and smiled. “He’s lives in Wisconsin. I see him sometimes when I visit my dad.”

I didn’t say anything. I don’t remember if I had suspected that or not.

“But I like you,” she said.

“I like you, too.”

“And anyway he lives in Wisconsin.”

“I live in Maryland.”

We said nothing, staring at the city over the river. Her face was bright with the lights and I wondered what kind of person ate out of dumpsters and trespassed onto private docks and smashed stranger’s cigarettes. Life in the Baltimore suburbs working with my father bored me. Reorganizing filing cabinets and desktops. Showing old men how to use their computers. Wasting time on the internet. Now College Park bored me. Vodka shots in the dorms with nineteen-year-old girls and the smell of their shampoos and perfumes on my body in the morning. Their fake IDs and clubbing in Adams Morgan. The drunk riots whenever the Terps played Duke. Keggers and fistfights on frat row, and never any music like this. I didn’t know them yet, but I had found my people, and they were here tonight at this party. They were fighting something, and that made them alive.
I slept in Kate’s bed that night. After that I felt so crazy about her I could hardly finish the last few weeks of the semester. I got drunk instead of studying for finals and slid by with Cs. When summer came, instead of going back to work at my father’s office and making tuition money like I had planned, I decided to spend some time on that land I owned in the woods and to do what I’d wanted to do for years now and try and grow all my own food. I decided to be near Kate—to move to Big Ugly.
I fire my last four flares into the night sky and head back to meet Jake at the stash. My headlamp’s dialed to the red option and I’m walking dead center on the mining road, knowing I’ll hear any truck they send before they see me. On the bend where I was discovered earlier in the day, I come across an opossum in the road. I take a few steps in its direction, expecting it to scatter, but it only lifts onto hind legs and turns two eyes towards me. The eyes glow red in the middle of a white face and in my light the snout looks dark and wet, maybe with sap or blood. I grind my foot into the dirt to scare it off, but it doesn’t go anywhere, so I switch off my headlamp and wait for my eyes to adjust.

Everything is black at first, but the moonlight gradually welcomes me to the night. The opossum hasn’t moved—it faces me on its hind legs. And so I start talking:

“You’re not afraid of me?”

I want to say it cocks its head, makes some sort of acknowledgment, but I think it’s just tiring from the upright position.

“Did you use to live here?”

I know the answer: Yes.

“Is this your home?”

Yes, I know the opossum would say. Yes, this is where I have always lived. And this is where my parents lived and their parents before. And this is where I raised my children, but I lost all my children to the machine and I have been looking for them but the place is changed and I don’t know where else to look.

“I’m sorry we’ve done this to you,” I say.
I don’t want sorry, says the opossum. I want my children. I want my home.

A breeze gathers over the mine and blows across the cut. The opossum drops to its feet and leaves the road. As I continue toward the stash, I can see the animal for a long time navigating the stumps and brush, its body white against the dark and disturbed earth.

Jake has already removed the dry bag and sorted out a day of water and food for each of us into neat piles. I remove my pack and work with him. Stuffing my food trash into a plastic bag with his and then shoving that in the dry bag, removing my water bottles and refilling them from the fresh gallon jugs. Jake lights the LED screen on his watch.

“We’re going to cut back to every thirty minutes,” he says. “I’ll hit every hour on the hour. You hit the thirties.”

“Is that safe?”

“It’ll be fine,” he says. “They know we’re here. They’re already on alert.”

“What about sleeping?”

“Three hours each. You go first and then we’ll trade off throughout the night. So by 9 tomorrow we’re both moving again, covering more ground in daylight. We can also cut back to three flares per point.”

“Why?”

“Same reason. They know we’re here. Three’s enough.”

“What happened to Brett?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You should call Kate.”

“Do you think he got caught?”

“Or he just bailed on us,” he says.

“Why would he do that?”
“I don’t know what that old man is thinking.”

I take the cellphone out of my bag and turn it on. I have one fledgling signal bar and so I hold the phone over my head and walk up the road. In about thirty yards I’m oscillating between two and three bars and so I try and make the call. The first one drops but the second goes through.

“Hello,” Patsy says, after a single ring.

“This is Ethan.”

“Are you in jail yet?”

“No,” I say, “Can I talk to Kate?”

After some shuffling on the other end Kate comes to the phone.

“I made the call this morning from Madison, on the burner phone just like you said.”

“We don’t have Brett—”

“What happened?”

“We just don’t know where he is.”

“What do you mean?” She was practically screaming into the phone.

“He never hit his first point,” I said. “We have no idea.”

“What if he’s hurt?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “There were some guards up here. One of them went after me on foot but I got away.”

“Ethan,” she says. “Listen to me.”

“Maybe you can go to the sheriff’s office in the morning.”

“Ethan. Listen to me.”

“See if they have him there?”
“Ethan,” she says. “Please.”

“We’re going to retrace his steps. Look for any sign.”

She doesn’t respond. We let a long silence pass.

“I read our letters today,” she says.

“What letters?”

“The ones we wrote that first summer when you were staying up here.”

“What about them?”

“You’re just—” she starts to say, and then her tone changes, and she says, “I’ll go see what I can find out about Brett first thing tomorrow.”

“Kate,” I say, but then I have nothing to follow.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

I turn off the phone and return to Jake. He has the map laid out over the split oak and he’s smoking a cigarette. “We have to assume they have our map.”

“Why?” I ask. I motion for a cigarette and Jake passes me his pack and lighter.

“If they have Brett, they have our map.”

“Right.”

“So we need new routes.”

“We have to look for Brett,” I say, “Retrace his steps.”

“We won’t find anything now at night.”

“We should have done it hours ago, as soon as he didn’t respond.”

Jake inhales his cigarette.

“We need to stay on task. We all agreed. Even if one of us got caught or had to leave.”

“Brett could be hurt.”
“Okay,” Jake says. “Our routes are all fucked anyway.”

“We can go together.”

“Okay, Parakeet, we look for Brett. And then you get some sleep.”

Jake removes his flare gun from his holster and fires three rounds into the sky.

“In Iraq,” he says, “I saw a dude shot with one of these. It was like a drive-by execution. We were posted on this corner in Sadr City watching these kids play soccer and this guy walks right into the game and shoots the goalie in the head with one of these. The kid dropped and his face was spitting fire for a whole minute. They’re supposed to be non-lethal, but they’ll put a hole in you at close enough range and that’s all that really matters.”

“What’d he shoot the kid for?”

“Who knows?” says Jake. “We chased the shooter but lost him pretty quick. He just fucking—” Jake sticks the muzzle of his gun into my chest. I let him hold it there until he makes the sound of the firing and mimes a kickback. “Yeah, so who the fuck knows?”

The dark slows our hunt. We scour the ground for sign of struggle or chase, but tracking is near impossible when everything up here is already snapped and broken and the ground is frozen and trackless.

“There was just one guy on you?” Jake asks.

“Yeah, but I lost him.”

“So there was that guy and the guy in the truck with the ATV. Any more?”

“That’s all I saw,” I say.

“And so maybe after they lost you they kept looking and found Brett.”

We find Brett’s point and search the area.
That’s when we hear the truck. We both kill our headlamps and fall facedown onto the ground. Even in winter, even with the trees ripped away and the mine so near, the duff smells like pine and animals, like life or like those things that can add up to make life. A few minutes pass before the noise manifests into two headlights slicing up the trunks and exposed stone. The truck skirts the mountainside thirty yards uphill.

“What fucking road is that?” whispers Jake. “Where’s that fucking road?”

“I don’t remember it on our maps.”

“It’s not on our fucking maps. It’s a different fucking road.”

The truck passes and then Jake yells and punches the ground. He gets up and I follow him to this new road. It’s a narrow plateau made by downed trees and dirt from the cut above our heads. I tell Jake I can’t believe they’d drive a truck on this. He doesn’t say anything. We hike in the opposite direction of the truck as it leads sharply downhill toward the mine. On both sides trunks and brush have been cut flush with the road by chainsaw and we both train our lights downward to keep track of our footing on the loose rock. The road leads to the end of the clear cut and we enter the trees.

“It’s been half an hour,” I say. “Should we signal?”

“No,” he says. “Not here.”

“Dude,” I say, afraid that at any minute the mountain will sing with explosion and we’ll be buried with it, even though I know they have a truck up here and that they won’t blast until morning, that we’ve already cost them an entire day of work and money. With every step I wait for the trigger, for the rumble to fold the land over me.

“Look,” he says, pointing ahead. We’re led to a road that is on our map, one above a creek bed, and I know from studying those maps that to our left is one of the main employee
entrances and then farther on to the right sit the temp office buildings. Jake takes this right, and I follow, expecting any minute to see a fury of headlights barreling in our direction. We walk until the forest clears again, and through the winter trees we can see down into the site. A dozen trucks armed with floodlights in their beds are parked beside the dimly lit office buildings. Men move in and out of the buildings, back and forth from the trucks. Even from this distance, I imagine the murmur of conversation, see the coffee steaming in their hands.

“Alright,” says Jake. “Here we go.”

“Here we go what?”

“Get ready to run.”

Jake takes out his flare gun and fires off three rounds. The fire arcs and dies out, and the smoke blows faintly east in the dark. The men below look up, and others step from the temp buildings to gaze at the marks we’ve made in the sky. When the light is gone and the smoke has vanished all at once a dozen engines fire to life and headlights and floodlights turn the chalky earth below into daytime and the men aim their trucks for the entrance to the mining road. Jake holsters his gun and smiles at me.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he asks. “Real action?”
The first thing I did at Big Ugly was set a garden. This was early May just after the end of the semester, and so I had missed my chance for the brassicas like kale and cabbage and had a lot of prep work before I could sow anything else. But the land held the memory of agriculture: a crudely geometric area surrounding the caved-in chicken coop testified to decades of pecking and over-fertilization and some corn grew wild in the bottomland near the creek, seeded every year and mixed with the jewelweed, yarrow, and wild rose. A metal hog pen up the road from the shack had fallen into the ground and now framed decade-old pine starts.

Patsy had tendered my declaration to spend the summer at Big Ugly with warm hesitation. I didn’t know her, but she had memorized so much of my childhood from family Christmas letters and school photos that we knew how to act like family. When she looked at me, I imagined she thought my current actions just as important as my birth weight or my first lost tooth, and treated the plan I’d laid out for restoring Big Ugly like she would have a boyhood dream of playing shortstop for the Yankees. I think she expected me to give up in a few short weeks, even days, but as those weeks passed and my hand started to show on the land, a kind of recognition altered her behavior and she began to plead for my daily visits to her home at the bottom of the hollow road. Compared to the last semester, drinking too much and worrying about school and hating just about everyone on campus, I felt happy and free and clean. The trees whispered out here. There were birds. I slept long and hard without all the clutter I’d grown up knowing.

The first time I saw Patsy leave the house I was clearing pine saplings with a machete in the bottomland, where her father had tried and failed at making an income on corn and tobacco so many decades before. The trees had begun to march from the forest into the field in a slow
reclamation, and so most were young enough to pull one-handed from the ground, hack off the thin limbs, and pile the spear-like trunks in a wheel barrow for the construction of a compost bin I had in mind. The older pioneering trees I had to dig out by hand; I’d spend hours navigating the roots shot deep in the silt with my shovel, and when I pulled them from the field, I’d replant them along the road up to the meadow, where a mudslide had wasted much of what once must have grown.

I had my shirt off on the early June day and could feel my shoulders heating up under the sun. I was sticky with sweat and sap and covered in pine needles. I had never been one to take off my shirt outside. My mother was so paranoid of skin cancer that I wore t-shirts in the swimming pool, and I never got comfortable with my pasty white torso. But here, away from the road, I felt so wild and right in the place and I cherished how easily my skin darkened when I allowed it. Patsy’s house was at the far end of the field, and when the screen door creaked, I stopped work to watch her edge along the beds with a glass of something.

“Sweet tea,” she said, once she’d made her way to me. She wore old lady blue jeans and a t-shirt with a palm tree and “Panama City, Florida” written on it—one of the many souvenirs from what I could surmise had been the only vacation of her life.

I downed the tea and rubbed the icy glass across my forehead.

“I’ll go get another,” she said.

“Don’t do that. I’ve got a water bottle over there in the trees.”

“It’s nice to see movement on the place.”

“It’s been a long time?” I asked.

“It has. I guess I quit doing things when I was the only one to do them for.”

“Why not just for yourself?” I asked.
“You’re young,” she said. “You might change in that regard.”

“You grew food down here with your mother?”

“Sure,” she said. “Just your normal vegetables. But we kept it all close to the house and didn’t need all this space you’re making.”

“I figure I can put up the excess, and I know some people in Charleston that know what to do with donations.”

“What’re you gonna grow?”

“Well, it’s late, but I’ll get tomatoes and peppers and everything in the ground pretty soon. And winter squash, too. I love pumpkins.”

“Your father was ambitious like you. Me and him was the only ones in the family to make it through school. I’m real proud of him, you know. He turned nothing into a whole lot.”

I blew some sweat dripping off my nose and then took my shirt from where it rested beneath the wheel barrow and dried my face with it.

“You know you don’t have to live like it’s 1920 up there,” she said. “I’ve got electricity and a shower, and you’re more than welcome to sleep at the bottom house if you want.”

“I kind of like it,” I said. “I’m making my way through Faulkner.”

“All the same,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with taking advantage every now and then. And you don’t smell too good neither.”

I laughed. “I smell like smoke and trees.”

“You smell like some wild man alright.”

We both laughed. Patsy stared a few moments at the field taking shape and then took the glass from me and lumbered back toward the house. I drove the spade under a pine and levered it
from its hold on the ground. When I took the tree in my hand and hacked away the limbs, it smelled clean and whole and delicious.

I visited Kate in Charleston a few times a week. She had stopped getting any financial support from her father and was working as a waitress at this pseudo-vegetarian place trying to make money to support herself. That meant she never had enough to drive to see me and whenever I was in town the only thing we did was ride bikes and borrow rides to a swimming hole her friends liked to go to. The only money I had came from my father; he said that Aunt Patsy needed care and I was providing that, and so he didn’t mind making monthly contributions. I usually burned through that pretty quick, though, driving to Charleston so much, and had to call for more by the second or third week of each month. My father never complained, but I didn’t want his money, no matter how easy it was for him to part with. But I also had no idea how to make any money of my own. Patsy set me up with a neighbor who needed help re-shingling his roof, but that was a hundred bucks and it was gone on one trip to the hardware store. Patsy called other people on Big Ugly and old friends she had in Chapmanville and Branchland, but sometimes I just didn’t feel like driving an hour just to help someone paint their garage door and make twenty bucks.

After a month at Ugly, I shot a deer and Patsy helped me clean it, and then pretty soon greens were coming up and I could basically feed myself on the cheap. I eventually got my father to up my monthly allowance because I was spending so much repairing the old shack, and then I stopped thinking about paying work and just spent my time building, gardening, reading, and driving to see Kate.
Kate and I began to thread our lives into one another’s. We spent several nights a week together and her friends began to tease us about how adorable we’d become. I quit smoking for her. We wore each other’s clothes. When I was in Charleston and she had to work, I sat at a corner table of the café and read. We wrote notes and poems to each other. One night, after making love, she played me a song she wrote about me on the ukulele. I thought of nothing else but her. She wanted me to meet her father and set up a Skype date; she left the house and I sat on her porch, her laptop facing me, and declared my love for the daughter of the old man on the computer screen. “You seem like an earnest young man,” he told me. She’d talk about places she wanted to travel, and ask me where I’d like to go. I’d tell her something I’d always thought about, like snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef or hiking the Inca Trail, and the next time we’d hang out she’d have all kinds of research done about ways we could afford it and times we might go. But mostly what I talked to Kate about was what I was already doing. I re-built the chicken coop and ordered a couple of laying hens. I made plans to install bee hives. I bought some mushroom spore and inoculated oak logs with a power drill and beeswax. One weekend, as time for re-enrollment in classes at Maryland had come and gone, she came to see where it was I lived.

By the time we arrived at the bottom house, Patsy already had dinner ready for us. She brought out three plates of food—pork chops, collards, potatoes, and a fresh salad from the garden, and a few giant pitchers of sweet tea.

“She’s a vegan,” I told Patsy. Patsy looked at both of us then stabbed the meat with a fork and set it on my plate.

“Give her your potatoes, Ethan,” she said.

“I’m fine, really,” said Kate.
“Want me to heat up some beans?”

“That’s fine.”

“You tell me if you’re still hungry.”

We sat down.

“Do ya’ll like to pray?” asked Patsy.

“We don’t need to,” I said. Patsy had never wanted to pray at a meal before.

“Well, that’s fine,” she said. “I don’t need to neither.”

We ate for a few minutes in silence, and then Kate asked how long Patsy had lived up here.

“However old I am minus those years at Marshall.”

“Do you ever feel any of the effects from the surface mine?”

“The coal mine?” Patsy asked.

“It’s close by, right?”

“It’s just right there,” Patsy said, and turned halfway in her chair as if we could see it through the kitchen window. “You mean does it sometimes shake and knock things off the shelf? Sure. They’ve been working some other spot, or I suspect Ethan would know what I’m talking about.”

“I felt it once,” I said.

“Some of what they blew away used to be ours too. Ma sold a piece when Daddy died because she didn’t want to take relief money. But she thought they was still doing the underground sort like my Daddy had always worked. And that was bad enough, but this was just after the war, and they invented a new kind of mining where they blow it to nothing and just scrape the mountain clean. When Ma found that out she lost her mind. One day she walked right
past the new property line and sat down on the edge where they was scraping and didn’t leave until the state police pulled her off.”

“Your mother did?” Kate asked.

Patsy nodded.

“Elma did that?” I asked.

“You think I’m ornery. You just don’t remember Elma Means.”

“Did she get arrested?” asked Kate.

“From what I recall, they made her pay some silly fine and promise not to do it again.”

Patsy cleared her throat and leaned back in her chair as if she had finished her meal, though she’d hardly touched the plate.

“Ma never stopped talking about that mine and feeling sorry for selling off the land until the day she died. ‘If I’d known,’ she used to say, ‘I’d have never.’ And then sometime, I don’t know when, they come up here saying how much they’d pay for this leftover chunk of it and Ma run them men off with a shotgun. ‘Get your ugly white asses off my property,’ she told them.”

Patsy laughed so hard she was tearing up. “They didn’t know what to do with this old angry Indian woman and then they just never came back. I figure it don’t matter too much to them. They got everything on every side of us, so they just make an island out of us here. We’re just a sliver left alone.”

“Your mother was Native American?” Kate asked.

“She was.”

“What tribe?” Kate asked.

“She never told,” Patsy said. “But Johnny dug up the records a few years ago and figured she was Chickasaw.”
“She never told you that, though?”

“I figure she didn’t even know a word for it herself. They took her to an English-speaking school when she was just a girl and made her forget everything about her Indian self. She used to tell people she was from Burma.”

“Why from Burma?” I asked.

“She saw a picture of somebody from Burma in a magazine once, and I guess she figured you say you’re an Indian and people got all kinds of questions, but if you say you’re from Burma they don’t know the first thing to ask.”

“Wow,” said Kate.

I’d never heard any of that before. Elma was two things to me before—a name on a plaque in the graveyard and a faint memory of an old woman touching my face. I’d known she was Indian, but it was something nobody talked about much. I first learned that piece of my genealogy in elementary school when I came home around Thanksgiving assigned a project on the native tribes of the Chesapeake, and my parents told me my father was part Indian and my mother was descended from the Mayflower people and so every Thanksgiving growing up was just like the first Thanksgiving. The Indian part intrigued me so much that I told all the kids at school when I presented, and when I printed out sketches of Piscataway in dugout canoes it felt good to claim something, to identify with something; but Piscataway wasn’t Elma Means, and anyway being part Indian is like being part Irish, and part German, and part Slovenian, and part everything else until you’re so many things that you’re nothing anymore. Now I mostly feel like a cheat and a liar just having the word Indian associated with my family—we look white, we act white, we get all the privileges of being white, and so whatever isn’t white is so bleached out and
buried there doesn’t seem any reason to fuss over it. When I was applying for college, I checked Native American on all the forms, figuring it would give me a better shot at scholarships.

“You need to change that,” my father told me.


“It’s cheating,” he said.

He made me call up every school and have them manually alter my ethnicity.

After dinner, Patsy turned on the television and Kate and I did the dishes. Then I took her up to see the old house. At that point it was still in its disrepair. I’d swept the insides clean of the cobwebs and rodent shit, but the tarpaper peeled off the sides and the warped boards holding up the eaves were moldy and letting the roof sink in.

“Your chicken coop is nicer than your house,” she said.

“It’s got a larger population.”

We went inside. I had an easel out with a half-finished painting of the hickory out front and several stacks of poetry and novels on the table. The kitchen was a bit of a wreck, my dishes overflowing the sink and onto the counter. But I had so few possessions here that the place seemed mostly tidy.

“You’re like this mountain ascetic,” she said. “I love it.”

“It’s quiet mostly.”

“Your bird!” she said, going over to Huw’s cage. “Can we take him out?”

“He’s mean,” I said, but I unlatched the door and he took the opportunity to scramble to the outside of the cage. I’d stuck a dry and leafless tree branch into a milk crate and fixed it tight with books so that Huw could have something to climb when I let him out, and he immediately
headed for that and walked to the far end near the window. He tapped the screen twice with his beak and twisted his head toward us without moving his body.

“That stays shut,” I told Huw.

“Coffee,” he squallled. “Woman.”

He held his wings a small space from his body to get the most of a soft breeze.

“Why’s he say that?”

“He’s got my grandfather in him. Kind of sounds like the man, too.”

“Your grandfather said woman like that?”

“He wasn’t exactly an excellent human being.”

“He’s kind of scraggly,” Kate said, touching Huw’s head feathers.

“He’s older than both of us combined.”

Evening was coming on and so we went to the porch to get the last of the daylight. She had brought a bottle of red wine and we drank it from pasta sauce jars that still reeked of tomato.

“I like it here,” she said.

“I’m glad I’m not going back to Maryland.”

“Me too,” she said, and leaned over to kiss me.

The katydids filled the woods with noise and bats had just begun to sweep in front of the porch for the mosquitoes we were attracting. We finished our wine and drank more. I told her about all the things I wanted to do here. What I wanted to repair and build.

“I know I can’t live here forever,” I said. “I know I need to work for real. But I just don’t want to leave yet.”

“What is real work? Like what I do?”
“Next year I can start sooner and grow enough to sell. I could start a CSA. I have enough land here.”

“Is the land safe to eat from?”

“Probably not,” I said. She squeezed my hand and set down her jar and then walked out into the grass. She craned her neck at the sky. The moon was at its smallest, and the dark almost complete.

“You should come here more often,” I said.

“I will,” she said. “I like it.”

That night, after she fell asleep, I listened to her breathing and stared out the window at the straight row of spruces behind the shack. They brushed against each other in the wind. I wanted to hug her and pull her close, and I did sometimes, and she would mumble and turn her back to me. I put my nose onto the top of her head and inhaled.

The next day we hiked to the Hobet. To get to the edge of the mine, you take the road past the graveyard to where it ends in the meadow, and then you walk the path along the creek, which we call Hart Creek but maybe it has another name, and then when that ends you just find the easiest way up until you reach the ridge. That ridge, which has got a deer trail running on its spine, eventually forks north and parallels the mine edge.

When Kate and I reached it she set her backpack in the duff and walked to edge of the ridge. She didn’t say anything. The Hobet-21, or the Big Ugly mine, stretches fifteen miles at its widest and is the largest surface mine in West Virginia. I’ve driven roads all around it, all over Boone and Lincoln, up the Mud River Road and over on Horse Creek, and I’ve never found a place that you can see it from a public road. They keep a stretch of trees, which out west they call
a “beauty strip,” between the public eye and the mine. Every now and then from a car you get a passing glimpse of a bald head, a chalk-colored and flattened peak, but if you really want to see mountaintop removal you’ve got to either get through Arch’s gates, rent a helicopter, or trespass by foot. When I first learned about the practice and that it was happening near the Hart land, I became obsessed with Google maps—every rut and discoloration, every pale streak of road over rock, every slurry dam and strip mine, the whole snot-rocket shape of the Hobet. There are places along the edge of this mine where you can’t see clear to the other side; thin strips of tree along the mining roads may jut out into the mine, and Mud Fork still bisects the operation, but there are places the earth curves out of view before the rape of the mountains ends.

Kate and I said nothing for a long time, and then I took an orange from my pocket and peeled the rind with my thumbnail.

“Doesn’t this sicken you?” she said.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve seen it before.”

“How can it—I mean, just look at it.”

I put pieces of the fruit in my mouth.

“I knew it was bad. I saw pictures. I knew it was bad, but it’s just so big.”

Kate wasn’t facing me, so I didn’t see when she started to cry. When she turned away from the mine for the first time to hug me her cheeks were already red and her eyes beginning to swell. It was a quiet, heavy cry.

“How do we stop this?”

“From existing?”

“From continuing,” she said.
“Tell everyone in America to stop turning on their lights. Shut down every city, everywhere.”

