Consider The Lilies

Marian Junker*
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Abstract

IT IS winter, but no snow has fallen. The ground is cracked and bare. Here and there a stubborn seed pod clings to a dead stalk, but every day the wind loosens it. Soon it will fall to the waiting earth...
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Last night, after we went to the Christmas Eve program at the church, we opened our presents. I got three books and a doll. I love the books. I have looked at each of them, and I can read most of the words.

This morning we got up early because all of the family is coming for Christmas dinner. My mother told me to go and play and not to bother her because she has lots to do. It has been a long morning waiting.

I tiptoe softly down the back steps and sit on the fourth step from the bottom. The back stairs are dark and full of shadows. They go straight up and turn at the top before going down the hall. No light from the hall windows reaches the stairs. The steps stop at the bottom between the kitchen and the dining room. It is dark and cosy, and a good place to listen.

I hear the rapid thumping of the knife against the chopping block. That means Aunt Laura is chopping cabbage. No one chops as fast as she does. I can almost see her elbows work in and out while the tiny pieces of cabbage fly around her.

From the smell of spice and vinegar I know that Aunt Marie is putting pickles in cut glass dishes. She will put in the round dish crab apples. They are bright red where the skins are split and the pale insides gleam. In the long narrow dish will go the little dills with tiny stems still on them. And
in the odd square dish, which is my favorite, will go the bread and butter pickles yellow with tumeric.

It's my mother's job to watch the stove. I smell the raisins steaming when she lifts a pot lid, and when the oven door opens, I hear the turkey hiss as mother wiggles its leg. This means it is almost done, and soon she will make gravy.

Aunt Laura and Uncle Henry, and Aunt Marie and Uncle Dick, and all their boys came this morning to help prepare dinner and to talk. They will stay all day until after tea. Grandfather is not here yet, but he only has to drive out from town. My Aunts and Uncles come other times too, but it is not the same. On Christmas, it is a gathering, a remembering, a family putting the pieces in the proper places.

I think about my Aunt Elaine. There is no place for her in the family. I do not know why. Once my Aunt Laura said to me, "You're the only girl in the whole family. This family sure runs to boys." It is true that all my cousins are boys. I'm not the only girl though. My Aunt Elaine is my father's sister, and that makes her a part of the family too. I know that Aunt Elaine and my father are the only children my grandfather has. The Aunts are wives of cousins, and not really Aunts at all, but they have a place all the same.

Our farm is my grandfather's, and father and Aunt Elaine grew up here in this same house. My bedroom was Aunt Elaine's when she was a little girl like me. It was only after my father and mother married that grandfather built the house in town, and he and Aunt Elaine went there to live. Mrs. Jannssen went with them to town. She had come when Elaine was born and stayed all these years to do for them.

My Aunt Elaine's place is in my grandfather's house in town, but that does not give her a place in the family. The Aunts and my mother talk about her a lot, but at the same time they never say anything about her. I love my Aunt Elaine.

When I am at my Aunt Elaine's, we don't have to get dressed until after breakfast. Sometimes Aunt Elaine sits in the sunroom and drinks coffee, and eats toast and marmalade all morning, and lunch will be late while Mrs. Jannssen
waits for her to dress. Aunt Elaine never wears an apron. My mother says she doesn't own one, and it isn't fair. I often wonder what is fair about an apron.

I wonder too, why she never goes out, or ever has anyone come in except the dressmaker, Mrs. Tillven, and the storekeeper, Mr. Rilli, and me. I stay there a lot while my mother and father go places with my brothers. They go to buy cattle or to the ballgames, places like that. I never mind being left with Aunt Elaine. She lets me eat my dessert first, so I will be sure to have enough room. Mrs. Jannssen scolds, but Aunt Elaine says, "Nonsense, first or last, what difference does it make?"

"You'll spoil her, that's what."

"Do you really think I'll spoil her?" Aunt Elaine laughs when she says this, and Mrs. Jannssen always gets angry and red in the face, and her apron tails swing back and forth as she leaves the room.

Sometimes my Aunt Elaine plays the piano and I lie on the floor listening. The music that my Aunt Elaine plays hurts, and I cry. When she sees the tears on my cheeks she scoops me up and says, "Be careful, sometime you'll cry away all your tears and not have any left." I laugh when she says this because I know you always have tears for a skinned elbow or knee.