“Ethan,” she said, in a tone that I would become used to, a tone that told me that I was giving up and if I gave up I was just the same as everyone who never cared in the first place. I chucked the orange peel at the thing. It disappeared into the brush below and we walked down, her taking the lead, a cool forest breeze punctuating the summer swelter.
We run far from the clearing and deep into the woods. My heart feels cut with cold air. My lungs constrict and the blood and oxygen stab sharp and irregular. We pause and sit as the clouds clear and the moon shows itself for the first time. The stars reveal themselves and the night sky opens over the mountains, or the mountains open to the night sky, and we breathe hard on our planet looking out at everything else there is to see.

The hoard of pickups has fractured and is on every navigable road of this mountain. They are faster than us and have sweeping flood lights. In our dark camo we can hardly see each other just a few feet away in the dark. But we know the mining roads lead away from this spot, in the deepest part of the woods, and that even if the men decide to go by foot in search of us, it would be a long march through the dark without knowing who or how many they are looking for.

“I can’t stop thinking about Brett,” I say.

“He’s fine,” Jake says. “I’m sure we’ll hear about it tomorrow from Kate.”

“Do you think they have him?”

“What are you here to do, Ethan?”

“What?”

“What are you here to do?”

“To fuck Arch Coal.”

“Me too,” he says.

I let my heart steady and listen for the distant motors.

“You sleep here,” Jake says. “I’m going to go to the edge and signal to keep them driving in the cut. You set your alarm.”
“1:30 am,” I say.

“Alright. Good. Go to sleep.”

“Jake,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“We’re fucking nuts, aren’t we?”

“I don’t know, man,” he says. “This doesn’t seem so different from anything else.”

“I just can’t believe this is necessary.”

“Well,” he says. “I guess it is.”

“Goodnight,” I say.

He leaves the way we’d come and then forks west before his sound disappears. I unpack my sleeping bag and slip inside, using an extra sweater as a pillow. I know there must be trucks all over this mountain but I can’t pick out any motors or voices. When I listen too hard, I hear twigs breaking and heavy breathing, and wait anxiously for the moment when they stumble across my packed tight body and haul me off to jail or worse. From somewhere farther down the mountain three of Jake’s flares hiss and float in the sky.

Jake isn’t worried about getting caught. I think he knows we’ll get caught eventually, if not on this mountain, then the next or the next. Neither of us expected to lose Brett so quickly, and I lie awake thinking about the possible scenarios—him slipping and getting hurt, him getting pulled off by the guards and taken to the police, or maybe just held down there in those temp buildings while the foremen torture info out of him. Lots of stories circulate about what goes on in these actions. Loggers cutting trees out from under tree-sitters. Starving them out. Even firing off rifles until the protestors freak out and come down.
I’d only heard secondhand stories about people mousing before. At a party in Charleston in my early days up here, when Kate hadn’t yet moved in and I was driving up there a few times a week, there was an Army Corps hearing near the Capitol building on some nationwide permits. We showed up in green shirts and tried for two hours to make our way into the meeting but kept getting pushed out by miners and police, and then later, back at Kate’s house with a bunch of people in from across the state for the hearing, I met a guy named Bunny. He had dreadlocks and tattoos on his fingers that said something in Polish about the fight against oppression.

“It’s like a multi-pronged approach, you know,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, like, you gotta do this shit, you know? You gotta go to these fucking hearings even if you know those permits are gonna pass or whatever just so that you can all be there at once and everyone sees that you’re fucking serious. You gotta go to your rallies in DC even if the cops’ only job is to not give a fuck and not start shit and maybe write you some hundred-dollar fine and hold you for an hour. And you gotta knock on doors in the coalfields and tell them what you’re about. But, you gotta do the serious shit, too—the throw-your-body in-front-of-the-machine shit, the monkey-wrenching, the blockades, the tree-sits, the mousing—”

I stopped him. “What’s mousing?”

We were sitting on the porch drinking beers and crushing cans. There was a five-gallon bucket of coal that some housemate had picked up for an action but never used and Bunny had his feet set up on it. It was fall and there was that burning smell to the air. Kate had long gone to sleep inside.

“Mousing,” Bunny said, “is fucking badass. Mousing is when you go to a site they’re about to blow and fucking run around with flare guns for as long as you can so that the company
can’t blow the shit until you get off. Same idea as blockades and tree-sits, where the goal is to halt operations and cost them some profits, but in blockades the cops come fucking scoop you up in less than twenty-four hours and in tree-sits they know where you are and usually find some way to get you down. Mousing is all about being faster than them, man, and being fucking smarter.”

I told Jake about mousing the first time I met him, only six months before our own action, at the first protest event he’d ever attended. He’d been back from Iraq for two years and had been living at home in McDowell County working on and off at his uncle’s grocery store. We’d both come for a fifty-mile march from Marmet to Blair to commemorate the Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest civil uprising since the Civil War, when ten thousand miners took arms against the coal companies to forcibly unionize the mines in Logan and Mingo Counties and were only held off when President Harding flew US Army bombers in from Maryland and threatened war on the strikers and rights-seekers. The mountain where some of those miners gave their lives for better tonnage rates and for pay in US dollars instead of company scrip—and where my great-grandfather, Bobby Hart, took a bullet in the thigh—was and is property of Arch Coal, and was and still is set to be surface-mined out of history.

“Nobody really gets what it’s like over there, man,” Jake told me. We were sitting by railroad tracks behind a warehouse where a couple hundred of our fellow protestors were sleeping. “I had buddies killed. I got fucking shot at. Every time I was off base I was terrified half to death some IED would fucking destroy me or leave me crippled for the rest of my life. And I didn’t know what the fuck I was there for. Like I joined because that’s what people here do and I didn’t think different enough. I don’t believe in that fucking fight. I believe in this fight, you know? This is the fight I believe in. We’re hearing about those miners who had to fight the
company because of how shitty things got, and I don’t know, you know, I don’t know how things are all that different right now. The time’s coming, pretty soon. We’re gonna have to take these fucking companies out before they destroy every piece of what we got left.”

“It’s happening everywhere,” I said. “The Amazon loses a Switzerland to logging every year.”

“Give me a gun,” he said. “I know what I’m fighting for.”

Jake is standing over me, in the dark, talking.

“This way I think is best,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

“Wake up, Ethan,” Jake says.

“Awake.” The night is without any sound now, animal or machine. I have a rotten taste in my mouth, the kind you get when you come out of sleep wrong.

“I said I think you better go that way, to the east a bit. I did a big loop on the western side of the cut. I saw a truck up there but it’s mostly been quiet. I think maybe they gave up for the night, but I bet we can expect some reinforcements in the morning. So, yeah, probably just do a loop down through the cut and then come back for me. Now get the fuck up so I get can some sleep.”

“Why are we doing sleep in three-hour chunks?”

“You’ll get used to it.”

I stand up. My body feels bruised all over, but I shoulder my pack and check the site for my belongings. After a long drink of water I say goodbye to Jake and head downslope. Once I get to the road I take my flare gun and fire three rounds into the sky. I let each burn and float
away before I reload and fire another. I haven’t thought much about the flares before, but now I understand how beautiful this is: the mountain is calling out for help, calling the sky, calling to the other mountains, calling to the people and the animals and the trees, and the mountain has a voice, and I am that voice. The mountain speaks through me, and I am its lungs and its legs.

Before moving on, I stoop to the ground and take a handful of duff from the roadside. Whenever they find us, and they commence with the blasting, this duff will be overburden—waste material, to be dumped into nearby streams—but right now it is soil in my hands, the decomposed life that has been for millennia. Things don’t last forever—mountains don’t last forever—but I am here right now with this mountain and this earth and these scraps of trees. I bring the duff to my nose and inhale its fumes. There is life in it yet.
My father named me after the Duke. As in John Wayne, nickname Duke, birth name Marion Robert Morrison of Winterset, Iowa, and his role as Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*. The character is an ex-confederate outlaw on an Indian-killing mission. The real man was a conservative anti-communist with the habit of multiple women and mean drinking. He was my father’s childhood hero. The first time I watched the film and he told me the story of my name, I wondered at these implicit expectations. Did he want me to emulate that masculinity, both its resilience and brutality? When I was a boy, he called me “tough guy” or “big man.” I was about to turn sixteen when the U.S. Army invaded Iraq. Because of a heart condition my father had not been in the service, but because it was a kind of family inheritance and because there was talk on the news of all the directions this war could lead and all the countries next on the list—Pakistan, Iran, Somalia—I assumed there would be a draft and I would be forced after graduation to put on a uniform. That never happened, clearly, but I think years later I’m still waiting for my war.

When the first large anti-MTR action after my move to West Virginia came to my attention, I got to feeling like I was finally nearing a battle. It was in the spring of 2010, and I’d spent the previous few months back and forth between Baltimore and West Virginia. I’d dropped the idea of getting my degree at Maryland indefinitely when I failed to enroll in fall classes, and then when Kate was busy with her semester at Charleston and the gardens had died, I went home and made some money doing office stuff at my father’s firm. I passed almost every spare moment those weeks drawing maps of Big Ugly, though—where my gardens would go, what I’d plant, ideas for an orchard I wanted to put in, and when it warmed up enough I was back at Ugly
with a little money saved up and a lot of ideas. Kate had struggled with her classes that fall and so in spring was just working, saving money, and spending a lot of time on Ugly with me.

With her there, the place felt a bit more lively and warm. She made me quit calling my shack a shack, and instead it became a “cabin.” She played ukulele and encouraged me to keep up with my painting. In the evenings we read poetry aloud and sometimes took Patsy to the top to have dinner in the old place. Patsy had played fiddle once, and at Kate’s encouragement she pulled it out from a closet in the bottom house and tried to remember what she knew.

“I played in a group,” she’d say, setting the fiddle on her lap. “In Huntington. And we were pretty good too.”

Kate also invited our friends from Charleston to come out some weekends. It was early spring, and though it had warmed, the forest was winter gray save the ferns greening the floor and the birds passing through. Our friends set camp right outside the cabin, under the stretching arms of the hickory, and we’d drink and talk and play music late into the night. Kate also liked her quiet times, and I needed that about her. Some mornings I’d wake to find her gone, and she wouldn’t return until I was already in the garden. She’d set down a basket of blackberries or mushrooms for us to identify. Sometimes she’d pick bouquets of forest wildflowers and set them in jars all around the house. A few rhododendrons grew up near the property line and once the blossoms had started to fall Kate collected the pink and white flowers and laid them about the cabin on every spare surface.

We took wild plant guides into the forest and collected pokeweed in the spring and stir-fried it with black walnuts from the previous fall. At the foot of a large dead trunk at the corner of the graveyard grew a chicken-of-the-woods mushroom, and I collected this and we ate until we were full. My oak logs sprouted shiitakes. My garden gave generously. We sold some things
to friends in Charleston whenever we went in to town—wild plum and raspberry jams, vegetables, fresh baked bread and mushrooms—but it was never much and we lived primarily on the ever-increasing allotment from my father.

Sometimes we were bored, insatiable. Sometimes I drank too much for no good reason. But my heart beat a little slower, living on Ugly with Kate.

Of course, the sore on the hill never strayed too far from my thoughts, and we stayed aware of any anti-MTR actions going on in the area. That first major event, a rally and protest at an elementary school in the Coal River Valley, came during that spring. Directly adjacent to the school, on the other side of the Coal River, conveyor belts rose out of the trees and fed the monstrous concrete silo of a coal processing plant. Just uphill from the plant was an impoundment for three billion gallons of coal sludge, a byproduct from washing the coal before shipment. The fear was that a heavier-than-normal rain might break the earthen dam and bury the school and kids in toxic slurry. A few organizations were working together on the action, and some celebrities were supposed to be in attendance.

On the morning of the protest, Kate and I were at the bottom house having breakfast when Patsy said she wanted to come along. “Better boil me two packets of oatmeal today,” she said. “I’m liable to get hungry out there.” She had turned the television off the night before and watched Kate sprawled on the floor drawing two signs with red and black markers, one that said “Coal Kills Appalachian Children,” and the other, “Coal Keeps West Virginia Poor.”

“I reckon that’s true,” Patsy said, staring at the bold letters.

Kate gave Patsy a hug when she said she’d be coming with us and immediately began packing for the day. We all loaded into my truck and when we got to the school early so that Kate and I could help set up a small stage. Once that was done and power had been run from a
generator in the bed of somebody’s pickup, Kate hung back with Patsy and I was given an orange vest and sent up the highway to direct parking. In the short time it had taken to set up the stage a counter protest had begun to form at the entrance of the processing plant. A few pickup trucks parked in the gravel were surrounded by lawn chairs of women and children dressed in oversized miner jackets and helmets. Two men sat with a cooler between them in the truck bed and drank cans of beer. They wore their coal miner overalls. They quit talking as I passed and followed me with their eyes. A kid, maybe twelve years old, his face buried under long blonde hair and a reflective helmet, spit in my direction. “Go home, tree hugger,” he said.

I stood forty feet away from them and answered questions of the passing cars. While waving in the confused out-of-staters and folks from Charleston, I got “Go home” and “Fuck you” shouted out of passing cars, but also a few excited honks and waves. The agenda of the protest was to give a few speeches and then march up the road and block the entrance of the processing plant. Dr. James Hansen, the head of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, was in attendance. And so was Daryl Hannah, who I remembered as the acrobatic robot with blonde hair that Harrison Ford had to kill with his electricity gun in Blade Runner. They came to give speeches and get arrested.

I hadn’t decided yet whether I was there to get arrested. The point with the arrests was to snatch local and national headlines, so that every report on every website and newspaper had to at least throw in a line about why we were here getting arrested. And it’s difficult to describe mountaintop removal or a slurry impoundment over an elementary school without swaying at least a few readers, even if the journalist illuminates the complexity of the issue. But at that point, my personal record with the law was clean—I hadn’t received even a speeding ticket.
The cars stretched the length of the road and both the protest and counter-protest had been bolstered by about a hundred souls each. I took off my traffic vest and passed with my head down through the crowd toward the stage. “Hey,” someone called to me. I lifted my gaze to see two miners standing against the fence, both decked out in their overalls and helmets. The bigger one did the talking. He had his white t-shirt sleeves rolled up to show hairy biceps and faded tattoos. “This you?” he asked, pointing to the stage.

I started to walk away but he touched my shoulder.

“Let me ask you,” he said. “Why y’all here just to start trouble?”

I looked from man to man. “We think they should move the school to a safe place.”

“It’s a whole river between here and that impoundment,” his companion said. “Even if it was to break—which it won’t—ain’t no way it would touch the school.”

I started to respond.

“Do you pay taxes here?” the big guy asked.

“Property taxes.”

“In Raleigh County?”

“In Lincoln.”

“Then why do you care where we put our schools in Raleigh County?”

“It was nice talking to you,” I said, and then I turned and walked toward the stage.

There was a woman in her forties or so detailing the waves of cancer washing over the hills. Kate had found Patsy a folding chair and the two were front and center. Surrounding a thin circle of activists was a larger circle of miners, who booed and shouted at everything said by the woman on stage. About a dozen different spats had broken out in the crowd. One of the organizers was away from the crowd speaking with a contingency of the West Virginia state
police. They wrote down what she said and she wrote down what they said. One of the cops was recording her and the action on the stage with a point-and-shoot Nikon.

“She wants to talk,” Kate said to me.

“Who?” I asked.

“Patsy.”

I stood over Patsy in the lawn chair we brought for her. Through her thin white hair I could see the liver spots on her scalp and inside her flimsy cotton t-shirt I could see the bony clavicles and the red veins that climbed her neck.

Every twenty minutes a coal truck would slow down and lay on its horn to drown out the speaker, to which the counter-protestors cheered and laughed. The ring of signs around the stage contradicted each other and some I had to read twice to figure with which position they sought affiliation. WE LOVE MOUNTAINS THAT MAKE COAL or WEST VIRGINIA IS OURS both felt ambiguous to me. When a pony-tailed old man that looked like he belonged on the streets of Berkeley took that stage and someone shouted at him to go home, he took the microphone close to his face and shouted back: “I live within walking distance. I live right over there. Want me to show you? I am home, damnit. This is my home. We are goddamned neighbors.” Another coal truck laid on its horn and the man shook his head, breathing hard into the microphone.

After he’d said his piece about corporate greed and put the mic back into its stand, an organizer came out of the crowd and bent over Patsy. “You ready, dear?” she asked. Patsy shook her head and Kate helped her to her feet. She took one step onto the stage before she turned to me. “You coming?” she asked. I hesitated, but when she asked again I followed her onto the stage. I put one arm around Patsy’s waist and let her lean into me and then with the other I held
the microphone close to her mouth. It was a long, tense moment before she began to speak, but everyone, even the mining crowd, waited for her to catch her breath.

“Get her down from there,” the big miner who’d asked me about taxes said, moving to the inside of the circle. He reached up and yanked on the mic cord.

This brought Patsy to life. “You let me talk,” she snapped. He let go of the cord and folded his arms. He was close enough to rip me off the stage, and I imagine he would have had Patsy not been clutched to me.

“My daddy worked the mines until he died of the black lung in the spring of ‘48,” Patsy started. No one contested her but a few of the passing pickups. “My granddaddy was shot through the chest on Cabin Creek when he tried to stand for the union.” To this there were some complaints. “I’d like for there to be some honest work in this state that don’t kill a man and starve his family, too.”


“You watch your language,” said Patsy. “Your mamma would slap you for talking that trash.”

Patsy was silent for a moment and it almost seemed she’d forgotten why she was on the stage. She looked up to me and then spoke again: “This is my nephew, Ethan. Now he didn’t grow up here, and I know ya’ll don’t think he should have the right to be here. But these are our mountains and we made a mess out of them. Maybe it takes some folks from out-of-state to point that out. Okay, honey,” she spoke to me now. “That’s all.”

Kate took Patsy’s arms and helped her down and then Daryl Hannah took the stage to hysterical boos.
“I’m proud of you,” Kate said in my ear.

“For what?”

“For standing up there, Ethan.”

When the celebrities had had their say about our warming climate and the coming of fierce storms and floods, we formed into a loose line and marched toward the road. Kate and I each took Patsy by the arm and mostly carried her along, which considering she weighed probably less than a hundred pounds, was not terribly difficult. The front of the march started singing “Amazing Grace” and most everyone joined in. In both directions the road was blocked by cop cars and a few officers followed on foot speaking to each other through their radios. Journalists ran wild after the best angles until our short walk was over and we were standing in front of the entrance to the processing plant and the small bridge over Coal River. The counter-protestors had posted up on either side of the road, joining the pickups and lawn chairs already parked there. About two hundred miners, who manifested sometime during the rally, stood just inside the processing plant, blocking our entrance over the bridge. We were now substantially outnumbered.

All at once we sat down. About thirty of us, including a man dressed as Uncle Sam, linked arms and began another round of “Amazing Grace.” The rest of the group, now sufficiently dwarfed by the small army of miners, cheered our disobedience from the shoulders.

“Patsy,” Kate said, “You know they can arrest us for this?”

Patsy nodded.

“You’re okay with this?” Kate asked me.

I shrugged.
Virulent insults went both ways across the road. A dozen officers paced back and forth and told us to stand up and disassemble, that we were obstructing traffic and in violation of the law. We sat for about ten minutes listening to this. Everyone was screaming. Protestors in orange vests and neon green hats that read “Legal Observer” ran frantically around shouting into walkie-talkies and writing on yellow note pads. “This is your last chance to get up or you will be arrested,” said an officer. A man on a bullhorn told the crowd that no child’s life should be at the expense of dirty energy. The tone of his voice was the same as a Sunday morning pulpit. The polished shoes of the police officers beat the highway pavement. Cameras swarmed and clicked around Dr. Hansen as he read a statement about particles of carbon. The cops made their final warning and then went directly for Daryl Hannah, who stood peacefully and let herself be tied in plastic handcuffs. “Go back to Hollywood,” the crowd shouted. The cameras followed her to the cop car.

The officers worked from either end toward the middle where we sat, making their arrests casually and without resistance. Before grabbing Kate or me, an officer lifted Patsy to her feet and she held onto his chest. He tried to turn her hands behind her back and she started to fall forward, so I stood and held Patsy still while the officer cuffed her. “She doesn’t walk that well,” I told the officer. He nodded. He was young; sweat darkened his green collar. He seemed congenial, scared. I put my hands behind my back and let the plastic tie tighten around my wrists.

The photographers caught sight of the shriveled old woman in handcuffs and buzzed around us on the walk to the cop car. The activists cheered and the officer pushed us both into the backseat. Another officer arrested Kate and led her to a different vehicle. The car was
blasting the air-conditioning even though it was a perfect 70 outside. The interior smelled of new leather.

“This is what Ma must have felt like,” she said.

When the arrests were through, the officers returned to their vehicles and we were driven about fifteen minutes upriver where they led us to a conference room, sat us down in folding chairs, and told us to wait. One by one they booked us and set our bails at $300 each.

“I’m proud of you all,” said the actress.

“Me too,” said the scientist.

The organizers came to pay everybody’s tab and a few hours later we were out in the mountain evening with court dates set a few weeks later in Beckley. A few of us crammed into one of the organizer’s cars and got a ride back to the school, where my truck was parked. Patsy and Kate were sitting at a picnic table in front of the police station when I picked them up. Coal smoke deepened the sunset’s hues.

“Ethan,” Kate said, once we were driving safely back to Big Ugly. “I think you did the right thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Moving up here. It’s important. What we did today was good.”

“There’s still billions of gallons of sludge hanging over that school,” I said.

“And one day the sun will explode,” she said. “You have to be more hopeful.”

“I should be hopeful the sun’s going to explode?”

“Accept what you can’t change and fight for what you can,” she said. “Be happy, Ethan.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence.
The next day I woke up early and drove into Madison to buy the *Charleston Gazette* and check the internet at the public library for news of our arrest with the celebrities. The *Gazette* had quotes from Hannah and Hansen as well as a couple of the miners, but nothing from any West Virginian against the impoundment. They’d posted a picture of Patsy getting arrested and so I printed it out for her. I figured we could hang it on the fridge. Most of the left-leaning internet news had blurbs about us, all with some variation of the headline “32 Arrested Outside West Virginia Coal Processing Facility.” So I’d made the news—I made the number 32 instead of 31. And whatever effect my arrest could have would germinate from this paltry array of internet articles.

I looked up from the computer. Five others beside me had the digital glow on their faces. Most of them were on Facebook. The old man next to me pecked cautiously letter by letter to comment on a photo of a child holding a pumpkin. I went to the checkout desk and tried to sign up for a library card, but couldn’t prove my West Virginia residency.

“You got an energy bill? Paycheck stub?” the librarian asked.

I thanked her and left the building. Outside I stood next to my truck with keys in hand as a freight train loaded with coal traveled the tracks alongside the Little Coal River. A giant magnolia shook in the wind it made. In this town ninety years ago, my great-grandfather Bobby Hart learned at a meeting of thousands of armed miners intent on forcing unionization that President Harding was threatening their insurrection with federal troops and Martin MB-1 bombers, a model the men in his outfit in France would have seen fly toward action on the front. Now the town is sleepy, pressed in by hillsides alive with the full force of spring. A woman holding a stack of papers tripped exiting the library and the loose sheets caught the wind of the train and traveled up over Main Street, whipping and separating and falling out of place.
2012

I stand and hold my hands to the sun. It’s toward the end of my second three-hour sleepless stint, and the eastern ridgeline shifts hues from black to blue to orange. The earth steams, losing its hard freeze. I roll up my sleeves and unzip my collar, trying to expose and warm my skin. The wind is gone now and the valley—do you call this a valley anymore? when half has been removed? what is it, a pit? an absence of geography?—is locked in and still. In a few minutes, Jake will shoot his flare and let me know that he is awake and moving and we can run around from daybreak to nightfall, when we’ll meet again and collect the next day’s provisions.

I slip around my pack and crouch over it, taking out a water bottle and a Ziploc of ibuprofen. I shake a few into my palm and throw them onto my tongue. The pain in my back is worse. I hardly slept in either of my sleeping shifts, instead rolling on the hard ground and considering the guards, the explosives, and Brett missing, and Kate, back on Big Ugly, and whether or not she’ll stay when I return.

Jake shoots off his flares. Three of them. Potassium nitrate combusts with the magnesium and burns into dawn sky, and without a wind the fire smolders high and long and the smoke remains constant and definite for a long while. The sky shifts from its daybreak colors to the ill-gray of winter and the smoke fades from its certain place in the sky to a trace, then from that trace to nothing. I waste ten minutes staring at the smoke and sky and now I’ve twenty to waste until I shoot off my flare and run again. I take out a book, but before I get even a few paragraphs in, the distant sound of blades stir the air and from somewhere beyond the mine a helicopter lifts over and above the trees and makes a direct line for the clear-cut.
“Parakeet,” the radio says.

“I see it, Red Wolf,” I say, pressing the receiver. “Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck.”

I push the water and pills and book back into my bag and head upslope into the trees where I’ll have more cover. A logjam fifty yards wide blocks my direct path and I try for a few moments to climb the trees, but they are thin and unstable and so instead I have to backtrack and go to the side around the piling up. The helicopter is now halfway across the mine. Dust is picking up over the open land—a fine, chalk-like dust, pulverized limestone—and it’s bowling around the machine and creating a long tail and getting stuck in the windless air. I’m nowhere near the forest when the copter is closing in on the cut and so I head back the way I came, back for the logjam, and when I’m close I lose my footing and fall onto my ass and slide a good way until I can catch myself on a stump. The copter is closer now. I can make out the lettering on its side and maybe see the figures in the cockpit. A cut throbs on my right calf, my pant leg torn in the spot. I make it to the logjam and take off my pack, slide underneath a trunk that’s held up by the shape of the land and the other logs below it, and then I pull my pack underneath and watch through a crack the copter approach and feel the beating of the air and the vibrating duff.