I think my Aunt Elaine never goes out because she doesn't want to. Once she said, "There is no one out there at all." It is curious because I think I am out there, and yet I am in there with Aunt Elaine. Lots of times I feel in there when I am home, and that is out there. I am here on the steps, but no one knows, so really I am in there. I do not like to feel this way. It makes me cold even when I have on my sweater.

I wish my Aunt Elaine would come to the family dinners, then everything would feel warm. My grandfather always comes alone, and no one expects her to come with him.

I shift my seat on the hard steps, and shiver. My Aunt Laura says, "I'm not sure this salad is as good as I usually make. The dressing wants to curdle. What do you think?"

"Let me taste. Ummm. It's marvelous. You always say that, Laura, and no one makes salad like you do."
"That's about all we can do with dinner until he comes. He is late. It's not like him."

"You don't suppose Elaine is coming with him, do you?"

"Of course not. She won't come. You don't want her to, do you?"

It is quiet in the kitchen and I am holding my breath. Aunt Laura says, "She might have a spell in front of the children."

"Laura, don't you ever say that word in my kitchen."

Spell . . . the word is growing and growing. It is filling all the space in the back stairs. I don't hear the board squeak that warns me to stand up like I am just coming down the back stairs, and my mother walks past the foot of the stairs before I can move.

She doesn't see me. She is upset too. In all the years of kitchen talk, no one has spoken the word spell before. My mother's steps cross the dining room and go into the living room.

I stand up and start up the stairs. Aunt Elaine has spells. You must not even say the word. Aunt Laura's voice follows me. "My goodness, she certainly flares up, doesn't she? It's not like we don't all know."

"Well, after all, I suppose it is worse for her," Aunt Marie says, "Elaine is Robert's sister, and then with Shannon the spittin' image of Elaine."

"That's true, Shannon looks more like Elaine every day."

It has never occurred to me that I look like my Aunt Elaine. I run down the upstairs hall. In my room I look in the mirror. It is true. I do look like my Aunt Elaine. In the mirror I see the door swing slowly shut. It latches.

I look and look in the mirror, but I can see only my eyes and my mouth and my hair. I can not see any spell. Then I remember about spell. In the stories my father reads to me someone is always under a spell.


I turn the knob and the door opens easily. I walk down the front stairs and my grandfather is standing at the bottom.
I will ask him about what a spell really is, and because I have decided to ask him, I smile. He says, "How's my little lassie today?" He picks me up, and I put my arms around his neck. He has a sweet old smell. I tighten my arms, I know that I can not ask him.

My brothers and my cousins come in the room, and their laughter is very large. My mother announces dinner, and we all go into the dining room, and my mother tells us where to sit. I sit between my grandfather and my brother John. We bow our heads and say, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest . . ."

My mouth is very dry. I sip and sip the water. I chew and chew, but I can not swallow. Aunt Marie says, "Shannon, you've hardly eaten a thing. You're not sick are you?" She is sitting directly across from me. Her eyes are blue and watery, and she blinks. She will see the dryness.

"Oh, she's probably just tired. She got up at the crack of dawn today, and after all the excitement of the presents last night. A nap will fix her up." My mother's words are firm. They draw Aunt Marie's eyes away from me. She does not see the dryness.

My Aunts and my mother take all the plates away. They take away the food and then they bring in pie and a plate of cheese for grandfather. They bring in coffee and then sit down and talk some more about the cantata tonight.

Grandfather says, "I'll take Shannon home with me, and then you can all go." My mother looks at my father. I do not understand this look, but it never matters because I always go anyway. Now I know it is because of the spell.

"Run and get your coat, Shannon. We might as well go now, and then I can take my nap at home." Grandfather pushes his chair back and waits for me to slip out beside him.

My mother gets up too, and goes into the hall. She takes my coat from the closet and holds it out for me. I put my arms in and lift my chin while she ties the strings of my hood. In the dining room everyone is laughing and mother is listening. She pats my shoulder and says, "Be a good girl."

Grandfather starts the car and then lights a cigar. "You cannot drive without a cigar," he says. I like the smell of the smoke, but today it quivers a little in my stomach.
When we come into the house in town, my Aunt Elaine comes to meet us. She is dressed. The ring on her finger sparkles, bright red. "Come in, come in, you are just in time for tea."