Now I’m consumed in dust. Everything—pine needles and last fall’s foliage from the forest above, the eroded topsoil, pink and orange pieces of tape used to mark trees for slaughter and since discarded and faded in the sun, the sticks and bones and dust of this mountain— together creates a whirlwind that ascends into the air with the approach of the copter and then descends and berates the land it came from. Underneath the logs I feel trapped in a wind tunnel, and I pull my parka up over my face to keep my eyes and mouth free of it. I can’t think it’s so
loud and I can’t look anymore for where the copter might be, but I can tell it’s near overhead and that it’s flying by slow.

And then the noise and torrent is gone, and the copter moves from overhead beyond and above the trees. After a few moments I pull myself out from underneath the logs, shaking like a dog and picking wet grit from my nose. I hike toward the forest cover, hoping Jake has found sufficient hiding and that this expensive and annoying flight has only cost the company time and money. They can have a helicopter if they want—but let them see nothing and let them fly it all day, let them throw themselves into an expensive rage. We will disappear and we will continue to light the sky—flare by flare—with our protest.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” says Jake.

He’s got my pant leg rolled up and my foot elevated onto a rock. The peroxide burns and sizzles, and he leans in close, like he’s going to sniff it.

“Tis but a scratch,” he says, and laughs. “My medic buddy used to say that for just about anything. It’s from Hamlet.”

“Romeo and Juliet,” I say.

“Pretty sure it’s Hamlet.”

“Nah, man,” I say. “Mercutio says it after getting the dagger wound.”

He tears the plastic off a wrap of gauze.

“Fuck,” I say, when he touches it to skin.

“It’s Shakespeare anyway.”

“I don’t know if I’m up to date on my tetanus shots. How long do those last?”

“Years,” he says. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”
He lifts my leg. “Fuck,” I say.

“What if I get tetanus?”

“You won’t get tetanus,” he says. He pats the bandage and rolls down the pant leg.

“Stand up and walk.”

I take a short walk around the rock he had my leg propped up on. It’s almost ten o’clock now and the sky is empty of clouds. The helicopter took a few turns over the mountain and then flew back to where it came from.

“How’s that feel?”

“Not too bad.”

“You can walk?”

“Yeah, I can walk.”

“You can run? You can jump? You can outrun a fatass hillbilly with a .45 and a badge?”

“I think so.”

He slaps my back and hikes up his pants. He packs the scissors and peroxide into his First Aid kit, packs that into his bag, and then hoists the bag onto his shoulder. I don’t want him to leave yet. They have a helicopter now and we both know the first shift of pickup trucks is coming soon, and I don’t want to be alone out here unsure of how fast I can run. I tell him this.

“Shoot when you see nothing. Stay low when you do.” He pauses. “You all right, Ethan?”

“I just don’t feel good about Brett.”

“Forget about him, man.”

“After we leave this mountain, they’re going to blow it up.”

“I know,” says Jake.
“Why are we the only two people in the world that want to save this place?”

“We’re not,” he says. “But we’re the ones here. And it’s our job right now.”

“I guess.”

“A few days before my first leave from basic,” Jake says, “I found out this girl I’d been with since high school was with this other dude. Some fucking forty-year-old miner.” He has on his sunglasses and carries no expression on his face. “Anyway, I wanted to stay the fuck out of West Virginia. So I booked a ticket to Montana, rented a car, and drove to Glacier National Park. I did some image search on the internet and it had the kind of mountains I wanted to see. It was April and nobody goes to Glacier in April so most of the roads into the park were still snowed-in. I hiked onto some random trail figuring I could just camp out, no tent, just this sleeping bag I’d picked up at Wal-Mart. It was cold that night. I couldn’t sleep. I had to get up and just do jumping jacks or I would have froze to death. But that’s not the point. It was a clear night that night. I could see more stars than I knew existed and for a second I didn’t feel like I was stuck to the planet. Like I wasn’t roofed in by trees or clouds or atmosphere or anything, but that it was just all out there and I was just another thing in it. I don’t know if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Anyway, it’s funny. I drove out there feeling like I wanted to die. Just fucking die. Here I was, looking down the barrel of a warzone and this dumb bitch breaks my heart. I wanted to hike one of those Glaciers and put a gun in my mouth. Looking at those stars, knowing nothing really matters much, I guess that was the only thing that stopped me.”

“God, man.”

“I know this shit’s hurting you.”

“What shit?”
“Kate.”

“Oh.”

“But she’s just a girl, Ethan. We got more important things to do here.”

He takes a breath like he’s getting ready to say something else, but then he just turns and walks back into the cut.

I watch him go. Then I take off my pants and piss on a tree trunk and change into an extra pair of thermals. I take the high road to the eastern part of the cut to make for easier walking. Fifteen minutes later I see Jake’s flares to the west—more than a mile off; he made good time without me. I cross a stream coming from higher up that flattens out to cross the road. The stream smells sulfuric like rotten eggs and is the color of rust. The road around the stream is mud, and below, in the new bed it’s created since the tearing of the mountain has rerouted its flow, is without any vegetation. I step through and take orange mud onto my boots.

I see a ledge in the cut and hike to it. The pain in my leg burns with every step down but it’s not affecting my gait. When I get to the ledge I turn on my phone and wait for the bars to appear. I call Patsy.

“Kate’s gone to Sherriff’s Office, just like you told her.”

“When did she leave?”

“Early,” says Patsy. “I was asleep.”

“Tell her to text with any info.”

“I’ll do that. You be careful now.”

“I am.”

“Alright, now.”
She hangs up without saying goodbye. From the ledge I can see over the remains of the thinned forest into the mine. At the edge of the cut begins the dull-brown that’s left over after the overburden is pushed into the fills and the coal is scraped clean. A mile or so farther is a ridge of trees that snakes partway into the mine. The cut along the ridge is jagged and vertical and the seams of earth—sandstone, limestone, shale, coal—appear stacked neat and even from the mine surface to the original surface where the trees still grow. In the center of the nearest pit is the dragline. These machines are the largest mobile vehicles on earth and consist of a small operating room situated on a set of caterpillar tracks, a truss-like boom that reaches out over the earth, and a wire-suspended shovel that can be thrown about and used to scrape away the overburden above the seams of coal. The booms extend more than 300 feet and the shovels dig up to 80 cubic yards at a time. The things cost tens of millions and are so massive that they have to be assembled on-site. They consume so much energy that they can’t run on fuel but have to plug right into the grid. Today this dragline sits immobile, waiting for us to get off this mountain so that the charges can go off and it can roll up and begin to scrap away the former forest floor. But nearby, 360-ton haul trucks circle about from the piles of coal to the switchback dirt roads out of the pit, like flies buzzing around the carcass of the dragline, coming down into the mine hungry and leaving full of that crushed black rock.

The engines of pickups on the eastern road sound across the cut. I check my watch. I’m five minutes early but I’ve got to get off a flare while they’re still far enough away not to pinpoint my location. So I do. Again I load the breech, aim in the direction of the dragline, squeeze the trigger, and brace my muscles against the recoil. The report echoes and the cartridge sizzles over the mine. I do it twice more, pack my gun, and then slide down from my ledge and run farther into the cut.
Dust clouds grow over the road and the wheels on gravel grow louder. The tear in my calf is pulsing, but I make it quick over the frozen earth and find an empty ravine to lower myself into. Though there’s no way they could spot me from the road above, I shovel leaves over my body as precaution and lay my head low in the cut of earth. Once, water must have flowed here to make this cut. The water maybe traveled through here until recently; maybe the sulfur and rust stream from above came this way before the mountain was shifted about and the trees cut and the earth prepped for removal. I close my eyes and listen to the truck and imagine the stream once more, flowing over, covering me and cleaning me and taking me down below, where there is a larger stream, out into a creek, maybe the size of Big Ugly, and maybe there are trout there and crawdads and mussels, and maybe, up along the banks are raccoons pawing out tadpoles and red wolves after the raccoons and gray wolves chasing the red wolves off the kill and big black bears skulking around, and maybe elk, too, their impressive racks clattering against the thick trunks of the gone chestnuts, of the gone hemlocks, all mammoth and ancient and holding tight to the mountains edges and smooth, green moss-covered valleys.

The trucks reach the road overhead and move on. The cloud lifts and settles and I stand from my hiding spot to watch the dust move west to where Jake must now be hiding, somewhere under the brush and waste of earth, somewhere among the litter of saw chips and sandwich bags and coke cans.
When my father found out I’d gotten my great-aunt arrested, he took a week off from work and came to stay at Big Ugly. He arrived while Kate and I were up in the meadow practicing yoga on mats of old cardboard boxes. Patsy had given me some money to buy a push mower because she liked the idea of keeping the graveyard neat, and after uncovering the old names, I lugged the thing up to the meadow where Dencil’s old trailer rusted away and cleared a spot in the grass with the best view. Kate and I were both in downward dog, the trim weeds scratching against the cardboard surface every time we shifted our weight, and then wheels crunched on gravel and dust rose over the trees as my father turned up from the creek.

“Is he going to be mad?” Kate asked.

“My dad doesn’t get mad,” I said. “Just quiet.”

Grasshoppers scraped their instruments together and we held our final pose, and then folded up our cardboard and walked back down the hill. Tart pink starts of blackberries grew in the hardened mud along the road and swallows shot over our heads toward the mountaintop. We passed the old house and went straight to Patsy’s. We found my father bent down at the edge of my garden.

“Pole beans,” he said, picking a just-ripe finger of green. “We lived on this stuff when I was a kid.”

“I’m selling salad greens and some veggies to friends in Charleston now,” I said. “Makes a little money.”

“Good for you,” he said.

He gave me a hug and then I introduced him to Kate.
“Here,” he said, and leaned in to hug her as well.

“I’ve heard a lot of about you, Mr. Hart.”

“Call me Robert.”

“I will.”

“You know I thought about doing this a lot when I was younger. Growing my own food and all that. Of course I didn’t actually own the place like Ethan.”

“Did you come here a lot?” she asked.

“Sometimes. I spent some summers with Aunt Patsy and my grandmother when I was young. She lived a long time.”

“From Patsy’s stories, your grandmother sounds like an incredible woman,” said Kate.

He nodded. “How’s Patsy?” he asked me.

“She’s great,” I said. “Playing fiddle, breaking the law.”

“I’m writing a check to that group to reimburse them for your bail,” he said.

“You don’t have to do that, Dad.”

“I do.”

We followed my father inside. In the kitchen, I started a pot of coffee and listened to my father and Patsy talk about me. He said something about me not finishing school. She told him I was a good worker. Kate told them it wasn’t so easy for young people anymore, that the economy was rough and a lot of her friends that had graduated couldn’t find good work. Patsy corroborated with something she’d read in Reader’s Digest. The black liquid dripped and filled the pot. I could smell the trees directly uphill of the kitchen window. Limbs hung over the house that Patsy wanted me to remove, but I hadn’t gotten around to yet. They creaked in the breeze.
I brought in the coffee and we talked about nothing for a long time and then Patsy decided to take a walk to the graveyard. My father wanted to drive her to the top but she insisted on walking. The four of us took the hill slowly, Patsy’s arm threaded into my father’s. He’d just turned sixty the year before, and was having trouble with the hill himself. The surgeries had started when I was still in high school—something with his cataracts, a knee replacement, gallbladder removal—but now I was losing track of all the newest things wrong with his body. My father was becoming an old man, and though I was still young and spry, the fact of it meant I was next in line. He made the hill fine, even if a little out of breath, and then he stopped at the chicken coop. My six hens were picking through a bucket of turnip greens I’d dumped out for them that morning. I got a little over two dozen eggs each week, which meant we scrambled eggs for breakfast, boiled them for lunch, and baked them into quiches for dinner.

“Rhode island reds,” Patsy said. “Ma and I used to have that kind.”

“They’re heavy layers,” I said.

“That’s right,” she said.

I opened the wire gate and we all entered the graveyard.

“Ethan’s been keeping it up good,” Patsy told my father. “It’s nice having somebody strong around the place.”

There were a dozen gravestones in all. Dencil’s was the newest, its surface glossy and text sharp, and next to him lay a brother, Abe, lost in the Second World War and two infants lost in 1933 and 1934, one named ‘Baby Hart’ and one named ‘Little Elma’ Hart. On a row below them was a plaque for my uncle Lewis, who drowned in the Chesapeake near Bethlehem Steel before I was born and whose body never surfaced, and on a row above Dencil was Bobby Hart, Patsy’s father, and the plaque for Elma Means. At the opposite side of the vaguely geometric
graveyard were headstones for James and Elizabeth McKitrick, Bobby’s parents, and four
McComas’ I’d never heard of before—one of them a veteran of the “Great War,” one a woman
named Vestie McComas who lived from 1866 to 1950, and the other two a couple in their sixties
that died three months apart in 1957. I asked Patsy about the McComas side, and how well she
knew them.

“I remember Grandma Bittie, but all the others were just old folks who died and needed
some family ground to rest in. They were second cousins or great aunts and uncles. That kind of
thing. My daddy got this place from an uncle without any kids. He always said that a bunch of
the McComas’ were bitter it didn’t stay with that side and always refused to call it the Hart place
because they said that name come out of nowhere anyhow.”

“Where did the name come from?” I asked.

“My daddy changed it before the war. My granddaddy was a striker and made a bad
name for himself. He had some brothers, too, all of them from Scotland and all of them
troublemakers. My daddy thought things’d be easier for him with a different name. Harts is the
name of a town on the Guyan. I don’t know if that had anything to do with it.”

“Patsy,” I said, “you remember that time my grandfather brought me up here right before
he died? We were looking for some box buried with Elma. Do you know what was in it?”

“You were trying to find Ma’s body?”

“Yeah. Do you know why?”

“I don’t know why that man didn’t just ask.”

“Do you know what he was looking for?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Bullets.”

“She was shot?” asked Kate.
“No, she died of natural causes. But it was the bullets that killed my grandfathers.”

“Oh yeah,” my father said. “This story.”

“What story?” I asked.

“They use to say that both their grandfathers were shot on the exact same day,” my father said. “One in West Virginia and one in Oklahoma.”

“That’s what they told us,” Patsy said.

“How’d they get shot?” asked Kate.

“The details don’t add up,” my father said, but Patsy answered the question anyway.

“My father’s father was in the Cabin Creek uprising, during the mine wars. A Baldwin-Felts agent shot him through the chest with a Gatling gun. And then my mother’s father got in an argument with a government agent who was taking my mother to her boarding school. They used to take Indian children from their homes and force them into boarding schools all over the country. Anyway, they said it happened on the same day and that they both saw it happen. They both kept the bullets. I guess it was part of how they got to know each other, seeing as how they had such a similar story.”

“That’s incredible,” said Kate.

“It’s not all true,” said my father.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well, when my father used to tell the story, the gun that killed Bobby Hart’s father was posted on a train that opened fire on the strike camp they were living in. They said he sat up in the tent when he heard the whistle and the bullet went right through his chest. Uncle Johnny said it happened in a company store over an argument about how his money didn’t work. And Elma always said she didn’t remember when she was taken from her family, or even what tribe or
town she came from, yet somehow she remembers exactly what day her father was shot and somehow got to keep the bullet.”

“That’s what they said, anyway,” said Patsy. “I’m just repeating what they said.”

“So you never met your grandfathers?” asked Kate.

“Nope. They were dead at least. That part is true.”

“And anyway,” my father said. “Look. On James McKitrick’s grave it says he died in 1914. The Cabin Creek wars were in 1912. I looked it up in a book when I was in college and the story doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m just saying what they said to me,” Patsy said. “Quit being so uppity, Robbie.”

“Well, it’s a good story,” said Kate.

“Anyway, that’s what they said.” Patsy turned now and walked out of the mowed graveyard, and then stopped at the porch of the old house. She reached out and grabbed the rail to hold herself up. A wasp hovered in front of her face and she batted it away. “Ethan,” she said, “you got any of that bourbon?”

“Yeah, there’s some in there.”

“Let’s make us a drink.”

I walked past her and up the porch. “How do you want it?” I asked.

“Ice,” she said.

“I haven’t got any ice up here.”

“Kate,” she said, turning to where Kate had wandered over by the chicken coop. “Run and get us some ice. And get my fiddle, will you? I don’t get up here enough.”

Kate left us and jogged downhill. Her skirt caught wind and lifted behind her as she went.

“You want a chair, Patsy?” I asked
“That’d be nice,” she said. My father stood in front of Dencil’s grave with his arms crossed against his chest. “I don’t know why your daddy can’t just believe a good story. What’s it matter if it ain’t all exactly true? Ain’t no use in arguing with the past.”

The next morning I convinced Kate to look once more for that metal box with me. We took a shovel and went up the same path Dencil had instructed me on a few years ago, and once we got to the boulder started combing the hillside just as I had before when I first felt Arch blast these mountains. We hunted for the chestnut, even a fallen or rotten chestnut, but nearly an hour had passed and Kate sat against a tree and we passed a water bottle back and forth.

“Why do you think they buried it?” she asked me.

“I have no clue. Or how come Patsy didn’t tell my grandfather what was in the box in the first place or why couldn’t he just ask instead of sending me up here for it or why’d they decide to bury Elma way up here at all.”

“To be closer to the mountain,” said Kate.

“Down there’s not close enough?” I asked.

“Why are you getting angry?”

“I’m not angry.”

She passed me a carrot and Tupperware of homemade hummus and we stopped talking about it.

“How long do you think you’ll live here?” Kate asked, a question she’d asked before.

“If I can get a farm going,” I said. “I don’t know. Why?”

“There’s a lot of places I want to live besides West Virginia.”

“Well, live there.”
“I want to live there with you.”

“Like where?”

“Anywhere,” she said. “We’re young. We’re not tied down.”

“Don’t you think young people like us just living all over the place is part of the problem? We’re some of the few that get it, Kate. We have to pick somewhere and stay put and make it better. Us leaving West Virginia just means there are two less people in West Virginia that give a fuck.”

“Do you even like it here, Ethan?”

“That’s not the point,” I said. “And yeah, I do.”

“Let’s go somewhere,” she said. “After the fall and there’s nothing more to harvest, let’s go somewhere crazy. Let’s go to Ecuador.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

I pitched the butt of my carrot into the woods and handed her the empty Tupperware.

“Come on,” I said. “I bet they put the grave way out over there where Arch already blew it up anyway.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know if anything they say is true.”

As we were going down the hill side by side, me carrying the shovel over my shoulder so that the blade swung behind me, I slipped on a rock and turned the shovel into the side of Kate’s head. She put her hand to her ear and came away with blood.

“Shit,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Jesus. Watch it.”
“I said I was sorry. It was an accident.”

She made a kind of angry growl and pushed me in the chest. I didn’t react, just took the step back and looked down at the bloody print on my white t-shirt. She walked ahead without me. It would take her the whole walk to calm down, but when she finally did, we took off my shirt and nailed it to the wall. The pits were stained with days of sweat and on the left breast the blood from her slap had begun to darken and dry, the creases in her palm distinct, telling a fortune for anyone who might be able to read that sort of thing.
Lowered to my haunches, I eat from a bag of sunflower seeds, grinding them to a gritty butter with my molars. I am thinking about a hot coffee and blowing air into my numb fingers. The phone rings and rings and rings, and then the machine:

“This is Patsy Hart. If you’re trying to reach myself or Ethan Hart or Kate Stefanowicz, we’re not here right now but we’ll likely be back soon. Leave your name and number and we’ll get back to you soon as we’re able.”

Then the beep.

“It’s me. Just checking in. I still don’t have any word from Kate, so just send word via text as soon as you have any. We’re anxious to know if there’s any news on Brett. We haven’t seen or heard anything and all is fine here.”

I hang up and stuff the phone into my pocket.

When I kill my headlamp, my eyes adjust to a sky absent of clouds but full of a host of stars and the Milky Way belting them and our sun and us with it. I think for a moment of how fast we’re hurling through space, locked to our planet locked to a star, and how it feels so still here, even the sounds of the forest gone with the logged trees and the winter season. I hold in a crouch at a noise in the brush below, ready to run or fight or freeze. The headlamp appears swinging back and forth at the ground ahead and then I hear the figure hack and spit and know it’s Jake.

“Red Wolf?” I say.

“Yes,” he says.

He throws his bag onto the ground and sits next to me on my rock.
“I’m fucking tired,” he says.

“Don’t go so far from point to point,” I say. “I saw your flares. It seemed like they were almost a mile apart each time.”

“I want them to think there are a whole bunch of fuckers up here.”

“Two is enough.”

“Two days,” he says. “How much money is that?”

“A lot.”

“A lot of money.”

“I want coffee.”

“I want to change my socks,” he says as he unlaces his boots and peels off his wet wool socks.

“Turn off your headlamp,” I say. “And look at the stars.”

He clicks from high to dim to red to off, and I see him crane his neck upwards.

“I wish I knew one from the other,” he says. “I can’t even find the Big Dipper.”

“It’s right there.”

“Oh,” he says, following my outstretched arm. He swivels his head about to take in every corner of the sky, and then drops his gaze and pulls his feet to his chest to pick at something on his foot. “You got to think of all the shit that we just don’t know anymore. Like we know how to make these incredible machines that can fly in the air and dive into the deepest part of the ocean and make it to Mars, but most of us can’t even use the night sky to find our way or know how to live off the woods.”

“We don’t know how to make those machines,” I say.

“But at least you know some things about what you can eat in the woods.”
“Not enough to survive,” I say.

“Well, then we’re just about the two stupidest motherfuckers in the history of the human race. We can’t build machines like good modern humans, and we don’t know food from poison like good ancient humans. We’re a worthless bunch of assholes.”

I laugh and hand him the sunflower seeds and go about setting out things for the next day. Just then the phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out to see that Kate calling. I stand on the rock next to Jake and answer.

“They’re holding him at the Sheriff’s Office,” she says.

“For what?” I ask. “Trespassing?”

“Is that Brett?” Jake asks. “Let me talk to him.” He holds his hand out for the phone.

“It’s Kate,” I say, and Jake lowers his hand.

“Reckless endangerment, trespassing, and unlawfully discharging a firearm in public,” she says.

“They charged him already?” I ask.

“I talked to a guy from Appalachian Justice and they’re sending someone to post his bail.”


“I don’t know,” she says.

“That’s fucked up.”


“Reckless endangerment and discharging a firearm in public,” I tell Jake.

“And trespassing,” Kate says through the phone.
“And trespassing,” I tell Jake.

“It won’t stick,” he says. “They’re just trying to tie him up.”

“How’d they find him?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “But Greg said it was a guard and not a cop that brought him down.”

“Why’d he fucking stop for a guard?” I say.

“Don’t get mad at me,” she says.

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Let me talk to her,” Jake says, turning open his hand again.

“So are you coming down?” she asks. “Or do you want some felony charges for yourself?”

“They had a helicopter up here today,” I say.

“Ethan,” she says.

“Give me the phone,” says Jake. I rotate my torso so that he can’t grab at it.

“You did what you wanted to do,” she says.

“Not yet,” I say.

She pauses for a long time and Jake asks for the phone again.

“There’s supposed to be a winter storm system coming,” she says. “That’s all anyone was talking about at the station today.”

“It’s gonna snow?” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. “A lot.”

“When?”

“In a few days. Maybe by Thursday.”
“We’ll be down by then,” I say.

“What?” asks Jake.

“There’s a snowstorm coming,” I say.

“Oh,” he says. “Can’t run in a snowstorm.”

“Is that all?” she asks.

“That’s all,” I say, and she hangs up the phone.

I hold the power button and then stuff the phone back into my pocket. It is a pre-paid burner, like the kind that drug dealers use. We’ve long since assumed that our calls and e-mails are being monitored. None of us—Jake, me, Brett, Kate—have ever had any proof, but when the FBI considers the top domestic terror threat a bunch of eco-hippies on the West Coast and animal liberators in the Midwest, it stands to reason that all us Appalachian kids in the anti-coal movement are being closely monitored.

Jake and I stuff our bags with a new day’s worth of food and part without saying anything else.

I take to the eastern half of the cut again and Jake heads west, now that we know the easiest ways around the terrain. This chunky gravel road makes for better walking than crisscrossing the steep slopes of discarded lumber, stumps, and icy rocks. The stars have changed position now, even from only before. Jake shoots three flares, each with a chemical burst of life before the trails of smoke dim in the starlight.

Then I am awash in the sodium light and I can’t see the sky, only the harsh shadows and color of my clothes and the gravel at my feet, and just as I am aware of the motor and the tires, a door opens and two sets of boots rush forward into silhouetted bodies in the headlights. I throw myself against the rock wall to the left and into the dark. “Hey,” says one of the voices. “Boy.”
Both sets of boots start into a jog, and so I come out from the wall, cross once more through that sodium light, and take a jump from the road into the ditch. I hit the ground on all fours, quickly fish my headlamp from my pocket and strap it to my forehead, then switch on the red light and climb the bank of the ditch, but one of the men grabs my pack and pulls me back into the ditch, and then his hand is on my shoulder, so I snap the buckle loose at my waist and arch my shoulder backwards like I’m taking a swan dive and now I am free of the weight and running.

I see two flashlight beams on my shoulders and the tree trunks in front of me, exposing the winter-cracked bark and the slashes of spray-paint that saved them from the cutting. The men are huffing and calling out. I weave through the trees and run face-first into hawthorn, my face numbing and warming as my nylon clothing fights the branches. I move around it, heading always down and toward the mine, making big leaps when I come to a rock edge. Already the voices are dying back and the flashlights no longer reach me or the surrounding trunks. I’m moving down, and now through the trees are the floodlights of the temporary office buildings.

Then my boot catches and I lunge forward, and my palms go out but when I expect them to hit ground, they don’t, and I free-fall until my face catches a branch that turns me halfway to the left so that I hit ground on my side and the wind leaves me and my legs go up overhead and windmill my whole body around, my hands grasping at air and sometimes weak and snapping branches, and then my knees find earth, and they feel wet and cold, and then I come down hard as the ground shoots up through my chest and that’s the last thing I remember.
A few weeks before we left Big Ugly to join the March on Blair in that hot and dry August, I lost my tomatoes to some fungus that would rot their bottoms before they had a chance to ripen. That summer I had a booth at a Charleston farmers’ market, and though I didn’t always show up with much—at most three hundred bucks of veggies, greens, mushrooms, extra eggs—I was banking a good deal of my income for the coming weeks on those four beds of tomatoes. I was standing in the field salvaging fruit for my own use and throwing the ruined fruit into the trees when Kate came down the hill and told me her father in Wisconsin wasn’t doing well.

“Are you going up there?”

“I might have to soon,” she said. “Not sure.”

“Look at this,” I said, holding a tomato to her. “They pretty much all look like this.”

She stood there, the plants and their cages between us, the sun hot and the leaves yellow.

“What?” I asked.

“My father is about to die.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I dropped the fruit and stepped over the bed to hug her. She didn’t reciprocate, but let her arms hang idle. She was wearing a tank top and her skin was sticky with sweat. After a moment I let her go and she walked for Patsy’s house. A few hours later, after I sorted out anything salvageable, I found the two reaching across the kitchen table holding hands, the air-conditioning blasting and glasses of sweet tea leaving rings of condensation at their elbows.
Kate was crying, but when I stood at the door with a delivery of tomatoes for Patsy’s kitchen, she didn’t look up. Patsy met my eyes, though, and her expression told me I wasn’t needed, and so I left my gift of food and went alone to my shack on the hill.

Kate’s father bounced back and left the hospital a few days later, but she remained frustrated with me for all my minor slights and my supposed lack of compassion. The cafe she’d worked at for three years had gone out of business right around the time her lease ended and so to save money she was living fulltime at Ugly now. She didn’t call it that, but it’s what she was doing. I told her with her help, I could make a lot more off the gardens. She bought a pair of gardening boots and got excited about the idea, but she was never willing to wake up early in the morning or work through the afternoon heat. The operation was still me, alone. She seemed to have lost all the passion for being up there that she had when she was just visiting. Now that it was an indefinitely permanent situation, she seemed to complain a lot more often. “This house is a fucking bug trap,” she’d say, every wasp, beetle, mosquito, horsefly, or silverfish an affront to her existence. On the day we left for the march, I called her a hypocrite for spending the night in Patsy’s house with the A/C and we hadn’t said more than a few words to each other all morning.

Because I had the truck, we were asked to ferry groups from a parking garage in downtown Charleston to this warehouse the organizers had rented in Marmet, a few miles south on the Kanawha, that monstrous riverbanked with slag piles, conveyor belts penetrating mines, houses perched on small cliffs above the road, and several hydroelectric dams making long and flat waterfalls. Jake had hitched into Charleston and showed up at the parking garage by foot. I noticed immediately his commanding physical presence. He stood a few a inches above me, wore a tattooed half-sleeve on his right arm, and moved his two hundred pounds of muscle about
like an athlete. He took slow steps and shuffled when he walked, but I could sense an explosiveness just below his surface. He paced between two trees, keeping to himself until a load of New Yorkers showed up, each of them with two or three times as much baggage as he had, and we all crammed into my truck and drove to Marmet. In the back bench the New Yorkers talked excitedly about how this new revolution would be a peaceful one.

“I don’t know, man,” said Jake. “What revolution ever succeeded without resorting to arms?”

“Gandhi,” said one of the New Yorkers. “He got the British out of India.”

“Martin Luther King,” said another.

“First,” Jake said, “black people still aren’t equal in this country. So King had a good message, but I think civil rights could have been pushed a lot further if Malcolm X hadn’t gone soft and gotten shot. Second, Gandhi might have pushed the British government out of India, but it’s only because they decided to act like the British. Oppression wears a lot of masks, man. The whole Western mentality is like a disease that’s got the whole planet on the edge. Take most of Africa. They pushed out colonial powers only to get a series of fucked-up, genocidal dictators.”

They argued back and forth. I made a few comments, but Kate appeared not to be paying attention. When we got to the warehouse, I helped the New Yorkers with their bags, and on the way in to get them registered and unpacked, we passed a few anarchists rolling cigarettes on their knees. The anarchists wore animal bones dreaded into their hair, homemade tattoos, and jeans so torn the patches had become the real clothing. These people made Kate almost counterfeit—but she stopped to talk to someone she knew, a just-out-of-puberty kid with a faint mustache and a beard of acne. They all smelled like tobacco and diesel fuel. I stood beside her for a moment, expecting to be introduced to the crowd, but now in conversation, she pretended to
not know I was there. I suppose I embarrassed her in my expensive hiking boots, cargo shorts, and Orioles t-shirt. I left her and went inside.

Volunteers were checking in new arrivals and desperately asking for donations.

“Sorry,” said the head New Yorker, “I didn’t bring any cash.”

“There’s an ATM at the gas station,” said the volunteer, who had bright purple hair and librarian glasses. “It costs us about one-fifty per head, and we need as much of that as we can get.”

“Okay,” he said, and then laughed to his companions. “Anybody want to go get some cash?”

I walked past a forming mountain of sleeping bags and kids sprawled across the floor hand painting signs, took some stairs up to a second level, and then got roped up by one of the organizers and sent into a conjoining room. There I joined a mandatory workshop on effective and peaceful civil disobedience run by an Australian veteran of the anti-coal movement in Queensland. She had us form a circle and introduce ourselves—name, where we were from, and why we came here. Most people were young, college aged, and from the states with a backyard in Appalachia—Kentucky, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia. A few were older. There was a guy from New Mexico who congratulated us “young folks” on bringing the movement back. A tall Navajo man gave a speech about how we were destroying the land, and as he went on, he seemed to make no distinction between “you” the activists, “you” the white people, and “you” the coal companies.

Jake stood beside me and leaned in. “I heard this Indian dude walked here all the way from Black Mesa,” he said.

“This guy?” I asked.
“Badass,” he said, shaking his head.

When the circle came around to us I learned that Jake Esposito had done two tours of duty in Iraq as an Army machine gunner, and that he was from McDowell County in the southernmost part of the state. The Australian gave us a rundown of what she meant by peaceful resistance. The philosophy of the march, as I had gathered so far, was not to engage with the inevitable squabbles, but to peaceably walk the road, and to not do anything inflammatory to test of the good will of the state police. Our goal was to reach Blair Mountain, and any sort of violent or unpredictable behavior from the marchers would not be tolerated.

The Australian handed six people plastic batons and sent them into a backroom. The rest of us she had line up.

“Here’s the scenario,” she said. “You’re blocking the entrance to a mining road and the police are about to arrive. Your goal is to block the road for as long as possible without getting arrested.”

We formed an unorganized huddle to block the front side of the room and waited.

“Are you planning to get arrested?” asked Jake, who had stuck by my side after leaving the circle.

“Not planning on it,” I said. “I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“I hope this shit gets intense,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m ready, that’s all.”

The fake police turned the corner and charged with their batons. They started cracking skulls and pulling people from the huddle by their elbows until they had “arrested” about fifteen.
“Okay, stop,” said the Australian. “What happened here? So many of your comrades have been taken into custody—they’re breaking your line.”

“We didn’t stick together,” said the hippie from Santa Fe.

“Right,” said the Australian. “Alone, the cops can pull you away, but they can’t arrest all of you at once.”

She gave some instructions, formed us all into several rows, and had us lock our elbows.

This time the cops came out and tugged and then the line mostly held. “Everybody sit down,” said the Navajo man, and everybody dropped to their asses. Now when the cops pulled on one set of elbows the whole line pulled back and held shape. The Australian congratulated us and we formed back into a circle. A lawyer in her late forties joined us in the room and gave us a briefing on the legal risks we all might take at some point in the week.

“We’re not expecting any mass arrests,” she said, “but there will be an action later in the week which some of you may decide to participate in. There will likely be arrests then.”

“What kind of action?” asked Jake.

“It hasn’t been decided yet, but we will discuss that when it comes.”

Our group left and another entered for their own peace training. Outside they were serving food—rice and stir-fry vegetables—and everyone was taking plates and finding spots to sit along the ledges and in the grass beside the tracks. More people had shown up now, and the gravel lot behind the warehouse was swarming with activists of all types. The large majority of people seemed to be contingencies from nearby universities; then there were the vagrant anarchists, who all seemed as if they had just train-hopped from the last protest event and would leave the March on Blair for another; the Sierra Club type middle-agers, who had taken the week off from nice jobs in Louisville and Raleigh and Columbus; the independent media moguls and
activist bloggers; and lastly, punctuating the crowd of out-of-staters were a handful of West Virginians with either an interest in the labor history of Blair Mountain, a grudge against the destruction of MTR, or, like Jake (who followed me into the grass between the porta-potties and the train tracks and sat beside me with his plate of food) those who didn’t need to know a lot about the problem at hand to find the required anger to attend.

“You a vegetarian?” asked Jake, forking rice into his mouth. “Seems like all these protest people are vegetarians.”

“Not really. Sometimes. You?”

“I’m an opportunarian,” he said. “Like a fucking raccoon. Tell me about yourself.”

On top of the warehouse, which we were both facing, a group of about twenty had taken a staircase onto the roof and were playing guitars, banjos, washboards, pots and spoons, and tambourines. Somebody even had a didgeridoo. They weren’t playing a recognizable song, but just all playing at once, trying to find some sort of rhythm and harmony with their call and response and banging.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Do you do a lot of stuff like this?”

“A few things before,” I said. “I was arrested at the protest at Dove Branch.”

“How long did you spend in jail?”

“Just a few hours. And just in some random room of the station.”

He laughed. “I’ve never done anything like this before. I saw my first mining site two months ago.”

“It’s pretty hard to look at.”
“It’s fucked,” he said. “I used to take my four-wheeler up this mountain when I was a kid—I’m from this town called Bishop—and I went there again when I got back from Iraq, and the place was just fucked, totally fucked. I did some research on the internet. Here I am.”

Another train went by. It was the fourth or fifth I’d noticed in the few hours I’d spent in and out of the warehouse. The noise on the roof disappeared as the tracks rattled, but one person, a young kid, probably in his late teens, climbed on top of an air vent about three feet off the floor of the roof and screamed. Even though I was fifteen feet from the train, and I could hardly sense my own heartbeat, this kid’s voice carried, harsh, throaty, and furious. His face turned red and he beat out the clatter of steel that raced by us. He kept going, too, and when the train roared away, giving one more sound of its horn as it rolled down the valley, the kid let up and bent over to catch his breath. The crowd of marchers cheered, all with their plastic plates in hands, their mouths full of donated bread and stir-fry vegetables. The kid gave a bow and then with a single whoop of the banjo player the motley group of musicians started up again and everybody returned to their meals.

When Kate returned, dinner was over and the plates washed in the makeshift kitchen behind the warehouse, and everyone was gathered in the main room listening to a historian from West Virginia Tech, a small college a few towns upriver. Every available chair was in use and on the second floor, which ringed the first floor on three sides almost like a balcony, and people dangled their feet through the handrails. Kate and two others came in the front of the warehouse, the double doors creaking and half the crowd throwing their attention in her direction. She shrunk her head into her shoulders as a kind of apology and tiptoed to the back of the room. I
tried to make eye-contact with her, scooting inwards on the bench I was sharing to allow her a seat at the end, but she either didn’t see me or pretended not to.

The historian was talking about the 1921 battle in Blair—my great-grandfather Bobby Hart’s Blair—and the series of events that led up to the armed insurrection. He told us about the company towns and the company scrip that only worked at the inflated company store, of the gunpoint evictions, the spells of dysentery and cholera, the black workers and European immigrants forced into a government-sanctioned slavery. He told the story of Sid Hatfield, sheriff of Matewan, who became a hero to the miners when he resisted the illegal evictions, and who later, while on trial for gunning down some company goons in broad daylight, was himself gunned down in broad daylight on the McDowell County courthouse steps. This slaying of a hero led to swift and intense militarization among the miners, and when a rally at the Charleston state capital called by union leaders Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney led to an unsatisfying response from the governor, over ten thousand men took arms and gathered near Marmet, the very town where we sat. The miners were mostly veterans of the First World War or the Spanish-American War, and they made plans to march to “Bloody Mingo” County, a place with some of the worst living conditions. One group of miners hijacked a coal train and had it carry men to Mingo. But the gun-slinging, ballot-rigging sheriff Don Chafin, known as the “Czar of Logan Town,” organized his own army of private detectives, Pinkerton agents, and other miners forced to take arms against their own. They had machine guns, homemade bombs and private planes, and a few days to prepare a fortress between the thousands of angry miners and the mines they sought to unionize. The radical Mother Jones, the famed socialist organizer, turned soft or senile in her last days, pleaded with the men not to take the fight to Mingo. And President Warren Harding himself sent in the National Guard and flew in bombers to demand an end to the unrest.
This put off some men, not wanting to go to war with their own country. But it didn’t stop them all, and miners poured in from all over coal country and gun battles raged across Blair and the surrounding mountains. But after a week, the miners, out-weaponed and losing their numbers, took up their many dead and headed home. The coal companies had won—nearly a thousand miners were indicted for murder, conspiracy, and treason against the state; the unions took the blow, and the mines continued on as usual.

“You have to understand the context of what you’re doing,” said the historian, who wore a red bandana around his neck—just like the striking miners—and pushed his spectacles up his sweaty nose. “You have to understand you are at the epicenter of a region with a long history of struggle and oppression, and that all the societal ills of Appalachia today directly correlate to the ills of Appalachia one hundred years ago. We are not an isolated moment in time. We are connected through history, through a shared story and through blood to the people who struggled before us.”

The historian ceded the floor to an old and stumpy fellow, whose pudgy arms shot out of his highlighter yellow shirt and whose trim white hair fell sweaty from his highlighter yellow hat. The audience got to their feet and cheered before he said a word, and the ruckus lasted a full minute before the crowd allowed him to speak. “First of all,” he said. “I want to say how proud I am of all y’all being here. I been fighting a long time. And your faces are beautiful.”

This man was Larry Gibson. A modern day hero of Kanawha County, living on Kayford Mountain at the edge of a mine, and legendary for all the hell he fit into his tiny body. He spoke in a thick West Virginia accent, and as he went on, I found myself leaning forward to catch all of his words. His accent, paired with a slur and a habit for non-sequiturs, made him difficult to follow. But he replaced his lack of clarity with an overwhelming passion, and just thirty seconds
into his speech he had everyone leaning in, jaws hanging open, and a whispering chorus of snapping fingers in response to the points he made.

“I want to offer solidarity for those in Wisconsin and Michigan and Ohio fighting for the Right to Work, and fighting against their union-busting governors. And solidarity, too, to those people in the Middle East fighting for their rights against corrupt governments.” One of the organizers, who had been toying with cables and a speaker while Larry started, offered him a microphone. “S’Alright,” he said. “Can y’all hear me?” he asked. “Can y’all hear me?” He was shouting this time.

The crowd shouted back.

“Blair Mountain,” Larry shouted, “one of the most historical sites in our national history, is slated to be destroyed by Massey Energy and Arch Coal. They’re gonna take that land that miners died on, fighting for their rights to a living wage, and blow it to nothing.”

He told us that it was time to stand up. That this was the largest anti-MTR protest ever, and that our voices would be heard. As he spoke, I saw among the faces gathered here—from teenagers to the elderly, from the veteran protestor to the novice—that there was hope and energy in the room. We were the people that had fought to put Barack Obama in office three years before, and the people, too, that the President had left behind in his quest for non-partisanship. We were the people who felt the warming of the planet, who spent hours crying over images of the BP oil spill in 2010, and who were kept awake at night by the statistics on the ongoing extinctions. We’d come here with a variety of goals—to preserve the labor history of Blair Mountain, to recognize the dismantling of unions nationally, to end MTR, and some to end coal entirely and pursue a new paradigm.
“But we’re here to stop all that,” said Larry. “They might have the money, but we have the heart.”

When Larry was done, the crowd gave him another standing ovation, and then an organizer gave us some details about the morning and told us to get some sleep. I got my toothbrush from my bag in the luggage cave and went to the porta-potties, brushing my teeth with about two dozen others. We all passed around a water bottle and spit onto the tracks. In the neighboring gas station parking lot, in the blinking light of a lamppost, a group of teenage girls stood in the bed of a pickup. Their stereo was blasting Montgomery Gentry’s “My Town” and they held up a sign that read “Go Home Treehuggers.”

“Go home,” one of them shouted at us as we passed around a tube of toothpaste.

One of the marchers, a man in his forties or fifties, spit the toothpaste out of his mouth and shouted back. “This is about justice.”

“Hey,” someone else said, and put a hand on his chest. “Leave it alone.”

The girls shouted “Treehuggers” again, more fiercely now.

The man spat again and walked back to the warehouse. Jake stood beside me, brushing his teeth. “Ignorant,” he said, letting some foamy spit dribble down his chin into his beard.

“Fucking ignorant.”

Inside the second room of the warehouse, the room where we had our peaceful protest training, I laid out two sleeping bags for Kate and me. I hadn’t talked to her, but our stuff was packed together in my bag, and so I saved her a spot whether or not she’d take it. Jake dragged a piece of cardboard and a Mexican blanket over to me.

“Mind if I sleep here?” he said.
“Please.”

In our few hours out of the room someone had laid tracks of duct tape along a carpeted floor to designate sleeping areas and walkways, and now the room filled up with people. Jake lay down on his cardboard and covered himself with the blanket, but whoever had put the duct tape down hadn’t accounted for someone so tall, and his feet shot into the walkway even though he had his head against the wall. Someone tripped over his feet and excused themselves.

“I didn’t know about all that history, man,” Jake said.

“I knew a little about it,” I said, “Not that much.”

“I can’t believe they don’t teach that shit in school. I took West Virginia history in the eighth grade and they just don’t teach none of that shit. I swear it’s a giant fucking conspiracy to make the corporations look like heroes all the time. I didn’t get any of this shit before Iraq, but now it just makes too much fucking sense.”

Kate appeared and took a place on the other side of me. She reached over my body to shake hands with Jake, and then one of the organizers flipped out the lights and asked us all to respect each other and keep quiet. “We all have a long day tomorrow,” she said.

Jake began snoring within minutes of lights out, and I turned my body toward Kate and put my arm around her. She didn’t respond at first, but eventually placed her hand on my forearm and squeezed.

“Where’d you go today?” I whispered.

“I know some people from St. Paul.”

“Who?”

“Just some people, Ethan.”

“Are you mad at me?”
“No,” she said. “It was good to catch up with old friends.”

She turned and kissed me on the forehead, her way of telling me to stop talking and go to sleep. Her body eventually twitched, and by that time the muttered conversation and laughter in the room was replaced with a chorus of snoring. As soon as I started to drift from coherent thought the lights came on again and all the bodies began to stir.

“Sorry to wake you—” It was the same organizer who an hour before had shut out the lights. “But we’ve just gotten word from a reliable source that about a dozen pickup trucks met up in Madison and are headed our way. They’ve been drinking, and we’re not really sure what their intentions are.” The room shifted, a hundred sleeping nylon sleeping bags scratching the carpet. Those who remained asleep were shaken awake. “I don’t want to freak you out, but we need you to move away from the windows.”

Another organizer stepped through and stretched duct taped over the large windows at the front of the room to keep them from shattering. Someone else knotted a piece of rope to the double-door handles, trapping us in and whoever else out. People asked panicked questions. I sat up in my bag and Jake was already standing. His hands were at eye level with me, and they cracked at the knuckles as he formed and unformed fists. Kate lifted her head, muttered, and then laid it back down.

“Please,” said the organizer once they were finished with the duct tape. “Try and get some sleep. We’ve alerted the Kanawha County Sherriff’s Office about the threat and they’re sending over a trooper.”

Jake went over to her and whispered something, but she just pointed back toward his blanket like an elementary school teacher forcing a student to nap. “Please,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”
Jake slumped down next to me again and shook his head.

“They’re not fucking ready for it,” he said. “I know these people. These are my people and they don’t fuck around.”

When two hours had passed and nothing came crashing through the front windows and no shotgun-wielding coal miners busted in through the doors, guns ablaze, everybody calmed down and started to drop back to sleep. But all night I felt Jake turning and sitting up, scanning the room, and when I woke in the morning he was gone. He found me at breakfast, though, and sat beside me against the brick wall, his eyes red and wide and his speech moving at a steady clip.

I asked him if was going to eat.

“Not hungry, man,” he said. “Nope. Don’t need it.”

After breakfast we rallied in a baseball field a few blocks from the warehouse. It was almost a hundred degrees outside, and we fanned each other with our massive signs—canvas held stiff with dowel rods and stuck to the end of bamboo poles—and doused our heads and red bandanas with water. The media was there—mostly Charleston affiliates and county papers, but also a cameraman from CNN, a blond German man with a tape recorder, and a spiffy reporter from Russia Today in high heels and a black skirt. There were more speeches—one by Chuck Keeney, the great-grandson of Frank Keeney, the union organizer largely responsible for the strike that catapulted into the Battle of Blair Mountain; another from a local woman in a black scarf that pleaded the importance of non-violence; and finally a pair of miners from a local outfit that pledged their support of our action. Sometime during the rally Kate appeared with two of her old roommates from Charleston.
The *Russia Today* reporter pointed at me and then walked over with her burly cameraman.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“You should talk to him,” I said, and motioned to Jake.

Jake hugged his bamboo pole to his chest like a gun.

“Where are you from?” she asked Jake.

“West Virginia,” he said. “Bishop.”

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“Am I allowed to curse?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Sorry.”

“Okay, well, I’m here to put an end to the rape of my mountains, and I’m willing to put up whatever kind of fight required. I served my country in Iraq and now I’ll serve my country in West Virginia.”

“You are military?”

“Machine gunner in the 2nd squadron of the 6th Cavalry, Operation Iraqi Freedom, ma’am,” Jake said. “We took down Saddam.”

“Thank you,” she said, lowering her microphone and scanning for her next target.

“I want to say, too, uh, also—” Jake said, and the reporter swung the mic back to him. “I want to say that there’s a long history here, and that this bandana around my neck is a symbol of pride and heritage. I’m a West Virginian, and that’s important.” Here he put his arm around me and pulled me into the shot. “And this is my friend Ethan, and I just met him, and he’s not a West Virginian or nothing, but he cares about this place and he came here because he wants to help us West Virginians out, to, uh, to fight against the corporations, and their greed that’s
ruining our national—natural—heritage. And we’ll do whatever it takes until they stop blowing up our mountains.”

When he finished she thanked him again and the cameraman followed her away.

“I’m going to be on the news,” he said, patting me on the back. “I got to call my folks.”

The fifty-mile march began. At the edge of Marmet we turned up Lens Creek Road, which took us away from the Kanawha and into the mountains. We walked single file in gravel ditches, along exposed granite cuts, and on shoulders hugged by coal trucks barreling out of the mountains. We held our signs high in the air, the media sprinted up and down our ranks and the state police stalked our front and rear, every now and then driving by us slow and making eye contact with as many of us as possible. Most of the cars on the road seemed to know why we were there, and almost all of them honked—half out of support and half out of anger and reprisal. “We love you,” shouted a middle-aged woman, her whole torso hanging out the passenger window. “Go back to where you came from,” shouted a miner from a pickup. “Treehuggers,” he said with contempt.

I was near the front of the line, Jake just behind. Kate and her roommates were in the back, but when I stepped from the shoulder to look for them, the turn in the road obscured the end of the line. We appeared infinite from this perspective, like a growing snake that couldn’t see its tail, and every hour more marchers arrived and lengthened our line. Volunteers with walky-talkies and yellow vests, dubbed Peacekeepers, asked us to slow down or speed up and tried to keep the excitement going through the lines. Medics in red vests made us stop for water and asked people how their feet were doing. Legal observers wore bright green hats and followed the police closely, scribbling every movement in their notepads. And the head organizers, whose
faces had become familiar to us all now, rode in cars or ran alongside the line and gave instructions to each other over the radios.