"Not for me," says grandfather. "We just finished dinner."

"But no fatted calf, father?"

Grandfather frowns, but Aunt Elaine is smiling. She takes my hand and we go together into the living room. Grandfather goes into his own room and shuts the door.

Mrs. Janssen brings in the tray. The tea pot is white with blue and pink flowers. It is short and fat like the song. The cups have blue and pink flowers on the inside and they are white on the outside. It would be nice to have blue and pink flowers outside. Mrs. Janssen smiles at me and then goes out.

"You're quiet, Shannon. Troubles?"

I am startled to hear myself saying, "Aunt Elaine, what is a spell?"

"A spell?" She puts down the tea pot and takes both of my hands. I stand still in front of her and tell her about the kitchen talk and the spell.

She listens, and then she drops my hands, and leans back on the couch. It is very quiet when I finish talking.

At first I am not certain what it is. Then I know it is laughter. Aunt Elaine is laughing. The laughter is high and sharp. It is like crystal crashing. It shatters against the walls. It gets louder and louder. The walls begin to move. They are going farther and farther away. I can no longer see the pattern of the paper. The drapes are twisting and writhing. They no longer cover the windows, but they cannot escape from the walls. The lights flicker and fade. The laughter reaches inside of me, and I feel myself going farther and farther away. The laughter soars higher and begins to echo. I grow smaller and smaller.

I do not hear my grandfather come in the room, but I hear him say, "Elaine. Elaine."

The laughter does not stop. Aunt Elaine bends forward and crumples off the couch. Her arm knocks over the tea tray and the fat little pot is broken. The blue and pink
flowers are turning brown on the carpet.

Mrs. Jannssen is beside Aunt Elaine. I do not know where she came from, and she is holding Aunt Elaine in her arms. The laughter is muffled against her breasts, but it does not stop. Now I know it will never stop.

My Aunt Elaine has used up all her tears. I think I have disappeared.

My grandfather takes my hand and we go out and he puts on my coat and my hood and we get in his car and we drive away. He does not light a cigar.

We stop in the lane and get out and go in the house. My grandfather does not take off his coat. He says, "John, take off her things." He says something to my father and he and my father and mother go into the back sitting room which is behind the dining room.

My brother John unbuttons my coat and he doesn't say like he usually does, "She is big enough to do it herself." His hands are strangely gentle. He picks me up and carries me through the dining room. My brother has not carried me for a long time. I am very high in the air. At the door of the sitting room, mother cries out. She takes me from John. We sit in the rocking chair, and rock back and forth.

"I must go to town," father says. His face is twisted so that his eyebrows don't match, and his mouth is lop-sided. John goes out with him.

Mother is patting and my head is on her shoulder, and her neck is warm on my forehead. She begins to sing in a far away voice. "Oh, my dearest, do you know how a long time ago, two dear little children, whose names I don't know, were stolen away on a bright summer's day, and left in the woods, as I've heard some folks say . . . ."

"Mama, what are you singing that for?" John's eyes look angry and he is rubbing his hands up and down against his legs. He does not come in. He is standing in the doorway.

There is crying in my mother's voice as she says, "I didn't even realize." The silence is very loud, and then she begins to sing again in her high sweet voice, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so . . . ."

I see Jesus coming from a long way off with the little
children at his knee. He smells like starch.

The snow falls steadily. Day after day it comes softly down and covers everything. It covers the seed in its place of darkness, healing the loss of stalk and milk-rich memories. Life is waiting within the seed. The snow lingers against the windows. The days linger in the dusk. The nights cover the days.

My Aunt Elaine has gone away. I do not know where she went. No one speaks of her. I can not remember how she looks. I have forgotten shape of eye, and slant of brow. I remember laughter, but it is far away—someplace. The spell is caught in the back stairs. I never go there.

My father left early this morning. My mother did not go with him. There is a waiting in the house. The boys have gone out to do the chores. They will throw hay down to the horses, and mix mash for the sows, and milk the cows, and gather the eggs, and check the water pipes, and spread fresh straw. It takes a long time.

John comes in with a little basket of pop corn. The ears of the pop corn are short and fat with white blistered kernels. Mother stands at the sink and looks down the lane. I think she is not looking down the lane, but down the years. Down all the years of my father and my Aunt Elaine. My mother's hands are empty and her shoulders droop. There is a weariness in the curl at the nape of her neck.

My brothers begin to shell the corn. They hold the ears down between their knees, and pop the kernels off with their thumbs. The kernels make a staccato sound in the tin pans.

"Let me help."

"Don't be a nuisance," my brother Eddie says.

"Let her try," says John. He slides over on the bench that sits just inside the back door. "Here hold it like this, and push with your thumb." John curves my fingers around the ear and the kernels prickle against my palm, and his hand is warm on the back of my hand. I wish John would never take his hand away. I push very hard. The kernels fly across the floor.

Eddie laughs. The tears run down my cheek, I catch
them with the tip of my tongue. It is strange about the
tears; they are only tears, not crying. Crying is inside of me
hurting. The tears never hurt, they only fill up my eyes
and slip down my cheek. That is all.

Mother turns from watching. "Shannon, let the boys
shell the corn. You're just making a mess." She stoops and
finds all the kernels on the floor and picks them up and drops
them in the pocket of her apron.

"Cry-baby," says Eddie.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Mother says. "John, go out
and winnow it now. I'm sure that's plenty.

John picks up the pans, and shuffles open the door. I
follow him out on the porch. On the step he pours the corn
carefully from one pan to the other. The lights from my
father's car pick up the drifting chaff as it separates from
the corn and blows away.

Father puts the car in the garage. He walks to the house
and his feet move close to the ground. His head is bent low
with his chin tucked into the collar of his coat.

John calls, "Wind's changed."

They stand together on the step. They lift their faces.
"More snow on the way. You can taste it in the wind,"
father says.

It is not snowing now. I wonder how you can taste it
if you can't see it. I open the storm door and step out.

"Hey, you'll catch cold. Back in the house with you."
My father's hands guide me by my shoulders back into the
house. It is hot in the kitchen. My cheeks sting.

Mother takes the pans of corn from John. She watches
my father. He takes off his gloves one finger at a time. He
holds the gloves together and snaps them against his hand.

"How was she?"

The words shape themselves in the air. They do not
dissolve. Sometimes words slip away unnoticed, but then,
there are times like this when they stay brittle-bright. It is
hard to walk around them or under them. The words do
not go away. My father takes a long breath.

He says, "She is much better."

It is not enough. The words are still there; they are
not going away. The words are about my Aunt Elaine, and
there are more words to say, but father is not going to say
them. Mother moves away, and turns on the stove, and
pours oil in the popper. Father takes off his coat and sits
at the table.

"Come here, and tell me what you did all day." I go
and stand beside him, and he puts his arm around me, and
pats and pats. He does not care what I did all day. I think
he is thinking about my Aunt Elaine. I feel very small.
The kitchen table is round and scrubbed the palest brown.
Feathery dark lines curve and wave back in upon themselves.
I trace the lines with my finger.

Father says, "We didn't get to see her at all. They said
it would be best if we didn't. Dad was so upset, he . . ." I
no longer hear the words. I watch them glittering in the
light.

The pop corn explodes and lifts the lid. Mother tilts
the pan, and the corn tumbles white and light into the blue
bowl. The pop corn has made all the words go away. I am
glad.

Now there are only little words that barely find a shape
before they are gone. They talk about the sows that will
farrow any day now, and Eddie's 4-H calf, and the univer-
sity where John will go in the fall. I lick the salt off my
fingers and hold the coldness of the milk around my teeth
before I swallow.

"I don't know what makes her so stubborn." Mother is
provoked because I will not go up the back stairs, and I
must go through the living room to the front stairs. Now
that Christmas is over, the front part of the house is closed
off, and we do not heat it. Everyone uses the back stairs,
but they do not have to worry about the spell. It is me the
spell is waiting for.

John says, "I'll take her up."

We go through the front room, and John closes all
the doors so the cold will not make a draft. John tucks the
covers in tight around me. He does not ask for prayers.
"Want the light left on?" I shake my head. I'm not afraid
of the dark, and the back steps are on the other side of the
house. I wiggle my hand loose from the tight covers, and
John picks it up. He kisses my thumb.
The wind croons around the house. John pulls back the curtains. "Starting to snow again. Going to be a real blizzard." He drops the curtains and they cover the window. "Well, little one, sleep warm."