Around noon we stopped for lunch in a defunct gas station. One of the organizers gathered us into a big circle, and in the center with a bullhorn, taught us a civil rights spiritual. She sang it twice through by herself, and though she was a young and petite woman, she had one of those classic soulful voices that seemed to come from someplace beyond the body. From brief introductions I had learned her name was Lisa, she was a vegan, definitely not a smoker, and all of twenty-two, but the pain and roughness in her voice would lead anyone to believe she’d lived the hard life for many years. The refrain, which everyone picked up easily, went like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around \\
Turn us around, turn us around \\
Ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around \\
Gonna keep on walking, keep on talking \\
Marching on to freedom land
\end{align*}
\]

At that point somebody in the crowd would shout out a noun to take the place of “nobody,” and the song would start over, continuing ad infinitum. A few times through everybody had picked up on this rule, and Jake shouted out “Massey Energy,” and we took that up.

\[
\begin{align*}
Ain’t gonna let Massey Energy turn us around \\
turn us around, turn us around
\end{align*}
\]

We marched out of the gas station like this, daring “Big Coal” and “Corporate Greed” and “Intimidation” and “Injustice” to just try and stop us on our slow plod up the hill. Every time we stopped for a break Lisa would teach us another song to vary our repertoire, and toward the end of the first day the marchers could start up the songs without sanction or organization.
After about ten miles we had done our share of walking for the day, and stopped at a private park along Lens Creek where the organizers had prearranged a stay for the night. We were met at the entrance to the park by a small counter-protest of a few women and their children wearing the spare miner’s uniforms of their fathers, uncles, brothers, or cousins. We passed quietly as they shouted insults varying on “Treehuggers” and “Go home.” Kate and I had walked the last length together and set up our tent among a growing tent village without speaking. When it was up, I followed her through an ultimate Frisbee game and down to the creek. She took off her shoes and stepped in the water.

“Is it cold?” I asked.

“Feels awesome.”

I took off my shoes and stepped a few paces into the water.

She walked toward the center of the creek, holding her arms out to keep balance, and occasionally bending over to pick up a stone from the riverbed. I swatted at the swarm of gnats orbiting my head and stared through the hardwood canopy into the sky. I stank after a day of walking in the heat, and doubted a shower of any kind was in my near future, so I stripped down to my boxers, throwing my clothes on the bank, and lowered myself into the water. My butt held me in place, and I could lie back with everything but my face underwater. I closed my eyes and felt the river try to take me. I considered the mercury in the water, the arsenic and whatever else, but I pushed those thoughts away. Time drifted, and I let the cold water calm me. A spiritual value in the woods and rivers surpasses the physical harm they may bring. Much of West Virginia is toxic, yes, but still, in some moments one can sense that God has not yet left.

When I opened my eyes I saw that Kate had taken off her pants and lowered herself beside me. For a few minutes I watched without her noticing. Seeing her then, I felt already as if
I didn’t know her. We had been drifting for a few weeks, months maybe, not touching each other like we used to, rarely having sex, fighting over the smallest things, my temper flaring and her going silent for hours at a time, but I just then became acutely aware that soon we would go our separate ways, that whatever we had shared had begun to dissipate, and that the circumstances that threw us together were no longer enough to sustain us. Kate, like everyone I’d ever known or touched or loved, would leave or be swallowed by the time and distance that takes away everything with the same indifference that the river punches flecks of sand from the rocks in the riverbed. Something will come to whisk us away, and we can only be ready.

“You seemed so at peace,” she said, once she’d noticed me watching. “I wanted that, too.” She sighed and we remained there until we heard a voice calling to us.

“They want us to take down our tents,” said one of the marchers, standing on the bank above us. “The police are here.”

“I thought we had this place booked,” said Kate.

“The owner lady,” the woman said, “she changed her mind and now the cops want us out.”

Kate and I stood up, grabbed our clothes from the bank, and went back into the tent village, which was already in the process of disassembly. The counter-protest had moved from the entrance to the crowd surrounding the park owner, the police, and the organizers, and now they took their cardboard signs and entered the park. A paved path circled around the part of the park where we’d set up our tents, and the women and children protestors walked the loop around us.

“You ain’t welcome,” shouted one of the women. “You ain’t welcome in West Virginia.”
“This is the United States of America,” shouted an elderly man, holding the long, pliable rod of his tent like a bright orange javelin. “This is a free country.”

“Where you from?” the woman asked him, taking a step from the path toward the man.

“North Carolina.”

“Go back to North Carolina.”

“This is a free country,” he said. “I have a right to be here.”

“This is private property,” she said, “and you and your hippie friends has got to get off.”

The man shook his head and the counter-protest continued around the tent village, now packed away in stuff sacks and hiking backpacks. Kate and I shouldered our bags and tossed them into the opened trailer as a group volunteers rushed to pack them away. An organizer made an announcement and then we crammed into fifteen-passenger vans and pickup trucks hauling water and toilets. Kate was pushed up onto my lap, and on our ride back to Marmet, as my leg went numb and I sweat all over again in the lack of air-conditioning, I watched the mountains and oxbows head in the other direction, away from Blair and the route that Bobby Hart must have walked so long ago. We turned away because of threats made to the park owner; we turned away because the whole damn state cowered in fear of the coal companies, just like they did a hundred years ago.

I smelled the river on me. I smelled the runoff in my skin and hair.

On the second day, even before we’d reached our predetermined destination, we’d already lost our camping spot for the night. After the campground from last night folded, each of the following hosts pulled their support of the march. The organizers told us they’d been intimidated by the coal companies, but wanted us to remember no matter how discouraging, it meant we
were making an impression. The spot we had planned for the fourth night, some private land just off course of the march, had literally been bought up by a company two days before we arrived, right from under our feet. The organizers said this meant they were scared of us and the effect we could have on the community. “A revolution in thinking,” said one of the organizers, baggy-eyed at 11:30 one night, after a day of making phone calls and before another night of little sleep.

Each morning a series of minivans, pickups, and a school-bus-turned-shag-mobile ferried us from the warehouse in Marmet to our starting point for the day, and each night the same cars would drive us back to where we’d begun. The whole process took up to two hours and the trip got longer the closer we got to Blair. During the day it was possible to feel we were actually retracing history, following the footsteps in our large group, but at night we’d return to the air conditioning of the warehouse, the outdoor kitchen and our warm meals, and of course the liquor stores and the gas stations nearby that we frequented for beer and cigarettes. Insolated among the hundreds of like-minded folks—like-minded in the sense that even if we disagreed on a whole host of issues, no one in the march supported MTR—we were a wandering tribe of friends in a hostile territory. It was easy to forget we didn’t own these places and that each time we crept through a tiny mountain town we likely matched its population, even exceeded it. We were an army without guns, only a set of blurry ideals, shifting and inconsistent at times, but passionate nonetheless.

Though despite my natural reservations, my habit of passing judgment and deciding myself apart somehow from group thinking and action, I felt, like perhaps I had never felt in my life, that I belonged to something. This was a tribe. Together we were powerful. Every day threats spewed from passing cars and the local papers gave foreboding predictions of our reception as we made our way deep into the mountains. But in that long line snaking the county
highway, I was invincible. Scared, yes—for my own safety even. We had been promised at the end there would come an action, something with a certain amount of legal risk involved. And when miners in pickups trucks slowed beside us, flashing their tattooed forearms and their snarls, the muzzle of a rifle or a leashed dog, I tried to accept the idea that actual physical harm might come to me. Yet there was an idea here that would persist whether or not I persisted. MTR was fucked up and it needed to stop. I could take a blind step into the road and let those coal trucks hugging the shoulders take me out of the march; I could step up to the next pickup, shout, “Fuck Coal,” and let myself be handled by a party of aggressive miners; or I could chain myself to the next refinery or access road and get hauled away by the cops—and yet the idea would persist. There was a movement here, and maybe MTR wasn’t going away, maybe Blair Mountain would in fact be blown to hell once and for all, and maybe Big Ugly would be smeared from the earth, but the movement was real and alive. Every time the coal companies pushed, the movement got bigger—money was pouring in from all over the country, people in Florida and California were ordering pizzas to be delivered the doors of the warehouse, and every day a hundred more marchers showed up—and even if the coal company had the government on their side, even if they had the entire financial system backing their habits and mentality, we had the heart and we had the justice. We were right. And we fucking knew we were right.

On our way back to Marmet on the second to last day of the march, the day before we’d reach Blair, a coal truck swerved around a turn and flipped over, spilling its load across the road and blocking movement from both sides. I was in the pickup hauling the porta-potties that day, and when traffic came to a complete stop and everyone stopped honking their horns and realized we weren’t going anywhere, I got out of the car to take a dump. On the toilet I zoned out, staring at
the blue cake in the urinal, and when I had enough of the stink and the heat, I stepped back outside and found that a line of drivers and passengers had formed to use our toilets. Beyond the line Jake stood in the gravel of the shoulder talking with a miner in full regalia—blue jumpsuit, reflective orange stripes.

“It’s not that I don’t see the bigger picture,” the miner said, “I just don’t know if y’all are considering things from our perspective.”

“My perspective is your perspective, man,” said Jake, “I’m from McDowell County.”

“McDowell ain’t Boone and Boone ain’t Raleigh and Raleigh ain’t Logan,” the miner said.

“True, man, true,” said Jake. “But you can’t show me a place on earth where’d I say doing this shit was alright. I wouldn’t do this shit no matter who lived beside it, fucking just penguins could live beside it, and that kind of mining would still be fucked up.”

“Maybe so—”

“I’m Jake, by the way,” he said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Alex.”

“And this is Ethan,” Jake said, and I put my hand in the man’s.

“So Ethan and Jake,” Alex said, “if y’all think we should kick the coal companies out of West Virginia, what you think we should do for jobs?”

“It’s kind of an irrelevant argument,” said Jake. “You know? Because coal isn’t going to last forever, and that means the jobs won’t either. And plus, this kind of mining, this MTR shit, has been getting rid of your jobs for decades.”

“But we need something to do.”
“And you need a place to do it,” said Jake. “And if you blow it all up, it won’t matter what jobs you could have because you won’t have anywhere to have jobs.”

The miner took a cigarette out of his front pocket.

“I heard this story,” he said, lighting first his own and then one for Jake. “There was this copper mine in Turkey that been operating for near a thousand years. Then, just recently, I don’t know, a few years ago I guess, all the copper ran out. It was like this whole way of life around long before America, and it just suddenly dried up and hundreds of people had to figure out what to do next.”


“These people had songs about copper mining, they had old stone villages built just for copper mining, people even got names in Turkish that means copper miner, and all of a sudden no more copper mining.”

“That’s West Virginia,” Jake said. “West Virginia is the next Turkey.”

“There’s a lot of coal,” I said.

Two more miners had entered our conversation during Alex’s story.

“It’s not a matter of whether we can keep doing this, because we can, for a while more,” I said, and I was attentive to my every word because the miners were watching me close. “But it’s a matter of whether it’s worth it.”

“You wondering whether feeding a family is worth it or not,” said one of the other miners, who blew cigarette smoke in my face as he said that.

“It’s more complicated than that,” I said.

“Y’all listen here—”

“Give him a minute,” said Alex. “Let him talk.”
“How many mountains in West Virginia do you want to sacrifice to coal mining?” I asked.

“Many as it takes,” the new miner said.

“How many towns do you want to get squeezed out? How many families have to leave before you start wanting things the way they were before?”

“It’s complicated,” he said.

“Hell, yes, it’s complicated,” I said.

“Do you use coal?” he asked.

“Every day of my life,” I said. “But people long before me made that decision and I haven’t ever had the choice.”

“I see what ya’ll are saying, though,” said Alex. “Coal may pay our salaries, but it don’t mean it’s right. If two countries is at war, both is gonna feed their soldiers, but it don’t mean both countries is on the right side.”

“That’s right,” said Jake, slapping Alex’s shoulder. “My family came from Italy to mine coal here and those jobs meant they weren’t gonna starve as peasants. But just cause we do something doesn’t mean we have to keep doing it. You seem like good guys, but coal is fucking up my home, and I’m going to do everything I can to make you stop fucking up my home.”

“Look,” said the miner had been blowing smoke in my face. “Until it’s something else that can feed my family and pay my bills, I’m gonna mine coal.”

“Self-preservation, man,” said Jake. “We just got different definitions of the word.”

Traffic started to move.

“Looks like it’s time to go,” said Alex.
“Hey,” said Jake, untying his bandana. “Take this. Means you support the people and the mountains.”

Alex bent his head toward Jake and Jake tied the bandana around his neck. Alex tugged at the corner so it pulled flat against his collar.

“They’ll fire you for that,” said the other miner.

“Last time I checked I still got freedom of speech,” Alex said.

The driver of our pickup called us back to our seats and so we all shook hands and returned to our vehicles. I slid into the backseat, pushed against the window by Jake and his large legs.

“In Iraq,” Jake said, once we were moving again, the truck sliding carefully between the rock wall and the overturned truck, “everyone could be the enemy. They strapped bombs to kids. They came out of houses. And so you just learned that it was better to shoot than get shot.”

“That’s intense,” I said.

“I’m not against those guys.”

“They weren’t against us.”

“But they think they are. And that means we have to shoot.”

We didn’t say anything else.

Dark fell as we drove and when we got back to the warehouse both dinner and the nightly meeting were over. I got someone on the kitchen crew to let us into the leftovers, and while I piled cold helpings of broccoli and bean chili onto two plates, Jake hopped over the brick wall and walked across the gas station parking lot to the liquor store. I sat in the dark beside the train tracks and he returned with a fifth of whiskey. We took pulls from the bottle to mask the
blandness of our food. There were a few people awake, smoking cigarettes and leaning against the brick wall. But the marchers were mostly inside, all sprawled out beside one another in the dark.

We didn’t talk until I was already a bit drunk.

“We should do something,” Jake said. “Me and you.”

“Do what?”

“I mean we should do something, man. I just keep thinking about the mine back home.”

“I think about the mine over at Big Ugly.”

“I want to get serious,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, and then lay back in the grass. A cloud shrouded the moon and the streetlights glowed in a sick orange. A train barreled past and we took turns with the bottle. The grass felt cool even though it had been hot all day. When the train was gone Jake stood with the bottle and went to piss on the tracks. His urine hissed against the hot steel and Jake took another drink from the bottle and started to sing.

I didn’t know the song, and so I didn’t join him. I just cocked my head to watch.

First to fight for the right,
And to build the Nation’s might,
And The Army Goes Rolling Along
Proud of all we have done,
Fighting till the battle’s won,
And the Army Goes Rolling Along.

He sung in a monotone as deep as he could drop his voice. But he sang loud, and with vigor, and punctuated his verses with drags from the whiskey.

Then it’s Hi! Hi! Hey!
The Army’s on its way.
Count off the cadence loud and strong
For where e’er we go,
You will always know
That The Army Goes Rolling Along.

“Hey,” someone called from by the porta-potties. “You got to keep it down.”

“Alright, sweetheart,” said Jake. “All apologies.”

He slumped next to me in the grass and passed me the bottle. It was nearly half gone. He spoke the last verse of the song, his spirit gone and his voice tired.

Men in rags, men who froze,
Still that Army met its foes,
And the Army went rolling along.
Faith in God, then we’re right,
And we’ll fight with all our might,
As the Army keeps rolling along.

When he finished we both lay in silence, not passing the bottle anymore and eventually falling asleep. I woke sometime later, the moon gone completely behind the mountain and the gas station the only light, and then I shook Jake awake and pulled him to his feet. He patted me on the back and we stumbled over the gravel and inside. I took out my cell phone and cast a glow across the bodies on the floor, and we tiptoed to our things against the far wall. When I slid in next to Kate she didn’t stir. It didn’t appear like she was breathing.

The next day we reached the town of Blair. It was hard to consider it a town at all really. Cut into either side of the forested road single-story houses and their neat lawns cropped up, and then for a short stretch the houses were closer together. It resembled every other small town we’d passed through that had a name but no longer warranted a post office. Our reception was different in Blair, though. So far along our route, many of the residents had expected us, and many had come to their porches as we passed. Some clapped, held signs of support, and some offered sodas or
water. Some weren’t so welcoming, insulting us either verbally or with yard signs. But in Blair every single household had come to their porches. They stared. One family stood just outside their fence—a man, woman, and two small girls—and tried to shake as many of the marchers’ hands as they could. Their neighbors, only a door away, sat on their porch staring, a massive Friends of Coal banner hanging from their eaves. They stared expressionless as their neighbors congratulated and thanked us.

Not a single household was without a sign. WE ARE SO PROUD, one said. YOU’RE NOT WELCOME HERE, said another. I tried to make eye contact with everyone that had come outside, no matter which side they chose affiliation. Most nodded at me or someone else, even those Friends of Coal. One woman, wearing a miner’s helmet and holding a handwritten instruction to GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM, met my eyes and nodded. I smiled at her and she smiled back, and then her face snapped back to a grimace like she had briefly forgotten she wasn’t supposed to be nice today, not to me.

At the edge of town—which didn’t take long to reach—the front of the line turned at a driveway that led past the house and down along a small trail into a field below. The field sprawled open, framed by a tree-lined creek on one side and a hill leading to a guard rail and highway above. At the far corner of the field sat a dilapidated one-room church. During our lunch that day we had learned that this spot had served as a medical triage for wounded miners in the battle. Beyond the church, up the hill and over the guard rail, the foot of Blair Mountain stretched from highway to sky. Like the town itself, the mountain was hardly distinguishable from all mountains in West Virginia. Forested, rounded gently at the top, and surrounded by many others in roughly the same shape. Spread over the dry grass of the field was tiny shards of
coal and in the center of the field were two irregular mounds that I took to be old slag piles the grass had grown over.

I walked to the church. One of the medics had duct taped a cardboard sign with a red cross above the doorway. The church was once again a field hospital. Not for bullet wounds and limbs blown off by bombs dropped from private planes, but for blisters, bee stings, and dehydration. I thought of Bobby Hart and of the bullet he took in the leg, and then I saw Kate shouldering both of our bags and walking from the trailer that had parked along the guard rail above. I went to her and took my bag.

“I think I’ll sleep somewhere else tonight, Ethan,” she said. “If that’s alright.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

I nodded and stood there a moment. I didn’t want to let on how furious I felt; I’d done nothing wrong and there was no reason for her to impose this space. So I said nothing, as if I didn’t care, as if I too had other places I wanted to be.

“But we can talk later,” she added.

“Excuse me,” a voice called, and we both turned toward it. Two women stood on the other side of the guardrail, looking down at us, obviously afraid to cross over to our claimed territory. One seemed a few years older than I and the other beginning to gray. They appeared about twenty years apart and I took them for mother and daughter.

“Do y’all need anything?” the mother asked.

“Sorry?” Kate said in response. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just—” the daughter cut in, “we read about y’all in the paper and figured you might could use some drinks or food or something. We was on our way to the store.”
“We have food,” I said. “Actually, someone donated about a hundred pizzas.”

“Well, that’s okay then,” the mother said.

“You can eat with us,” offered Kate.

“Oh, no,” the mother said. “That’s alright.”

All four of us stared at each other, the small hill and the guard rail separating us, and for a time no one spoke. I thought of the prairie dogs at the National Zoo. Their cage wasn’t a cage at all, but open to the air and with a surrounding wall so short that the public could easily climb in and they could easily climb out. But I would stand there with my father or mother and even once Dencil and Elaine, and never would either species cross that imposed boundary. But I suppose the two women felt a bit like specimens as well—the locals, the natives, the West Virginians, the ones with the problem so bad a bunch of college kids and anarchists had to show up to point it out.

“Do you need water?” the daughter asked.

“We have that,” Kate said. “But really, we appreciate your hospitality.”

“You were on the news,” she responded.

“Really?” I asked.

“I even looked you up on the internet. Ya’ll pretty famous right now.”

“Let’s hope that makes a difference,” I said.

“Everybody’s talking about y’all,” she replied. “Everybody I know.”

“Anyway,” the mother said, speaking over her daughter. “We wish you the best now.”

“Thank you,” Kate and I both said, and then they walked back to their car and continued down the road. When I turned back to Kate, she was crying.

“What?” I asked.
She shook her head and hoisted her bag back to her shoulder. When she didn’t respond, I turned away and walked straight across the field, feeling her gaze on my back. We were at some boiling point—I almost hated her face, the sullen child look of it, the way she kept her hair, her lips always half open like there was something she could never figure out how to say. There were dozens of other women here—beautiful, radical, open-minded women, and I’d had long conversations with many of them throughout the week. None of them scolded me for my bouts of anger, none of them told me they felt trapped with me, none of them knew me so well to criticize, to pick me apart, to make lists at night of my many flaws. Kate, I felt, was replaceable.

Jake was visible from anywhere in the field, standing on top of the coal mound holding his blanket and his flap of cardboard.

“I have extra room in my tent,” I said.

“I like it outside,” he said. “There aren’t clouds today. I bet the stars will be out.”

The sky was brilliant and full of sun.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I think I’ll leave the tent in my bag.”

Jake stepped off the grassed-over pile of slag and slapped my back.

“Let’s find a spot away from the crowds,” he said.

Under the sky that night, which just as Jake predicted was full of distant light, we put together an impromptu contra dance. A banjo, fiddle, and guitar cobbled together the tunes they knew and those who danced taught those who didn’t. We formed long lines that went from the church steps into the tent village and danced barefoot over the jagged coal. The whiskey Jake and I drank between dances put us at ease in spite of the cuts on our feet and the police car parked beyond the guardrail flashing its lights. Kate danced, too, and we even partnered up once. When I put my
hand on the small of her back and she bunched my t-shirt to hold tight to me as we spun around, she was hardly different than a stranger, just another body in the line of bodies. We stared each other in the eyes each time we had to swing, and when it was over she kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you, Ethan,” she said.

“For what?” I asked.

“For taking me into your life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“It means what it means. Just thank you.”

She wandered off to find another partner and so did I. I danced with women who were laughing, who held my gaze and who smelled like sweat and tea tree oil and strawberries. When the bottle was through and the organizers asked us to cut the music and noise so that everyone could get some sleep, Jake and I slinked off beyond the tents to where we’d set our things. There was a small clearing beyond the field, a cove hidden in the trees. There we could see the stars, hear the creek, and felt more alone away from all the tents. He laid out his cardboard and I set my sleeping bag in the dirt but was so sweaty from dancing I didn’t get in.

“One of the Kennedys is going to be here tomorrow,” Jake said.

“Which one?” I asked.

“I don’t know one from another.”

“I’m glad you came,” I said.

“How come?” Jake asked.

“Because I don’t think I’d feel like I belonged here otherwise.”
“We belong where we go,” Jake said. And then, “Man, I’m a tree-hugging hillbilly Army vet from a fucked-up war. I don’t belong anywhere. Not among these people, not in West Virginia. Nowhere.”

We stopped talking to let each other sleep, but we both laid awake and quiet long after all the noise from the field of others had gone silent. The night was colder than I expected it to be and my clothes wet with sweat chilled in the mountain air. I felt the weight of the black sky on my chest. It pressed me into the earth, toward the black coal beneath.

The next morning hundreds more marchers poured in from all over. For the first few hours of the day shuttles carried people from a campground in Logan County to our church field in Blair. Then there were speeches. Dozens of them, it seemed. Even Robert Kennedy Jr, whom I gave little attention. Nor did I hear the music, taste breakfast, or pay attention to the heat or humidity that burned my skin and soaked my clothes in sweat. I was waiting for the meeting where we decided the level of risk in our direct action. We had been warned that this was no sit-in with a hand slap, where the risks were known beforehand, the bail determined, and the cops warned. This went into hazy territory, and our police liaisons had not discussed our plans with the state or county officers on hand. Most of the more than thousand attendants at this morning’s rally would be heading out from the field and up the road toward Blair Mountain, but instead of trespassing onto the Massey-owned battlefield, the actual site where the miners gave their lives so that they might get a few cents more per ton, they would head for a bend in the road where they’d have some more speeches and musical performances and where they’d all pat themselves on the backs for a job well done and a walk well walked. Another contingency, to which Jake and I had attached ourselves, but not Kate or her roommates, who were afraid of their priors and the
potential for serious jail time, met during one of the speeches at the far side of the field. Under the cover of trees and out of the sun, we discussed strategy and the risk we were willing to take.

It was then Jake and I met Brett, who had not been with us during the week but who was introduced as someone experienced in the field of civil disobedience. “A show of hands,” he said. “Who is willing to risk arrest?” He wore a cowboy hat and sunglasses, his t-shirt tucked into faded blue jeans.

Jake’s hand went up before the question was finished. He slapped my shoulder with his free hand and my hand went up, too. Of the sixty or so huddled together beside the trees only about fifteen raised their hands.

“We’re not sure,” said someone. “Maybe if everybody else decides.”

“Can the March pay our bail?” somebody asked.

“The March is broke,” Brett said. “We can offer advice or support. We can try to raise money for bail, but we can’t promise anything.”

“I’ve got priors,” someone behind me muttered.

The lawyer present rehashed the risks with us—anything from a hundred-dollar fine and citation to a $20,000 bail and six months in prison. They’d seen judges sympathetic to direct action and they’d seen the book thrown at seventeen-year-olds after two-day tree-sits.

“This isn’t DC,” the lawyer said, “where the criminal system is used to this kind of thing. This is West Virginia, and we don’t know for sure how they’ll react.”

Brett posed the question again. “So who is willing to risk arrest?”

Even fewer hands.

Jake held his hand high and though I waited a moment, mine went up, too. During whatever Brett said next, I thought about the phone call I’d make to my father. I’ve been arrested
again. *I need money again. I need you to come get me. Do you know any lawyers, Dad?* I knew this movement was never going to get anywhere if no one was willing to sacrifice, but I also knew that it wouldn’t get anywhere with one sacrifice alone. Anyway, I’d already sacrificed. I’d moved here. I’d been living in West Virginia over two years now, keeping Patsy company, the one who’d made the real sacrifice.