John turns out the light and his steps go down the hall to the back stairs. It is still and dark. The wind talks to me. It whispers at the windows, and sings under the shingles. It promises snow enough to cover everything. I put my thumb in my mouth. Outside the snow is falling and the wind is piling it deeper and deeper. I go to sleep.

Spring is coming all the way from Kansas on the breath of the wind. It lies like a pale red wound on the dirty patches of the snow. On the south side of the house under the spirea bushes the white English violets are already blooming. Along the edge of the little garden the grape hyacinths thrust their purple spikes beside the snow melting in the fence row.

On the warm days the huge white sows are parading their little pink pigs in the south pasture. The old cows are hiding their calves with the white, white faces in the little swales behind the old channel. The buffalo move in the old channel, and the cottonwoods stand silver white.

My Aunt Elaine is coming home. The scent of plum trees runs in my blood, the lilacs are wild in my hair, the inch-long, pale green tips of the blue spruce shout in my ears. All the windows in the house are open, and all of the doors. The spell has fled from the back steps. I do not know where it is. I have looked in all the closets, and in the attic, and in the basement. It is gone. I think it is the wind that has blown it away.

The wind is stronger than the spell. The Spring wind is stronger than the Winter wind. The Winter wind hides and protects, but the soft wind from Kansas calls and calls. The little seed alone in the darkness loses itself in the terrible greening.

My Aunt Elaine is coming home. My father and mother discuss this every evening. They do not talk to me. They talk to each other.

Lying in the orchard with the cool damp ground under my back, and the cherry blossoms bruising my mouth, and
Sketch

the high wind calling I think about my Aunt Elaine.

I remember now how she looks. She has pale brown hair, and green gold eyes and smooth skin across her cheekbones. She smells like the sun-warmed grass, and she listens, and she holds.

All the days go by and still she does not come. On Memorial Day my mother cuts pink peonies, and lavender iris, and bending pointed ferns, and ties them into bouquets. Early in the morning, before breakfast, when the dew is wet against my legs we go to the cemetery. My mother puts flowers on Richard, and Ethan, and Barbara, and Elaine who is my great-great-grandmother. We put flowers on one called only Baby, and on the other Elaine who died when she was three. I wonder if she is still three. I would not like to be always six. All our graves are in the old part where the willows bend and the honeysuckle grows as big as trees. In the new part the trees are far apart and the bushes neatly clipped and there is perpetual care.

And still she does not come. The corn grows taller and taller and the tough green leaves fan across the rows. My mother’s roses bloom pink and white and scarlet where they climb on the porch. The wasps have built two nests under the roof of the bay window. Father smokes out the nests and knocks them down. The wasps are back again and beginning to build.

Now she is home. She is at my grandfather’s house. My mother and father have been there every day this week. I would like to go too, but something stops my mouth, and I can not say, “I want to go too.” I do not know why this is. I surely do want to go and see my Aunt Elaine. But I have not seen her.

Today she is coming to our house for dinner. Everyone is coming. All of the Aunts and Uncles and cousins are coming. I should be very happy. Always I have wanted us to be all together, to be whole, and it is finally happening. This morning there was a pounding in my stomach and I could not eat my breakfast, but Mother was busy peeling eggs for potato salad and she didn’t notice. Now I think I can not wait in the house any longer. I fly to the orchard.

From the edge of the orchard I can see the old channel.
I look and look for the buffalo. They are gone. Now the pounding moves from my stomach to my ears. Where have they gone? They are always there.

Once, a long time ago, I asked my father about them, and he told me I was dreaming. He said, "It's been years and years since there have been any buffalo in this valley. Sometime I'll take you to the Black Hills and show you a herd of buffalo, but they are bison, not buffalo." I do not think it is the Black Hills buffalo in our channel. It is not a dream either. I see them when I am wide awake, and the puffs of dust hang in the air behind their hoofs. They have heavy stubborn shoulders, and hidden black eyes that touch you. Everything is all right as long as the buffalo move in the old channel.

I watch and watch. They are not there. They have gone away. I wish they had not gone away on the day that my Aunt Elaine is coming.