Brett took a final count and we went with majority rule: we would trespass but do our best not to risk arrest. The momentum that had been building all week—the talk over meals, the impassioned speeches, the *We’re gonna stop this shit*—all seemed to fizzle out in one vote. A lot of people were staring at the ground, having side conversations about when the semester started and taking time off from work and how much money was in the bank. Brett told us to tack ourselves onto the end of the march, leaving the rally last and taking up the back of the line, and showed us the signal he’d make with a red bandana tied to a bamboo pole when it was time to break from the rest and charge up the hill onto the battlefield.

As Jake and I walked away, Brett caught up with us and asked our names.

“This is bullshit,” Jake told him.

“This is how things go down,” Brett said. “I’ve seen plenty of bullshit in my days.”

“I thought these people were serious,” Jake said.

“Are you serious?” asked Brett.

“We have the attention, the media,” said Jake. “Fucking CNN is here. We need to do something while they can capture it on camera. We walked for five days in the heat, and now we’re in Blair and we’re just going to pussy out as soon as the cops say so. They’re blowing up the fucking mountain, man. I feel like nobody understands that. *F*uck your job. *F*uck your
criminal record. Fuck your college classes,” he was shouting now. “They are blowing up the
fucking mountains! Doesn’t anyone give a shit?”

Some guy shouted, “Yeah, I care,” and then wandered in the direction of the porta-
potties.

“It’s hard to get people to take big risks,” said Brett.

“I don’t know, man,” Jake said. “We’re fucking copping out. That’s all I’m saying. We
got to camp up there and lock ourselves down to the edge of that fucking mine site so that
Massey can’t take it another inch onto that battlefield. I’ll fucking hunger strike. I’ll go to prison.
You think I give a fuck? ‘Iraq vet goes to prison to protect historic labor site.’ That’s a good
fucking headline.”

“If you’re serious,” said Brett. “There are things we could do. Not today, but soon.”

“Fucking sign me up,” said Jake.

Brett stared each of us in the eyes individually.

“You’re serious too?” he asked me.

“I’m serious.”

“Okay,” he said.

A subpar marching band struck up—trombones and trumpets, bass drums and crash
symbols—and they lined up along the path that led off the field. The rest of the rally lined up,
too, all one thousand people. Brett told us he’d catch up with us again and then the line continued
through the woods, onto the highway, and up the hill. It took fifteen minutes before we could
join, tying ourselves to the tail of the snake.

We stepped on the road, and though like every other day in the march—same signs, many
of the same faces—a different feeling now reverberated through us. The new additions didn’t
follow the same rules and instead of keeping to the shoulder like we had been, we took the right lane of traffic and the cops shouted at us to get back onto the shoulder. We didn’t. Cars from both ways honked, cheering or cursing, and rumors flew from one end of the line to the other that the cops were giving us our final warning, get off the road or else. The organizers and peacekeepers were now spread so thin and commands coming over the radio were full of static and confusion, blocked by the rock walls on our right and chaotic with the many voices. Songs migrated from the front and back of the line—“This Little Light of Mine,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” “Roll the Old Chariot Along,” and of course John Denver’s “Country Roads”—and sometimes I had to choose which song I wanted to join, the one in front or the one behind.

The road was like all the others we’d been on for days, but now, on our right was the actual Blair Mountain. Jake and I were beside each other, singing and clapping and stomping our feet. We kept this up for about half an hour—the cops and traffic and news vans swerving at our side—and then we saw Brett raise the bamboo pole and wave the bandana left to right. He broke from the march and turned right onto an access road. The person behind followed, and the person behind that person, and everyone through to the end of the line.

It was like a wave. It reached Jake and me, and when it did he made a sort of battle cry and we charged twenty yards to a green gate marked ‘Private Property of Massey Energy.’ A CNN cameraman had knelt beside the gate, pointing his camera at the marchers hopping it in a single bound.

As I passed, the cameraman spoke: “How do you feel?”

All I could think to do was scream. So I screamed and so did everyone else. Months later I would find a trailer for a CNN documentary called *Battle for Blair Mountain: Working in America*. The editors spliced footage of Stars and Stripes- and hard helmet-clad miners at a labor
rally yelling, *Whose coal? Ours!* *Whose mountains? Ours!* *Whose jobs? Ours!* against images of sign-wielding, red-bandana protestors marching and screaming. For a split-second, after a woman makes a remark about how the environmentalists would save a salamander before saving a West Virginia family, you can see my face, sweaty and red-eyed, screaming into the camera.

I put one hand on the gate and flung myself over. Then Jake and I sprinted up the hill. I felt high. We were charging into battle. We didn’t stop sprinting until an organizer asked us to respect those marchers physically unable to keep up our pace. My heart was racing. We paused, waiting for the others to catch up.

Jake and I had made our way to the front of the charge, along with the other younger and fitter marchers. He held a bamboo pole to his chest, which throbbed, his pectorals swollen and puffed full of energy. The road was narrow, rutted, and flanked by fruiting blackberry bushes. I picked a few and offered some to Jake.

“We should keep going,” he said.

“We have to stay together,” someone replied.

“We have to get to the battlefield,” he said, dancing from foot to foot to see through the trees.

When the back of the line caught up we slowed our pace to a steady trod. We took a turn and a pickup came into view, blocking our path in the road.

“Go around,” Brett shouted, and someone else echoed until it reached us in the front.

“Don’t touch the truck.”

Jake and I were first. There was a man in the cab on a cellphone. He had on sunglasses and a baseball cap. He wasn’t a cop, but he wasn’t dressed like a miner either. He was an
undercover something. He didn’t turn his head as we stepped off the road and pushed through brush to avoid his blockade. The road then cut steeply up and Jake and I breathed heavily as we progressed forward, about a hundred individuals behind us laboring to keep up. As we walked, the view to our right, which had been dense forest, opened up, and through a thin veil of straggly hardwood trunks we could see the massive sprawl of MTR. We were almost to the battlefield now and here was the mine that Massey didn’t believe was big enough, and beneath us was the coal they wanted to get to. This was the ground they wanted gone.

We paused again. People took pictures with their cellphones.

It was that same chalk color. Pale granite. Gravel. It went as far as I could see, a canyon of nothing between the dense forest we walked through and the dense forest a few miles away. Between it, though I couldn’t make out a single piece of equipment or any geography of roads or pits or slag piles, was a blasted wasteland—a desert, a moonscape, an ugly death pit. It struck me standing there, though the specific thought had never struck me before, not living on Big Ugly and walking the surrounding hills, that I might be one of the last human beings—one of the last organisms—to set foot in this forest. Surely there would be some wanderers, maybe more protestors after us, and the miners would have some prospecting and logging and laying of explosives to do before they reduced the mountain to non-mountain, but in the great span of time—millennia of life and death and civilization and war—this was a piece of something that would soon fail to be. This was a land that would be erased, a mountain removed, a history disregarded, a landscape altered. Because Massey currently owned the land and the right to mine at any moment they chose to do so, the ground beneath my feet would soon cease to exist.

Same as Big Ugly. And with it a story deleted. My story deleted.

Jake pulled at my arm when the march went forward.
Brett was now in the lead, and after a few more minutes of walking, he stopped us and waited for the group to huddle up.

“We’ve now entered the battlefield,” he said. “This is the area where ninety years ago men took arms to fight oppression against the same companies that today still oppress the land and people of West Virginia and Appalachia. We’re going to take a moment of silence now out of respect for those who gave their lives in that struggle.”

I bowed my head, as did a few others, as if in prayer. But not a minute into our silence, we heard the command, “Down. Get the fuck down. Now.”

Four police officers, two county and two state, had just made it to our huddle. All four were heaving and sweating. One of the county officers grabbed the nearest body and tossed it back the way we came. The other officers followed suit and grabbed people by their shoulders and pushed them downhill.

“If we could just have a moment,” Brett said above the commotion. “We just want to have a moment—”

“No,” said an officer. “Go.”

The officers circled the huddle, prodding at us like a simple nuisance, like a herd of cattle wandered onto the wrong piece of property. “Faster,” they shouted, and the pace quickened.

“Plant your flags,” someone shouted. At the command everyone jabbed their bamboo poles into the soil—we had dozens—and soon the path was lined with our message. END MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL. SUSTAINABLE JOBS FOR APPALACHIA. SAVE BLAIR MOUNTAIN. I wondered whether some Massey employee would have to come up here to pull them out, or whether our messages would be shredded with the trees when the logging began and buried forever under rock with the first of the blasting.
We marched back the way we came, all the way told to move faster by the police. At the junction where the pickup had been, a fat officer sat on an ATV holding about a hundred plastic handcuffs. He had on sunglasses and I couldn’t tell whether he was looking us in the eyes or not. Ahead, one of the police officers slipped in his slick dress shoes and fell to a knee. Some of the marchers had to help him up and once they did he told them to keep walking. I said something to Jake about the cops, but he didn’t respond; he was elsewhere, his eyes focused on the ground and his bamboo pole missing from his constant grip. He stayed that way the whole way down Blair, and all the way on the road toward the church field; uncharacteristically silent, he didn’t say anything more to me until we were back in the field and waiting to load the trailer that would ferry our belongings back to Marmet.

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“Serious about what?”

“I’m not done with this. Maybe everybody else here is done. But I’m not done with this. I want to take things to the next level.”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked.

“I like you, Ethan. Even for an East Coaster.”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked again.

“Something,” he said. “We’ll do something.”

The March on Blair Mountain ended. And the week after the newspapers we’d graced lined litter boxes and recycling bins across the state of West Virginia. The articles on the internet were removed from homepages and catalogued. E-mail blasts went out to thousands claiming the event had been a great success and had resounded our message across the nation. Jake and I
exchanged contact information and shared a long hug in the parking lot in front of the
warehouse. He told me he’d had another conversation with Brett and to expect a call.

I spent the afternoon driving back and forth to the parking garage in Charleston, dropping
off excited marchers at their cars, saying goodbye, and wishing them safe drives back to New
York, Wisconsin, Ohio, or wherever. I pulled back into the warehouse parking lot when much of
the crowd had left and Kate was waiting for me there alone.

“Time to go home?” she asked.

“Are you coming with me?”

“Can I?”

“You can probably get a ride out of here to anywhere in the country. Pick a place, go
there. Have an adventure.”

She didn’t respond, instead just threw her bag in the bed of the truck, and then we went
inside to say goodbye. Somebody had found a wheelchair, and the organizers were pushing each
other across the floor, now empty of luggage and people. They were laughing. Others were
passed out in corners, their work now over. Kate and I went around the room shaking hands and
giving hugs, and then we left the warehouse one final time and headed along the marching route
for our home at Big Ugly.
The sound is like a blade puncturing cardboard, the tear and pivot, and in comes a pinhole of light. I pass through an atmospheric gauze, like taking the first breath after a long dive, and I return. In my dreams I am my father, and in his dream he dreams his father—the thread unbroken and unending behind me, and I can knot the thread to one of the many paths before me or I can dive back down, not take that breath, and let the thread free to fall on wind and be forgotten and finite.

I take a breath. Light spills into my vision.

There are footsteps in the nearby duff. As my vision shifts to light and my eyes focus I can see two figures in navy jackets with reflective orange stripes up the sleeves. Coal miners. They take cautious steps forward, watching always the ground at their feet. I want to call out to them and tell them what hurts, but when I open my mouth, the first breath I take in is fire—and my mouth is dry, and the air pierces somewhere deep in me like a knife and blackness threatens the periphery of my vision again. I let this pass and the men walk on. By my watch, it’s 8:47 in the morning. The sun is in the east but hasn’t fully come to the mountains. I try and turn but feel the sharpness again—my left side is dull and bloated, and my hands and feet in gloves and wool socks are numb with cold. My limbs began to work all at once, but when I try to roll to my belly, so that I can lift myself from the ground, I feel stiff and full of flames.

I remove my right glove with my left hand. The fingers are white, and blood inside my palm is splotched and purple. I take this hand up and under my shirt to the side that’s made contact with the ground. My stomach and chest feel my touch though the hand can hardly make out what it’s touching—and then I move it to my side, on my ribcage, and it is so warm that even
the icy hand notices the warmth. As I press dumbly I feel another sear of pain. I take the hand and pull my collar from my neck to see down to the injured side but it is too dark and it hurts to bring my chin in to my chest. I huff shallow and painful breaths into my hands a long time before I am able to use them more freely. I bring my knees to my chest, and reaching out with my right arm grab a nearby stone to pull myself onto all fours. It works, I am up, but as soon as I’m off the ground everything goes black and I sink right back down.

I’ve broken a rib. This is my diagnosis. And I may have frostbite on my nose and feet and hands, or at least I am in danger of it. My brain is plumped and liquid and like it’s trying to exit through my eyes. I could be experiencing the early signs of hypothermia, but that may be from the pain as well and the jolt of the fall. Maybe I have a concussion.

My watch says it is 9:05 now. I haven’t signaled all night or met Jake for sleep rotations, so he knows I’m down now. I reach without thinking for my radio, but when the pain in my side surges back, I remember shedding my pack, which is probably in the truck with the men, or already down in the temp buildings being rifled through by the miners. They must be reading the notes in my journal, tearing pages from my book, studying my maps, eating my food, throwing my extra socks on the floor, and maybe smashing my flare gun to pieces. I wonder if Jake was calling out to me all night—shouting to the miners for Parakeet just as we shouted before for Bison when Brett had been pulled in.

“Hey,” I shout.

The miners need to find me. I will be arrested, but I don’t want hypothermia or to lose my hands to frostbite. A few months in a county jail, that’s all. I shout again, but it has been nearly half an hour and they have long since passed. I try once more to shift onto all fours but once there I feel nauseated and short of breath. When I realize that all night my head has faced
downhill, I slide my knees in the duff to turn 180 degrees before rolling onto my back. On every inhale I feel the sharpness in my rib, but now my head has cleared of the blood and cloudiness. I check my watch over and again, both waiting for Jake’s signal at 9:30 and just to see some piece of the world progressing toward a change in my fortunes. Using the small movements in the land, I shift myself into a reclined position. Through the trees I see the mine below and run my hands over my body to check again for bruises and breaks. It seems, now that my hands are more capable and lifelike, that one of my rib bones is swollen and protruding against the skin. The whole side must be bruised and now my lungs are competing with the broken rib. 9:30 passes and no flare goes off. The minutes tick by and nothing happens. “Jake,” I say aloud to myself each time I look at my watch. “Come on, Jake.”

The haul trucks buzz around the mine and a distant mechanism clicks, almost like a jackhammer but slower and more strained. The behemoth dragline is motionless and parked in the middle distance. I am far from the upper road now. I think about working myself to my feet and walking the lower road to the office buildings and asking for the mercy of the miners and guards, but my lungs and bones and muscle and will are all in direct competition.

10:00 passes and 10:30, too, and no flare in the sky.

At my same elevation on a bare branch of a dead snag lower on the mountain, a crow lands and caws. He opens his wings to take in the slight wind blowing from the southwest and it turns his feathers against the grain and he swells into a voluminous, contorted monster. He caws again. He is all black save his pale gray beak and his devil-red eyes. I speak to him but he doesn’t speak back, only caws, twice more, and then steps from the branch like a suicide from a bridge girder and then his wings once again manifest and he rides the wind through the cut.
And then I realize: without a flare, without Jake keeping this up, they will blast this mountain. A thousand tons of explosives are embedded along the skirt of the mountain, and soon—when? today? right now? when did Jake last shoot a flare?—they might assume I have left and that all is clear to continue the operation we have only delayed two days. Industry will begin again as if it had never paused and I will be buried in it, maybe not even discovered, maybe just a rotten smell in the shovel of the dragline, piled up and thrown to clog a stream somewhere, worm food if worms live in a place like this, a place so dead, forgotten and rubbled.

_A plague o' both your houses!
They have made worms' meat of me._
In the days after the March on Blair, something shifted between Kate and me. The lackluster end to the action had left me depressed. Everyone went home, the newspapers quieted, and Arch Coal went about its business. But it satisfied Kate in a way, and as long as she occasionally addressed the problem, she felt that was good enough. We started bickering about everything. I didn’t do my dishes, and she slept in too late and never wanted to drive into Charleston to see friends. We went two whole days hardly saying anything to each other. It’s not that I wouldn’t respond to her questions or hold simple conversation, but I was stern and easily annoyed with what didn’t matter to me, and if she asked what was wrong, I would grunt and maybe leave the house. I didn’t know how it happened, but I was acting like my father when my mother asked things of him. In the worst of days, I felt like Dencil. I’d take my coffee to the porch and ignore what she was saying. That thought, that I was unconsciously and without any control becoming just another Hart man, angered me and consumed every small comfort that I enjoyed about our life there, and the idea that Kate was somehow becoming one of the quiet, willing, and ever-faithful Hart women angered me even more. We were in our twenties. We were liberal. None of this was supposed to happen, but on good days we liked each other’s company and didn’t want to change anything about our situation. We’d both looked for work in Charleston, and there was nothing. We could move somewhere else, but I liked my garden and my shelves of preserves and the dried wild ramps and flowers that hung from the rafters.

When she got the call that her father was really on his last leg, she decided to leave for Wisconsin indefinitely. “Have fun,” I said when she started her car in Patsy’s driveway.

“Fun?” she asked.
“Sorry, I just mean, I hope you have a good experience there. With your father.”

“Okay, Ethan,” she said. We didn’t kiss goodbye; she just backed out of the driveway and left the hollow. I wanted to throw a rock at her taillights, to call her up and curse her until she came back home. I felt sick, selfish.

For the next week, while bell peppers and squash were going strong and the fall kale coming in, I spent the cool morning hours alone in the garden, afternoons in a hammock reading, and dinners in the bottom house with Patsy. Some nights I brought a bottle down from my house and Patsy told me stories. Even though she would frequently circle back and repeat herself, telling the same anecdotes almost every night, I enjoyed just listening to her talk. She was a good storyteller and I could tell she’d been a good middle school teacher. Patsy told me what she knew about the company towns where her parents lived when they were first married, and about how when Bobby Hart was doing alright with the farming, they’d go weeks at Big Ugly hardly seeing anybody outside each other and the McComas relatives who’d stop by. She told me about how bad things got sometimes when she and her brothers were young, when some coal mine somewhere shuttered, or when tobacco prices plummeted, or when Bobby Hart came home cursing and kicking about a sore deal he got for some piece of farm equipment. She told me about the two babies Elma lost to fever and about her brother Abe who never came back from the Pacific.

I asked her about Dencil, too, and what he’d been like as a boy. I retold the one story he ever told me, one that had stuck with me most of my boyhood. My family used to drive out to their house in Baltimore County for regular Sunday visits. If it was football season, my grandfather was silent in the den, where if I spoke or played with my Legos or X-Men figures
too loudly on the hardwood floor, I’d be banished to the kitchen or one of the bedrooms. If it was gardening season, he was out in his fields, where I wasn’t allowed for fear I’d trample and pick and ruin like the clumsy child he called me. So the only time he sat face to face with my family was when my grandmother demanded his presence at the dinner table. My grandmother, who had not attended church since her wedding, liked us to come in our Sunday dress and have a large supper. It must have been the church suit that prompted the story, because I sat at the table diligently sawing through my pork chop and avoiding the too-salty sauerkraut when he reached across the table, pulled at my tie, and said, “Tie.”

No one questioned his action, but continued to eat, and then he told his story.

“They dressed the kids up before they put them on the train,” he said, aiming his fork like a gun. “You’d see them in town like this, wearing their ties and dresses, everybody hungry even though they were dressed nice and in town and out of their hollers. They use to send them kids off when the parents didn’t have enough food for them, and they’d dress them nice and everybody come to town to watch them leave on the train for the cities. Maybe Cincinnati. Sometimes Baltimore. We didn’t have much food neither, so when I’d ride into town with my father so that we could get some feed or a new tool or sell the sang I’d pick, I’d see those kids and wonder when they were gonna put me on a train. I asked my father that, and he slapped me across the mouth. ‘Never boy,’ he said. ‘Me and your Ma ain’t never putting you on no train, you hear?’”

He laughed at the memory and began to eat again, and then faced me with a mouthful of potatoes.

“That’s what you look like,” he said. “Like you’re about to get on a train.”
The only other stories he ever shared were mostly of the war—in his pictures from the concentration camps and his stories of the friendly brawls with British soldiers and his cracks about “putting a little hillbilly” in the new Queen and her Royal line. The life his family saw him lead for forty years, from the day he moved to Baltimore to the day Bethlehem shuttered operations, revolved around shipyards and bars and turkey shoots and vegetable gardens. According to my grandmother and father, his childhood in West Virginia had only impressed on Dencil the mountain accent he never completely shook and his particular methods for slaughtering a chicken or sowing his rows of corn.

But Patsy told me about the boy that came before the man. She told me he was always pencil thin and somber. He never did well in school and dropped out in the tenth grade, but enjoyed hunting and fishing and generally spent most of his waking hours wandering the mountains around Big Ugly. He took to the tasks his mother assigned him and kept their woodpile well-stocked, the chickens and hogs well-fed, and a square of the yard well-mowed and weed free. One of Patsy’s forefront images of her older brother was of him red-cheeked and covered in splinters of wood, coming in from the cold with another armload of fresh fuel for the stove. She told me about the year Dencil quit school and first went inside of a coal mine. Patsy didn’t know much about his experience, but you’ve seen the films: the hard helmet and head lamp, the cut logs holding the slate from falling on the miners’ heads, the blackness, the gunpowder, the dust, the pick axe, the hungry tipple on the tracks, the sun up to sun down.

Dencil worked for just over two years when he decided he was getting out of West Virginia any way possible, followed his younger brothers’ examples and talked to an Army recruiter in Madison, and later found himself Europe-bound a few months before German surrender. He was an electrician in the war. That and a coffee boiler, a corpse mover, a
burgeoning whiskey drinker, and a patron of the cheapest French and German prostitutes (described in scant detail in his handful of letters to his brother John I found stuffed in a brown paper bag in a closet of Patsy’s house). By the time of Dencil’s return, when the bomb was dropped and Europe was in ruins and the young men of the mountains home from their soldiering to find the war-time mines shuttered, the eternally packed shack of his childhood was full of ghosts. Abe was dead and his body in the graveyard. Another baby had been born and lost and buried. Bobby was away most the day in the mines. John was recovering at Walter Reed and Patsy at school and not visiting and Elma spending her days over on Arch property with her willow baskets.

Because of the quiet, because of the tightness of the mountains and the dumb way all the men and women of Lincoln County had of talking and living, the men and women who had never been anywhere and didn’t know nothing about what kind of things the boys like him had done, because his father was sick with the coal miner’s cough but wouldn’t quit work and his mother would go days without talking to another soul, Dencil bought a singlewide, towed it to the top meadow, and started drinking.

Usually when Patsy got to the drinking part, about the days he’d disappear, about the gardens he let go, about the two years he lived at Big Ugly after the war trying to figure out how the hell not to get stuck with a pick axe in some West Virginia dog hole, Patsy and I were pretty drunk ourselves. “This,” she’d say, holding her tumbler to the lamplight, “never did none of us no good.”

One day while grocery shopping in Madison, I got a phone call from Jake.

“I was thinking we could talk,” he said.
“Oh yeah?”

“Are you serious about getting serious?”

“I am,” I said.

“You remember that cowboy guy? Brett?”

“I do.”

“Well, we’ve been talking and we got ideas.”

Jake showed up at Big Ugly the next day with a bottle of bourbon and two steaks. He built a fire in front of my house, uncorked the bottle, cooked the meat, and told me he’d heard they were supposed to start blasting the southern end of Carbow Spruce again, the mountain just east of where we lived.

“That’s right,” I said. “We got a letter about a month ago.”

“Well, I was wondering if you might be interested in stopping that shit.”

“How would we do that?”

Jake smiled. He took his bottle from where he set it on the porch and poured some bourbon over both the steaks. The liquor hissed and caught flame, browning the meat.

“I haven’t had a steak in a long time,” I said. “Made of cow, I mean.”

He didn’t respond, just skewered and flipped the steaks. “Just tell me you’re in,” he said.

“I’m in.”

Jake never told me much about his family in Bishop, only that his father was an asshole and his uncle a terrible employer. The place had gone quiet without Kate, so I let Jake sleep on a cot in the main room. He stayed two days the first time, us getting plastered both nights. The second time he came a few weeks later, he brought a hiking bag of stuff and then just never left. He
invited Brett to come meet us and talk through some of the vague plans we laid out while drinking.

Brett lived more permanently in Lexington, but spent a lot of time in Charleston in his activist work. The night he showed up I could tell immediately he meant business. He found Jake and me eating dinner on the porch, said a few words about the weather and about the work he did in Kentucky, and then pulled a couple USGS maps from his backpack with the Hobet circled. He was standing on the ground and laid the map at our feet so that Jake and I read it upside down. Brett had never moused either, but he carried himself like a veteran. When asked a question, he’d take a long time to answer, wrenching his face and nodding his head like everything took deep concentration.

“What sort of area do we have to occupy to make this thing work?” Jake asked, pointing at the map with his boot.

“As long as the flares are visible and they know they’ve got people in those mountains, they won’t go on with the blasting.”

I asked him about the legal risks.

“It all depends,” said Brett. “No way to know.”

“You think we could like fuck with equipment while we’re at it?” Jake asked. “Fry the mechanics on some excavators. Sand-in-the-gas-tank kind of shit.”

“We’d get caught doing that. This way we delay the mining a few days and then we’re out. Hurt their profits and then we disappear, reappear on another mountain in some other part of the state, hurt profits there, and so on. You start monkey-wrenching—even if you could get onto the site—you’ll get caught real quick. The best part about mousing is that you can pick up and go somewhere else. No jail time means you’re still in the game.”
“This shit sounds a hundred time easier than every op we ran in Iraq,” said Jake.

“You never got caught before, right?” I asked Brett.

“Not for anything serious,” he said. “We kept it smart.”

“Fuck yeah,” said Jake. “What’d I tell you, Ethan? This guy knows how to get shit done.”

Brett never stuck around Big Ugly for very long, but Jake had become a permanent establishment. He had some savings and he had no problem drinking it away. I let go of the garden, and Jake and I made regular visits to Kate’s old friends in Charleston, the friends that once came to stay with us. I stayed some weekends at her old place, with her old roommates. It was good to be around people again, people that didn’t know me so well or hate me for my tiny habits and flaws. People that expected nothing from me and didn’t lace themselves into my future and my aspirations and didn’t depend on me for their happiness and their wellbeing. People who winter didn’t shut off and send to bed at nine every night, and who didn’t have livelier conversations with my great aunt than they did with me.

It’s hard to remember it all, but in our domesticity, which Kate and I lambasted as patriarchal and conservative, we were often happy. Maybe we turned because we never committed to what we were building. Maybe we never admitted to each other that we wanted to keep things going, even if we implicitly admitted to that day after day when we woke and supported and loved. And mostly I can blame myself—no matter how I want to shape the narrative, and to direct blame on Kate’s actions and words, when Jake came to stay with me and when we were visiting Charleston, drinking through the weekends, I didn’t think or care for her no matter how many times we said “I love you” on the phone.
One night Jake and I went out and I lost him at the bar. I kept drinking with some people I sort of knew. A few hours later I woke up drunk next to someone else, and when I stood, found my pants, and lit the room with my cellphone, I realized I didn’t know the person in the bed or the room I was in. I thought of Dencil and of the siblings my father never met and the hand Dencil on his sons and wives, and it became difficult to breathe. I went outside and found my truck on Virginia Street, a few blocks from the Capitol. I walked downhill and across Kanawha Boulevard to the river. It was late in the fall then. I wore no coat. I had a hangover. I wanted to pick up the bottle again and step into that river and drown. I saw my body bloated, thrown over dams and smashed up by rocks and barges, picked clean by fish and floated from river to sea. I almost thought I could do it.

I called Jake again and again, but he didn’t pick up, so I drove 119 in a stupor and was almost all the way home—all the way back to my shack and my own bed—when I drifted too far and into the middle on one of the creek road’s twists, saw two headlights in front of me, and took a sharp turn to the left to dump my truck into three feet of Big Ugly. The airbags went off and the chemicals burned my face. The cold creek water rose to meet my feet and a voice shouted from the road. A man waded waist-high into the creek and pulled open my driver’s door.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “Hey, brother, can you hear me?”

He undid my seatbelt and pulled me from the car and for a moment, with his hands around my chest and my back to the water, he just paused there. He didn’t pull me out of the creek. My truck’s headlights cut out and I could see the stars overhead in the clear night bursting and burning and imploding. “What’s your name, man? Hey!” He pulled me from the water and left me alone on the bank as he ran back to his car. I sensed the earth at my back, the cool water dripping down my sides and legs and pouring from my shoes.
Eventually I sat up and borrowed the man’s phone. It took Patsy ten minutes to collect me. “That’s how Frank died,” she said to me, over and again on the short ride home. “You know that’s how Frank killed himself, Ethan. That’s how my husband Frankie died.”

When I got home I changed my clothes and started a fire, and when the sun was up and Huw was chattering in his cage, I brewed a pot of coffee and called Kate at her dad’s house in Wisconsin and told her about the woman last night, and about the two other before her, and about my truck in Big Ugly. Now when I said I love you, I meant it. And I asked her please to come back, please, because I needed her and I never understood it more than that moment that I loved her and I needed her and I couldn’t lose her.

She came back, two days before her father died.

“I don’t know who I am without you, Ethan,” she said. “And that terrifies me.”

“You are still you. You are always still you.”

“I need to know who I am. I need to get out of this place.”

“But I love you.”

“You promise this won’t happen again?”

“You know it won’t.”

She was a fool. I was a fool. I don’t know what we were bothering with.
I stop to cough. I’m on the lower road, holding my broken side. The sun is a dim pinprick in the midday sky and my feet are heavy and dull and full of spikes. There is a grating sound in my breathing, like my air must turn a series of rusted, ill-fitted cogs to pass into my lungs. At this speed, it will take two hours to get to the entrance road that switchbacks through the woods down to the temp buildings at the mine site. There’ve been no more flares from Jake for I don’t know how long now. I’ve lifted my shirt and found that dark red bruise radiating from about four inches below my left nipple. The skin is cut but not punctured and every step is like getting punched in the chest.

This—I’m thinking—is my war wound. Maybe the only one I’ll ever get. Dencil and Lewis Hart were not physically injured in their wars. By all accounts they came home different men, but there was no limp or scar to symbolize their experience. But my great-uncle John sported a lame left shoulder for the forty years between the German bayonet and the day he vanished from the family. This is how I remember the story:

John landed on a beach in southern France in the waning days of the war to cut off enemy use of the Mediterranean ports. As the US Army marched into the mountains, and the Germans retreated, he was among a fireteam separated from their squad when they met a dozen Nazi soldiers on a dirt road. His two other comrades were killed in the encounter, and he took a near-fatal bayonet wound to the shoulder and was then thrown half-conscious into a train car with about thirty other French, British, and American POWS, some of them dead and some of them living. For ten days he lived on rotten potatoes and lapped up rainwater from the manure-coated floor. When soldiers died of their wounds or infections, the living begged their captors to remove
the bodies. *Bitte schön! Der Geruch*, John would say, showing off his German at the dinner table. But of course the dead bodies remained, because that sort of thing always happens in war stories. After a few days, he stopped eating altogether. The potatoes and shit-water, he said, were making them hallucinate and driving the prisoners to fistfights and wrestling matches among the dead bodies of their comrades. Eventually a gunfight on the surrounding hillside with an American platoon displaced the remaining Germans and they were pulled out into a hot day in late August and given coffee and soup and antibiotics.

Why I remember this story, all these years after the man who lived it disappeared, has little to do with the horror. For me as a child, the details of war made little sense; what was odd was that John, whom I would most often see at large holiday meals, had never once touched a potato. I remember my father hunched over a trashcan rolling a knife over potato after potato to mash for Thanksgiving or to make a salad for a graduation or reunion, and my mother asking if that was alright, if he should be doing that.

“Potatoes again, Robert?” she’d say, a turkey baster or spatula in her hand.

“What?” my father would say.

“John and Joanne are coming.”

“What about it?”

“Well, do you want to be making potatoes? It always makes him talk about the war.”

I stand up from my coughing thinking of those soldier men of my family and wonder if what they did to their sons is because of what was done to them in war. But I don’t know if you can draw direct lines from one thing to another. Or, if you could, if you could say that because bad is done to one it must be passed on and done to another, and in this way you could simply explain
the entirety of human history. We have war because we had war. We destroy because we have been destroyed. There will be death to compensate for loss. A bullet for a bullet—and too, we destroy the land because of the destruction we see. When our childhood towns are swept through by bulldozers and train tracks and invading armies and shopping malls and highways, we board these vessels—joining the great momentum of war and development, giving our bodies to the snowballs—and happily roll through the next town over. To stop the destruction, to offer love when all we’ve known is disinterest and neglect or worse, is the obvious and impossible solution.

I want to sit but it would hurt too much. I’m thirsty. I can’t feel the tip of my nose. The sun is now blanketed over by gray clouds that appear low and heavy in the sky. Perhaps the coming of the storm Kate spoke of.

There’s a car making noise and dust behind me. My impulse is to run, but I stand dead center and just wait. It takes almost five minutes before the dust gets to me and the pickup drives right up to me and stops. I turn to face the miner inside dressed in the customary jumpsuit. He’s a younger guy, maybe a few years older than me. Under his jumpsuit he wears a hoodie, and a pair of sunglasses hides his eyes and keeps him expressionless. We stare at each other for a long moment through his windshield before he opens his door and lowers his boots to the ground. The heat and music from the cab exit with him; he’s listening to a throbbing, bass-heavy metal song and has the heat turned so high it swirls in the air like oil does in water, as exhaust does from a tailpipe, as blacktop steams in summer.

He walks up to me unhurried, and I’m trying to think of what to say, or wondering whether he’s going to know about my weak rib and give me a quick knee to it.

“You hurt?” he says.

“I fell.”
“That why ya’ll stopped with the horseplay?”

“I need to get to a hospital.”

“I figure you do.”

We keep still another moment and then he motions to the passenger’s side. When he sees the way I’m hobbling forward, he puts my arm around his shoulder and helps me to the truck. It takes great effort and pain to step into the cab, and when the heat and noise hit me, everything almost goes black again.

“You need water?” he asks.

“Please.” He reaches under his seat and hands me a plastic bottle of water. It is sweet and cold and I drink half the bottle in one gulp. We’re driving the road in the direction I was traveling, toward the temp office buildings. I want to ask him what he’s doing with me, who will be there to greet me, but I am tired and know I have no power in this situation.

We pass through the cut and into the trees and then reach the permanent road into the mine. There we take a right down, and start sinking, farther and farther. As we’re nearing the mine, he slows to a stop and reaches behind the seat. He yanks a black packing blanket and tosses it in my lap. “Cover up,” he says. “And try not to look like a guy under a blanket.”

“What?”

“You want them to see you down there?”

“No.”

“I got to go in there a minute but I won’t be long. You like cream in your coffee?”

“Sorry?”

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Both.”
“Don’t do anything stupid,” he says. “Just—you know, you’ll be alright. I don’t know why I’m doing this, but just don’t do anything stupid.”

“Alright,” I say, and then he lets go of the brake and we begin to coast through the switchbacks down into the mine. I slide in the seat, and the grinding breath returns and my side feels like it might split open. When tucked behind my neck and shoulders the blanket reaches to my knees, and so I sink some more so that my feet are far under the dash and I bunch the blanket up around the shoulders to keep it from pulling so hard against my head and revealing the skull-shaped thing underneath. It smells of motor oil, and I almost want to fall to sleep.

Then we stop.

“I’ll be just a minute,” he says, and I don’t respond from beneath the chrysalis.

He opens his door and a sweep of cold air blasts across the bench. Voices outside laugh and murmur but I can’t hear what they say. The metallic grinding sound has returned, far-off and echoing across the bare rock, but rattling the panes of the truck and beating into my heart and brain and broken bone. The heat fades from inside the cab and cold radiates from the door at my side. Wind cuts and howls against the side panels and whistles in through the cracks. I hear footsteps—they approach the truck. The gravel beneath the boots cracks and then stops when it’s loudest. The person is close. A voice from farther off calls and then boots beside the door respond and walk away again.

The truck door opens and the man fidgets with items on the dash. He’s sniffling from the cold and clearing his throat. Then he starts the truck and we go in reverse across the gravel and past the voices and when we’re on an incline, he tells me I’m free to show my face.

“I’m Brian,” he says.

“Ethan.”
“From around here, Ethan?” he asks.

“Sort of,” I say. “Not originally.”

“Didn’t figure. You don’t sound like you’re from here.”

“Not originally, no.”

“How many of you guys were up there?”

I don’t say anything.

“We caught your friend. The old guy.”

“Brett.”

“That’s right. We drove up to him in the dark and he put up his hands like we was going to shoot him or something.”

We turn left onto the upper road that cuts through the forest and toward the highway, and then a flare goes off behind us in the cut and Brian stops the car.

“Y’all still there?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Motherfuckers.”

Brian does a three-point turn on the narrow lane and barrels back the way we came, eventually swinging a sharp right onto the upper road right above the cut. I see two plumes of dust on the lower road riding to meet each other. When we come upon a steep logging road, Brian makes a left, and I hold my arms tight to my torso and hold my breath to stave off the pain from all the bouncing. The metal stills plays over the radio, and even as he’s taking sharp turns, Brian sips calmly from his Styrofoam cup of coffee. At a junction Brian leans over the dash and looks for the smoke trails from the flare in the sky. They’re to our right and Brian turns right and we quickly come to another truck stalled in the road.
He gets out and walks to the parked truck, opens the driver side door, and then comes out with a radio. I can’t make out what he’s saying into the radio, but after a few static-filled responses he jogs downslope. I think for a moment that I could steal his truck, but then decide that would only get me in more trouble, and anyway it seems like his plan is to take me out of here without reporting me, since he went through the whole hiding-me-under-a-blanket idea. I turn down the music and turn up the heat, and then lean back and try to get into a comfortable position. I know they’re after Jake, but I don’t know what to do about it or what I want to do about it. I want to go to the hospital.

I begin to drift to sleep, listening to the truck engine click in the cold, but shouts wake me and I sit up to see Jake followed by three miners, Brian among them. Jake is without his pack and isn’t wearing his hat or sunglasses. He heads directly for the first truck, but then opens the door, checking for the keys, I guess, and then sprints to Brian’s truck. When the miners reach the road, one of them trips and windmills his arms as he falls belly to the ground. When Jake sees me sitting in the passenger seat, he slows his pace for a minute and raises his eyebrows at me, and then opens the driver’s door and gets in.

“Keys?” he asks, and then touches the keys already in the ignition. He roars the truck to life. Sweat beads at his temples and he’s breathing hard, almost heaving, and when the heat of the truck blasts in his face and enters his lungs, he hacks. Brian slams against the door and pulls at the handle.

“Get out my truck,” he says.

The door swings open and Jake grabs for the inner panel, but in the struggle with the door the plastic panel tears free in Jake’s hand. Brian reaches in and takes hold of Jake by the front of his coat. Jake extends his arm, shoving at Brian’s face, and the two tug-of-war until Jake is
almost half out of the cab. Another miner is at my side now, but I lock the door. He beats on the glass near my face.

“Get out of there,” he says. His breath condenses on the window pane. The third miner, the one who fell, leans against the other truck rubbing his ankle.

As Brian struggles to wrestle Jake from the truck, Jake reaches into his coat pocket and flashes his orange weapon. Brian doesn’t let go of Jake’s collar, even when Jake places the barrel to Brian’s chest. Jake fires. The flare shrieks and whistles, the cab fills with sparks, and then Brian stumbles backwards. I brush a hot ember from my cheekbone. Brian remains on his feet in the road. Blue and white and orange sparks shoot from his chest and sizzle against the truck. He looks at his chest, but keeps his arms at his side, not knowing what to do. It’s like his heart is sparking from his breast, leaving in phosphorescent chunks. He doesn’t address the flare, just stares dumbly, fascinated. The miner at my side of the truck stands stunned a moment before he runs to Brian, takes off his coat and whips him with it. The other hobbles up onto his injured ankle and does the same, two men beating another with their dark canvas coats, the flare still combusting, showering all three.

Jake slams his door and puts the truck in reverse, pressing on the gas so that we skid away from the scene. “Wait,” I say. He puts his arm around the seat and looks over his shoulder, but he’s going so fast that when the road bends to the left, he sends us straight over the ledge. The truck rumbles over leftover saplings and rattles over rocky ledges, I can hear the undercarriage scraped and dented by stone, and then a tall dead snag smashes into the bed. I’m thrown against my seat and then whipped forward into the dash. My breath cuts short from the abrupt stop and I almost lose sight from the pain. Jake puts the truck in drive and presses the gas
again, but the vehicle is tilted akimbo and the wheels squeal and the truck doesn’t move an inch. I smell rubber burning.

“Get out,” he says, and opens his door. He’s coughing now, almost uncontrollably. His face is purple and his eyes bright red.

I stay where I’m sitting, holding my arms tight over my body and trying to breathe through the dented machinery of my insides.

“Out,” he says again, clearing his throat. “We have to run.”

“I’m hurt.” I say.

“Come on, man,” he says. “They’re coming.”


He stands in the open truck door, moving his gaze from me to the ledge we just left. I almost ask him to carry me, but then I don’t know who I’d rather be with right now—the miners or Jake. When the uninjured man appears on the road above, Jake slams the truck door and runs west, along the contour of the hillside, toward the still-forested cover, in the direction of Big Ugly. He bounds over stumps and ravines like a deer after the hunter’s fatal shot.
From my bed by the window at Boone Memorial I can see a dense fist of charcoal-colored clouds displace the swirling light grays that came in with morning. My father is here, sitting by the bed and petting my arm. He’s always made it a point to make physical contact with my sister and me. He grips our shoulders when we say goodbye, pats our knees in car rides, gives massages, holds onto hugs too long. “I could be like my father,” he said when I once shirked away from an embrace as a teenager. “I could never touch you at all. Never look you in the eyes. Except when I’m hitting.”

Two West Virginia state police officers stand outside the room talking with a woman in a wheelchair. A doctor comes in and sits me up. He listens to my rocky breath through his stethoscope, throws an examining light into my eyes, and once again studies the charred flesh on the tip of my nose. He then helps me stand and surrender my wrists to the officers’ handcuffs, and I am escorted out of the hospital into the fierce winter air with a bandage on my nose to keep from scratching at the yellow and black blisters of first-degree frostbite and instructions to avoid the outdoors and fireplaces, and for the fracture on my left number seven rib, a bottle of ibuprofen and instructions to breathe deeply and avoid physical activity for a few weeks. He offers nothing for the minor concussion. My father hustles past the officers and into the parking lot. I am lowered into the back seat, and when the cop turns out of the lot I see that my father has caught up with us. The whole way to the station I sit slumped over in the seat so that I can watch my father’s Prius in the side mirror, his silhouette neatly framed within, keeping pace the few turns to the sheriff’s office.
As soon as I’m booked—same charges as Brett: trespassing, reckless endangerment, and discharging a firearm in public—my father posts bail and we walk arm in arm into the parking lot. He helps me into the passenger side of his car and then brings two fleece blankets from the trunk and sets them on my lap. One blanket is patterned with soccer balls and the other with electric guitars. He wears a flannel with a nylon underside and has brought an identical one for me. They cut off my thermals and base layer in the hospital, and so I wear the flannel over a stained undershirt he also brought along. From the dashboard blares a noxious, manufactured heat.

“Are you warm enough?” he asks, taking his seat behind the wheel.

“I’m fine.”

He keeps slapping his hands together and blowing into them. It’s never been characteristic of my father to be prepared, but something about discovering I was injured and frostbitten has made him think of blankets and extra clothing. He presses the engine button and the car glides in reverse and out of the parking lot. Almost as soon as we turn out of the station the first flakes of snow begin to fall. The radio is set to a Maryland station, but local voices speculating on the storm punctuate the thick and heavy static. I imagine my father driving here yesterday not once noticing the voices on his AM sports talk going dead, accepting the static as given. I turn the radio off.

“They were talking about the storm,” he says.

“It was static.”

By the time we turn onto the creek road the snow is sticking to the pavement and his windshield wipers work furiously to keep the world in view. He makes the turn to Patsy’s but I tell him I want to go up top to the old house.
“It’s freezing there,” he says.

“I’ll get it warmed up.”

He stares at me, and I know he won’t force me but thinks I’m being unreasonable.

He parks in the gravel and comes around to my side to help me out. He takes up the blankets I’ve pushed aside and then goes for more in the trunk—all the same fleece material and cut to the same size by my mother fifteen years before when she went to the fabric store to cut a blanket every time Jane or I found a new hobby—tennis, trumpet, baseball, piano. I take the steps up and push open the unlocked door. I kick the snow from my boots and enter the cold and dark room, taking a seat on the couch as my father sets an armload of blankets beside me and goes to work on the woodstove. I lean into the blankets, trying to take full and even breaths as he builds a teepee of tinder over balls of newspaper, just like he taught our Boy Scout troop ten years ago. The teepee catches and the fire dances against the iron door before he lays in two pieces of honey locust and closes and latches the door to let the fire heat the room. Snow builds on the sills and wind rattles the panes.

In the kitchen he pulls from the cupboards above the sink cans of tomato and pickled beets and green beans.

“Haven’t you got anything more filling?” he says.

“Check the cupboard on the left.”

“Flour and spaghetti.”

“The cooler.”

“Three eggs.”

“You could make spaghetti.”

“You have any meat?”
“I had some venison in Patsy’s freezer, but I think it’s all gone.”

“What about how you were going to make it on your own up here? Keep yourself fed through winter.”

“I was feeding Jake. We ate it all.”

My father fills a pot at the stove and then lets the burner click a full minute before he gives up. He huffs. “What’s wrong with it?” he asks.

“Maybe the pilot light went out.”

“It’s not your propane?”

“I changed that last week.”

It takes a great effort for him to lower himself to the floor and check the light under the oven door. He exposes his butt crack to me and as I stare at it blankly, I think of the next few weeks up here resting my rib, and then I think of the years that are coming when my knees and back will go and I’ll end up looking something like him. He finds a cigarette lighter on the kitchen table and relights the pilot.

“That’s it,” he says, and then strikes a flame under the pot of water.

The water comes to a boil.

“It’s not that I don’t understand,” he says, “because I do. I do understand. I just wish there was some other way to go about it.”

“Like what?”

“Those are serious charges.”

I haven’t told him about Jake yet, about the fire that flared from the miner’s chest. I asked one of the doctors how Brian was doing but he wouldn’t tell me, he only told me about my injuries, and besides that wouldn’t look me in the eye. I’d rode to the hospital between Brian and
another miner, a man in his fifties named Joseph who’d come from the temp buildings to collect us.

“Where are we going?” I’d asked Joseph.

“Boone Memorial.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“Don’t you fucking talk,” he told me. “Don’t you say another goddamn word. I’ll throw you into that fucking ditch so quick you’ll never take another breath.”

When he pulled up to the hospital and they loaded Brian on a stretcher, Joseph pointed me out to an orderly, me resting my head on the nylon back of the front bench of his Ford.

“Here’s the fucker,” he said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

My father boils the noodles and empties a can of yellow heirloom tomatoes into another saucepan. The meal is plain but the sauce is sweet and I eat until I am full. He puts more wood in the stove and soon the shack feels comfortable enough to shed the fleece blankets and move about in just my sweater and wool cap. I shake a few ibuprofen from the bottle and tell him I’m going to bed. He nods and puts on his coat.

“I’ll go visit with Patsy,” he says. “I’ll come to check on you before long. I want to drive you down to the house before the storm comes on.”

“I like it here.”

“I like it here, too,” he says. “I remember this place when I was a kid. It looks about the same.”

“Was the forest the same? Or were there different trees?”

“I don’t know trees like you do.” He doesn’t say anything for a moment and I feel again the throbbing of my bruised brain. I dig a cold knuckle into my eye socket.
“My father wasn’t good to me. He used to beat me, you know.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I tried to be different, you know.”

“I know, Dad. You were good to Jane and me.”

“Thank you,” he says.

“I’ll remember that.”

“Good.”

“Will you ask Kate to come up here?”

“Sure,” he says.

When he opens the door the wind blows hard through branches and against the frozen earth. He steps into the snow and his footsteps crunch down the steps and toward his car. I stand from the table and touch the bandage on my nose. It is tender, but not too painful.

I open the stove and the fire accepts another brittle log of honey locust. I arrange pillows and blankets on the couch and lay myself on the injured side, as the doctors prescribed. The fire ticks and hisses. The wind finds cracks in the shed, cracks I could not find, and whistles into the room. Sometimes the loneliness here is sacred—a time to commune with simple noises and the feeling of life in my body. Other times it is maddening, and the quiet suffocates, and it is like drowning in an air everyone else can breathe. Through the front window I see how dark and gray the sky has become, even though it’s early in the afternoon, that time of day when the sun is supposed to be closest. The boughs of the hickory shift from side to side in the wind, cracking and groaning in the weather. I stare at the torment outside and I drift into warm sleep.

I wake to creaking floorboards and the strike of a match.
“Kate,” I say, but there’s no response.

When the kerosene lamp is struck, I see that the figure isn’t Kate, but Jake. He’s in the same clothes we were running around in a day before.

“You got away?” he asks.

“I’m out on bail.”

“What’d they charge you with?”

“Same as Brett.”

“Nothing about the—” he pauses, “the flare gun.”

“They told the cops what happened. That it was you.”

“I got lost,” Jake says. “I tried to come right here but it started snowing and I got lost.”

“They’re looking for you, man. You can’t stay here.”

“Did that guy die?”

“I don’t think so. I rode with him to the hospital.”

“Good.”

“His name is Brian.”

“Who?”

“The guy you shot.”

“Oh.” Jake takes a cigarette from the table and lights it with the uncovered lamp. “This is a fucking storm.”

“I’ve been sleeping,” I say.

He sits at the table but doesn’t smoke the lit cigarette. The tobacco pulses at his fingertip and the smoke lifts in a steady opaque stream.

“How much snow is there?”
“Look outside, dude. It’s one hell of a storm. I got fucking cold last night.” He kicks off his boots. “My fucking feet. I think I got frostbite.”

I shift my weight and pull myself up from the couch. The world outside is disappearing in white. Snow climbs the northern face of every tree, the road is indistinguishable from the forest floor, and each headstone of the graveyard, almost masked entirely by the flurries, is sinking beneath the snow cover.

“Did you give them my name?” Jake asks. “Are they gonna fuck with my folks?”

“They already had your name, man.”

“Brett?”

“I guess.”

“Let me use your phone,” he says.

“It’s in my bag.”

“Where’s your bag?” He’s swinging the lamp around the place, kicking at every box and pushing around the chairs.

“It’s probably still in my dad’s trunk.”

“I need to talk to Brett.”

The whole house rattles now with wind. The snow berates the northern wall, and the trees groan in their struggle to keep root.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Midnight maybe?”

“It’s been snowing for a while?”

“A few hours.”

“I’m going down to see if Kate’s still here.”
“I didn’t ever trust him,” he says.

“Who?”

“He was too fucking slick, too fucking smooth. I don’t like people from the West Coast, man.”

“Brett was from Iowa.”

“Yeah, but he was really from Washington, man. He got radicalized there.”

I told him I was going down to the bottom and picked up my coat from where my father hung it by the door.

“She’s here, man,” Jake says. I saw her car. Nobody’s leaving on those roads out there.”

“I’m going down there.”

“Stay here with me,” he says.

“Why?”

“Just stay, man.”

The lamp he holds is the only light in the place, and it swings from his unsteady hand, illuminating the walls of the house Bobby Hart built in a flickering orange. Jake shot another man point blank for no good reason. I ask him why.

“They wanted to stop us.”

“They did stop us,” I said. “We were done.”

“Stay up here, Ethan. For real.”

I fix my feet into my boots and kick each leg one at a time against the wall so that I can reach the laces. My coat weighs heavy on my tired shoulders.

“I never did that before,” he says. “Never shot anybody. Sometimes people ask and I make like maybe I did. It sort of feels like I did. It feels like I shot hundreds of people. Street
kids, families, our own guys we had to watch die. It feels like I dropped every fucking bomb, like it was me that did in all those villages. But the truth is I never got one kill to my name. I shot at people, but maybe not trying to kill them. Just to shoot at them because that’s what I was supposed to do. This was the first time. It was close, right up in my face. I know I hit him. Everybody saw it.”

He holds the lamp out from his chest, the flame dancing and the kerosene sloshing back and forth. Outside the storm whips and cracks the forest into submission. I stand on the porch holding the door open, the entrance between us—him in the dark shack, holding its only fire, and me in the night almost brilliant with light from the snow. Before I shut the door, he makes a whimper, almost like a kicked dog—a soft gushing, a deep throaty cry. I shut the door and leave him.

Along the road, already over a foot deep in snow, downed branches require my path to meander, zig-zag and switchback on the way down. The porch light of Patsy’s house is yellow in the storm. The only other light on in the house is the living room, and when I enter through the kitchen I see that my father sits alone on the couch.

“Do you want tea?” he says at my entrance.

“I’m okay.”

“House okay up there?”

“Storm’s bad.”

“Apparently New York City is flooding,” he says.

“That sounds so apocalyptic,” I say.

He sips from a mug and stares at the blank face of the television.

“I can’t sleep,” he says. “It’s too loud.”
I don’t say anything, but lay my coat over a chair and kick off my boots, and then slip past him down the hall to where Kate’s sleeping. Without knocking I enter the bedroom. It was once Elma’s, and still has the stepstool up to the tall bed and the smell of baby powder and medicine, that smell that accompanies the near-to-death. Kate lies still, but I can tell from her breathing that she’s awake. I sit at the foot of the bed. After a moment, she stirs.

“Your dad said you broke a rib.”

“I’m okay.”

“Was it worth it?” she asks.

“Can I lie with you?”

“I’m leaving when the snow clears.”

“I know.”

“I’m glad it’s not worse,” she says.

“Can I lie with you a while?”

She scoots closer to the wall and when I slip beneath the sheets and blankets, she backs against me so that we’re spooning. The alarm clock on the nightstand, which was blinking an electric green light against the white walls, goes black. Her phone beeps when the outlet quits.

“The power went out,” I say.

“Why?”

“A tree probably fell against the line somewhere.”

“You’re cold.”

“My pants are wet from the snow.”

“Take them off.”
I rise from the bed again and strip to my boxers and t-shirt and then slide back into bed. We get into the same position and I bury my head into the back of her neck. Relationships are about stories. And for a while Kate and I loved to tell our story to each other—how we met on a line between the nation and coal, how I dropped out of the system and decided to be near her and farm, how she left her three-year relationship to be with me because she knew. But then when the story shifts, and you complicate your own simple, hard-edged narrative, it becomes more difficult to accept what you are. Kate didn’t leave me because we couldn’t be together or because we didn’t love each other anymore; she left because we didn’t know how to tell our story. Yes, he cheated, but he is so good to me. Yes, I know what I did, but it doesn’t mean I don’t love her. Here, beside her, I’d never felt closer to anything. You could hate your family, leave your family, but they’re always a part of your make-up, a part of your story. Kate was closer than family, more important than my DNA and more important than the faults and struggles of those before me. But Kate could also disappear. She could walk out of my life and it would be like none of it ever happened.

For a long time my pulse is louder than the weather, and then there is a roar and a close crashing outside and then in the dark the floors shake beneath us and a window in the main room shatters and I throw my hands above my head. Kate and I scramble out from under the sheets and I step back into my clothes. I go into the main hall as wind invades the house and snow blows in from the kitchen. There is another loud shifting, a cracking and groaning, and then the house shifts with us and the front side drops. Kate screams from the bedroom. My father and I are shouting at each other. He pulls his cellphone from his pocket and holds it against the weather to show the branches that have entered through the back side of the house. The kitchen roof has
collapsed and a pile of snow fallen onto the still upright table. The chairs have been knocked backwards and the fridge door swung open and a carton of milk emptied across the floor.

He goes to the hall closet and finds two flashlights and he hands one to me. Kate has come out of her room, shouting my name. I turn the light on her and my father pushes into Patsy’s room. We all go into Patsy’ room. She is asleep in her bed and my father shakes her.

“Patsy,” he says. “A tree fell on the house.”

A branch reaches through her window and her dresser lies face down on the floor. She turns and my father sits her up.

“We should go up to the other house,” he says.

“That place isn’t safe,” Kate says.

“Do you see what just happened?” I say. Still the house is making noises. Something else crashes in the kitchen. Snow blows sideways into the house from the top of the mountain and the wind moans like an injured animal. Our flashlights uncover small pieces of the wreck so that it’s hard to consider everything at once, the house actually punctured by a fallen tree.

“The tree could be on top of the house,” my father says. “Get her coat and shoes.”

Kate gets her coat from the hook near the side door and I pick up her slippers from the hall.

“Where are her real shoes?” my father asks.

“She doesn’t wear real shoes.”

He fixes the slippers on her feet. She stares at my father as if drugged, not saying a word. When Kate has her arms worked into her winter coat, the rest of us put on our coats and boots and go out through the side door. From the outside we see that a larger tree has fallen and taken out a series of smaller trees with it, shoving those smaller trees into the house. The wind is
pushing us sideways, and my father, with his arm around Patsy, tries to coax her to move her feet
toward the road. The snow has built in three- and four-foot drifts against the house and is
probably eighteen inches everywhere else. It squeaks against my boots.

“Fuck,” I say, though no one but Kate hears me. “Huw.”

“Jesus,” says Kate.

I turn back to the house and go in through the side door, for the first time since coming to
Big Ugly not removing my shoes and walking right onto the carpet. The bookshelf in front of
Huw’s cage has collapsed and knocked over his end table. The cage lies on its side, the bottom
half-pinned beneath the bookshelf and the whole thing slightly askew under the pressure. I don’t
see him at first, but when I touch the cage he shifts his green body in the dark. One side has
collapsed inward and his wooden perch has fractured in the middle. I lift the bookshelf and take
the cage but now I see one corner’s hinges have snapped, so I open the door and reach in for
Huw. I grab his body but he clings stubbornly to the cage. I pull him free and hold the bird at
arm’s length. He is silent, but cocks his eye to me.

Kate helps my father with Patsy, but the three of them haven’t made it far in the snow. I
easily catch up to them, squeezing the bird with both hands. When I slip slightly I remove one
hand for balance and Huw uses the opportunity to spread and flap his wings. He can’t get
purchase to pull away and I push his wings back into his body.

“Quit it,” I tell him.

The flashlights beam through the snow. The trees are near invisible though only feet
away, and what can be seen of their dark bodies are dwarfed by the swelling of white around
them. Everywhere branches have been scattered in the snow and twice we have to climb over
large downed limbs. When the shack comes into view, Patsy stops walking. My father and Kate coax her along, and then she tries to speak.

“Come on, dear,” says Kate.

They overwhelm her objection and push her body forward. As they ascend the porch Huw catches me off guard with a sharp bite to my hand and I release my hold. He flaps his clipped wings just as a sudden wind whips down from the mountain and lifts him up into the air. My flashlight follows the path of his body as he glides, beating his unused wings as the gust pushes him into the hickory. He clamors to find a perch in one of the dark and leafless branches and then tucks his wings against his side and holds to a wrist-sized branch in the tree.

The other three have gone inside and shut the door behind them. I walk over to the hickory and put the Maglite in my mouth. The metal is cold and bitter. I take hold of the lowest climbing branch, brush off the layer of snow and then place my left boot thigh-high on the trunk. At first it slips, but then I grip the bark and lift myself high enough to grab hold of another branch with my left hand. My side sears with pain and I can feel a sharp burning in my nose. Once I have thrown my right foot onto the lower branch and shifted my weight to it, I balance and take the flashlight from my mouth. I find Huw in the beam.

“Come down, you stupid fucker.”

“Coffee,” he says.

I steady the light back in my teeth and reach to him, making sure he can see my outstretched arm in the beam. He stares at me, his feathers ruffling in the wind. I push with my left arm and take ahold of another branch with my right, now moving my left boot to a branch and shifting my weight to that side. I find him in the light and see him walking farther out, and then he lifts a leg to a nearby branch and climbs upward, moving higher in the tree.
“Huw,” I say, “I can’t leave you here.”

He finds a new spot he’s comfortable with and turns again to look at me. He opens his mouth, and his black tongue rolls over his bottom beak.

“Coffee,” he says.

“Huw,” I shout.

He squawks.

“I’ll get you some pineapple,” I say, begging. “Come on, you fucking bird.”

The lamps have come on in the house and I see a dozen small flames refracted through the windows of the shack. I reach for him once more, but he is far away and I am in too much pain to continue my climb. I hold my weight in my arms and drop into the snow. The pain in my side shoots through my body, and the flashlight falls from my teeth’s grip. I pick it up from where it has crattered the snow and get up from my hands and knees. I kick again through the wind to the porch and once more find the bird with the light. He is facing away from me now. He opens his wings once more, and I think maybe he will glide to the ground. He has always known the ground; his wings were clipped at birth, and though he resembles his distant cousins in the Brazilian Amazon he has spent his decades on this earth a caged and flightless bird. The wind shakes his wings and for a moment he appears in flight. He is beautiful, radiant, but hopeless. And then he closes his wings into his body and tucks his beak into his chest. I drop the light from the bird in the hickory and head inside the heated cabin.

My father makes a fire in the stove. The wind is just as wicked up here as it rattles the panes and bends the lowest-hanging branches of the upslope spruces; their needles against the roof sound
like a scratchy, indecipherable whisper. I sit in a metal folding chair in the corner and hang my face over the beeswax candle that Kate and I made until it burns my scabbed nose.

“You’re not supposed to be that close to a flame,” Kate says, as if she is in my thoughts.

“It smells good,” I say.

“Patsy’s asleep now,” she says.

“That’s good.”

She sits in one of the table chairs pulled against the wall, her legs crossed and her hand sunk in between her thighs. She chews on her bottom lip, her nervous habit, and watches my father blankly at the stove.

“Jake,” I say.

“What about him?” Kate asks.

“Where’d Jake go?”

“What do you mean?”

I stand up from my seat.

“Jake was here.”

“He was?”

I take a lamp and open the door, searching for footprints leading away from the porch, but the storm is so heavy whatever tracks he left are already gone. I shut the door and sit again next to Kate. The fire is bright and raging and my father stands from his job. In his flannel overcoat, his graying hair and his belly pushing out against the bottom buttons and a piece of firewood unconsciously held in his hands, he appears as if he has approached the final slope of his life, and the weariness he has always carried in his face is less forgiving as it drags at the eyes and the mouth.
He turns his gaze from us to the roof, where the spruce branches’ whispers have grown more insistent. I replaced the shingles on the roof but the frame is Bobby Hart’s original frame. This house was built to protect this family from the poverty of the coal camps. It was supposed to shelter them while they worked an income from the land. It didn’t work, and Bobby Hart went back into the mines after his children were born and worked them until he had breathed so much of that coal dust in that he died. His son, Dencil, had two options: work coal or move. He moved and worked the tankers and hobby-farmed at a loss, then died. My father came into the world at a time when employment came easy and a living income was his right as an educated white man. For me, things have slipped, and now I’m here, back where Bobby Hart started, trying to make my way off the land. But the land has rejected me just as it rejected him. The soil is contaminated, and the air I breathe is shortening my life expectancy.

In moving here I think I meant to dig through the layers and find some pastoral history, some past where my family was one and whole with the land, but digging down I found that when I bring that past to the surface it becomes ugly and toxic. Maybe the past is meant to be left alone. Maybe its wholeness and fortitude is a myth, and when taken by the present and exploited, it becomes fatal. We can use our history as a fuel for the present, but it will leave the land ugly and starve us out when we have exhausted its stories and mysteries. We must live where we are put, on the surface. The dead will return to us through the soil when they are ready, but we must not seek them. Leave what’s buried buried, and take what is provided freely here in the green and now.

I find that we all three have been watching the roof. The whispering has grown louder despite a sudden quiet in the wind. If I listen with a certain abandon, I can almost discern the tone of its message. The voice is foreboding and aggravated; it wants us to and take our roofs
and chainsaws and our explosives and let it be in its unending pain and isolation. Without saying anything my father unfolds Jake’s cot from where it leans against the wall. He takes a quilt from the milk crate on the floor and lies down, clothes and all, and turns to face the wall.

“You take the couch,” Kate says.

“You need to sleep somewhere,” I say.

“You’re injured.”

“Sleep there with me,” I say. “We’ll fit.”

“No, Ethan,” she says.

I don’t argue the point and go immediately to the couch as a child who’s been reprimanded and sent to bed. I lie on my side and take slow and intentional breaths, the mechanisms of my body struggling to function. Kate walks a circle around the room to blow out each of the candles. At the lantern on the table, the last remaining light, her orange face disappears when she turns the wick into the lamp’s belly to expire the flame. I expect to hear footsteps moving to the crate of quilts so that she might make a bed on the floor, but the house is silent, and staring through the darkness I cannot find her, only the bright negative image my eyes trick me with—her figure a splotch of dying light in the mechanics of my sight, she a memory, a ghost, floating away and fading into the dark and quiet house. Looking for her figure when my eyes adjust, and waiting for the floorboards to betray her movement, I fall asleep. I could have stared for mere seconds, waiting, I don’t know, but it seems I stared for hours hoping for her presence to materialize, where I could have sworn she still lived.
I’m on the 52 west from Bluefield one early afternoon in late March and I’ve been driving from Maryland since daybreak. My mouth tastes like sleep and energy drink, that film of sugary grit on my teeth. As soon I cross the Virginia border into West Virginia, getting away from the Blue Ridge strip of college towns and west of the state forests, I can feel it again: coal country. Those bald spots beyond the road, the Friends of Coal bumper stickers, the way big men in flannels eyeball my out-of-state plates at the gas stations.

Sharon Esposito works the desk at the correctional facility in Welch and lives with her husband, a miner for Murray Energy, and their four-year-old daughter Clementine. When I pull into their driveway and knock on their door, I can see through a bay window the girl on hands and knees pushing a plastic train around a carpet with a picture of tracks and buildings and rivers. Sharon answers the door in blue jeans and a large white t-shirt. Her hair is wet from a shower. She is pretty, tired. I can see Jake in her cheek bones and lips.

“Ethan.” She shakes my hand and leads me to her kitchen table. “Don’t mind the mess,” she says as we pass through a hallway cluttered with boxes. “We moved here last year and Ron and I work so much we haven’t got time to unpack, I guess.” She sits me at the table and then goes about the kitchen fixing a pot of coffee and a plate of crackers and grapes. I ask about her daughter and she goes on for a while about the school system. Her eyes bounce around and she doesn’t meet my eyes until she sits across the table, her own cup of coffee steaming in front of her. “So you knew Jake real well, I guess.”

“Not for long,” I say. “But pretty well.”
“My Ma, she likes to say the Army made him some different person. That she could never see the boy she raised doing something like that. Something, you know, must have turned his head a little crooked.”

“I didn’t know him before.”

“I guess you didn’t. I guess we knew two different Jakes.”

Two years ago, during the blizzard that locked us in the shack at Big Ugly, Jake got picked up by cops trying to hitch down 119. His public defender called me twice, the first time to get my side of the story, and the second time, only a few days later, after he had been locked up in a Madison jail a week without bail, to let me know that Jake Esposito was dead. He wouldn’t tell me anymore than that—only that it was an open investigation, and then he gave me his condolences and hung up. I remember calling Kate, over and again calling Kate. I hadn’t talked to her in a few days, and I started going so crazy thinking about her ignoring her phone that I threw mine at the wall and watched it smashed into plastic pieces and precious metal.

The headline in *The Charleston Gazette* read, “Environmentalist Iraq Vet Shoots Coal Miner, Commits Suicide in Boone County Jail.” According to the article, Jake made a noose with his bed sheets, tied them around his sink, and went limp on the floor. After I read the story I took a sheet from my bed and tied it into a noose. I threw it around my bathroom sink and put my head through, just like the article described, but I sat there and wondered how a person could be dedicated enough not to just stand up—how could he have just sat there, not breathing, when everything in his body must have wanted him to stand up and soldier on? I didn’t believe it. I still don’t. I’d known Jake for months, and it didn’t make sense. I’d traveled near that edge before, but I’d never looked it head on, never knew how to cross over.
Over the next few days the story blew up on cable news. *Fox News* said he was part of a radical eco-terrorism group and the pundits said he got what he deserved. They called him a murderer, even though Brian walked out of the hospital a few days after the incident. *Democracy Now* brought on a psychologist to discuss PTSD and the suicide rates of veterans. They discussed things done and seen by American soldiers in Iraq—things Jakes never mentioned, experiences he never had—trying to rationalize, humanize. Almost none of the reports talked about mountaintop removal or focused on what Jake was doing to get in jail in the first place. I started getting e-mails. Somebody even showed up at Big Ugly wanting to talk to me, and a lot of the reports mentioned me by name, but I never told the press anything. I didn’t know what to say—that I didn’t see the suicide coming, that I wasn’t sure he even did it, that he believed in what he was doing up until the point where he shot someone in the chest. My grandmother called me, frantic.

“It’s a goddamn election year, Ethan. I’m running for reelection.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why’d you have to involve yourself in something so stupid?”

“I don’t know.”

I had to deactivate my Facebook because of all the hate mail I started getting. Brett did interviews, though. “Jake was always a bit of a loose cannon,” the old Iowa boy said, clutching his belt outside the house in Charleston where he was staying. “You never quite felt safe around the guy.”

I got in contact with Jake’s family, but when his mother figured out who I was she hung up the phone. Sharon, his sister, called me a week later to apologize but asked me not to attend the funeral. “We want to remember him as the old Jake,” she said. “No offense.” The
environmentalist community was quick to disassociate from Jake. All the big ones—Greenpeace, RAN, Appalachia Rising, Mountain Justice—released statements condemning violence, saying it had no place in the movement. They tried to make clear that Jake Esposito never held a role of leadership in their organizations.

Then this January, Sharon called me up out of the blue. “I been reading about it,” she said. “The ecology and stuff. About this lizard that went extinct from the dirty streams and stuff. Trying to make sense of Jake. I don’t know.”

I was back at Maryland, two semesters away from a degree in Agricultural Sciences, renting a College Park apartment with a view of fast food and gas station emblems erected over a congested Route 1.

“I know you called a long while back, but I wonder if you wouldn’t mind talking a bit. I feel like I gotta make it make a little more sense, if you know what I mean?”

Sharon breaks up a saltine and eats it shard by shard. I stare into the bottom of my empty coffee cup. I once read that you could tell a person’s fortune with those leftover grits, something about which way they pointed, what kind of patterns they made—but I can’t remember the specifics, don’t know how to read the signs.

“I couldn’t tell Ron you were coming,” she says. “I meant to, you know. We tell each other everything, or at least we try, but he didn’t really know Jake and he don’t like you environmentalists. He’s a coal miner. I mean, it makes sense. But I can’t talk to him about Jake. I just don’t know how.”

“I’m sorry.”
“The last time I saw my brother, a few weeks before he moved up there with you, you know what he told me? I was up at Ma’s house with Clementine, and Jake was there like normal, sleeping late, kinda angry. He told me I was irresponsible for having Clementine. ‘A parasite,’ he called me. He said we was all just ruining and using up everything good and having more babies to do the same thing. You believe that, too?”

“No,” I say. “I don’t believe that.”

“I get it, you know. It breaks my heart to think of what we’re losing. It really does. But how can he be so angry, you know? So hateful? Who wants to live life like that?”

“He didn’t know what else to do.”

“I guess he didn’t.”

I left Sharon’s house before her husband returned from work, and drove right back the way I came, six hours, the sun disappearing in the west and turning those winter-gray mountains blue, then black, and then gone in the dark.

* * *

When the snow stopped, Kate left Big Ugly and went back to Charleston. I walked down the road with her to the car below, and leaned against the house holding my tender side while she shoveled a rut behind the wheels of her car.

“Thanks for coming,” I said. “For watching Patsy and stuff.”

She nodded. Her face flushed red from the shoveling and the cold. She expelled dense clouds of breath.

“When can I see you again?”

“I don’t know, Ethan. I don’t know if that’s right for me.”
“We’ll talk?”

“Sure,” she said.

She left and didn’t come back and I didn’t see her again. We talked on the phone every now and then for a few months, but then I moved back to Maryland and she moved to San Diego with a guy named Anders. He’s from Germany and about seven feet tall. Sometimes, when I’m trying to study or work on a paper, I find myself scrolling through their pictures on Facebook. Feeling that dull ache—that guilt, that regret, wanting to be better and to never let that happen again but knowing, too, that I’m the same person that ruined it once and would ruin it again. We only learn right by doing wrong, and usually by then the damage is done and unforgivable. Once the mountain is gone it’s not coming back no matter how much you say you’re sorry.

Two days after she left, Patsy, my dad, and I were having breakfast in the small house when we felt the blasts. The windows rattled and the house creaked and settled. I rose, put on my boots and coat, and went outside. Everything was covered in white, only a few paths worn up and down the hill. The sky was slate gray, threatening another snowfall, and Huw, the bright green bird, stood frozen in the black and snow-burdened arms of the hickory. His head and shoulders covered in a half-inch of snow, he appeared smaller and brighter than he ever had before, like a brilliant piece of fruit in the bleak and whitewashed world. I knew I should take him down, but he was so perfect there, like a stuffed exhibit in the Smithsonian, and I didn’t want to wrap him in cloth or plastic and cover his still tropical feathers or hide the beauty that even death could not steal.

My father and Patsy followed me outside now. Standing beside the hickory, we saw a black cloud moving over the mountain, like Moses’ plague, corroding the pale winter sky, like the earth had coughed and its lungs were full of snow and coal dust. We waited for each blast
that followed, the jostling ground, the distant and fracturing earth. The land Jake and I had
defended—the land I had run and slept and lived on for a few days; the land Elma scoured for
berries and pawpaw and herbs, where Dencil hunted and camped as a boy; where generations
had lived and loved and died—was smoke, overburden, and coal to burn in plants across the
nation. It would become infomercials and electric razors, cell phone calls and radio wires, plastic
bottles and porch lights and billboards and C-sections and treadmills and drum machines and
everything that used electricity, no matter how important, how trivial. Patsy slipped her hand into
mine—for balance, I thought at first, but she didn’t lean any weight into me, just squeezed with a
power I’d never expect she had until my knuckles grinded against one another beneath the skin.
When we’d waited long enough to be sure we’d seen the last of it, that they were done with the
loud part and now the machines would be going to work and gobbling up the earth, we went
back inside the house.

Patsy told a story about Dencil putting a garter snake in their father’s work boots. My
father told one about Lewis dating two girls at the same time. We laughed at the punch lines and
nodded at the serious parts. A tea kettle whistled in the kitchen.


VITA

Andrew Donal Payton was born April 8, 1986 in Landover Hills, Maryland. He received his Bachelors of Arts in English and Electronic Media & Film from Towson University in 2008. His poetry has been published in *Notre Dame Review, Fourth River, Louisville Review*, and elsewhere, and won the James Hearst Poetry Prize at *North American Review*. His fiction has appeared in *Meridian, Greensboro Review, Southern Humanities Review*, and *Masters Review*, won a fellowship to the Aspen Writers’ Foundation summer writing retreat, and received finalist commendations in the *Chicago Tribune*’s Nelson Algren Award, *Hunger Mountain*’s Howard Frank Mosher Short Fiction Prize, and *Gigantic Sequins* Flash Fiction Prize. His nonfiction is published in *Bayou, South Dakota Review, South Loop Review*, received an Honorable Mention in AWP’s Intro Journals project, and won *Flyway*’s Home Voices Contest. In 2014-2015, he will live in Svidník in the Slovak Republic as a Fulbright fellow.