"Shannon, Shannon, come here. I need you." My mother’s voice fades in the wind. I think it is not me she needs. It is for me to keep my dress clean and not to scuff my shoes. It is my dress and my shoes she is calling. She needs for them to look neat and clean when everyone comes so they won't think I've run wild. My mother says, "I must catch hold of that child, she has run wild all Spring." I do not think my mother will ever catch me. I do not think I am wild either. I think I am like a plant, thin and green and growing, and someday I will bloom, but not yet.

"Oh, Shannon, there you are. Now stay in the house and keep yourself clean. Go play with your dolls. It is almost time for them to come." I do not like my dolls, but my mother does. Every year I get a new one for Christmas. They sit on a shelf in my room. I never see them.

I sit on the steps of the back stairs. It is still cool on the back steps and dark. I hear my Aunt Laura come in. I grip the step with both hands. I am ready to run.

"Such a beautiful day," Aunt Laura says.

"It will be hot before noon, though."

"We need the heat. Makes the corn grow."

I relax against the steps. The wall is smooth where I lean against it. It is all right. My Aunt Laura did not bring
any spell. Now my Aunt Marie has come. I can tell by the sound of her basket when she puts it on the table how heavy it is.

"My goodness, Marie, did you think we can't cook?" My mother is laughing when she says this.

"You know how I am," Aunt Marie says. There are many spaces of silence in the kitchen. It is not like always when their talk runs together and never stops. I get up and go up the stairs and through the house and down the front stairs and out on the screened porch.

I think I have forgotten something. I have on my slip and my underwear and both socks, and they match too. Sometimes, when I hurry I pull my socks out of the drawer and they don't match. This upsets mother. I look at my socks carefully. They both match. The ribbing is exactly the same on both socks.

My grandfather's car turns into the lane. My Aunt Elaine is riding beside him in the front seat. Mrs. Jannssen is in the back seat. Grandfather has a cigar in his mouth.

The back door opens and my mother and my Aunts flood out on the lawn. They crowd around my Aunt Elaine. My Aunt Elaine is smiling. Her hands brush her hair. She walks beside my mother into the house. I let my breath out. I did not know I was holding it.

The voices in the kitchen are high and shrill. They give me goose bumps. My grandfather walks to meet my father and my uncles, who are looking at the western cattle that came in two days ago. The cattle mill in the feed lot and look sideways at the men. My father says they are still nervous and spooky. They will never leave the feed lots until time for the big trucks to carry them to Omaha and the slaughter houses.

I can not wait any longer. I go through the dining room. I look up the back stairs. There is no spell. I walk on into the kitchen.

My Aunt Elaine says, "There you are, Shannon. My, how you've grown." Her eyes are looking at the top of my head, but her words do not touch me. I wait for her to stretch out her hands to me. She does not. She has on my mother's apron. It hangs loose and ugly from her shoulders.
Her eyes are flat and green. All the gold has gone.

"Everything has changed." My Aunt Elaine's voice is very thick. It is like other words are struggling to be said. She closes her eyes. I think when she opens them the gold will be shining again.

Mrs. Jannssen looks at my Aunt Elaine, and then she looks at the clock on the wall. She opens her purse and takes out a tiny bottle.

"Oh, is it time for these?" Aunt Elaine's hands shake a little when she takes the pills. Mrs. Jannssen hands her a glass of water. Aunt Elaine's fingers curve like claws. The red ring has slipped sideways. When she swallows, her throat moves up and down like a bobber on a fishing line. I am very frightened. I cannot see the spell, but it is very close. My Aunt Elaine does not look at me. She bends down and smooths her stocking. Everyone begins to talk at once.

I think we will never finish dinner. I sit at the end of the table beside my brother John. My grandfather sits by my Aunt Elaine. I have never sat at the end of the table before. Aunt Elaine's voice is like firecrackers. It bursts across the table and makes me jump. I wish she would shut up.

I do not ask to be excused. I slip away, and no one knows that I have gone. I walk slowly up to the orchard. I lie face down in the long grass. My ear that is close to the ground hears the humming of summer in the heart of the earth. My other ear hears the wind, and there is laughter on the edges of it. My real Aunt Elaine has gone on the wings of her own laughter, and she is lost somewhere behind the wind. I can hear her laughing.

I can feel myself sinking into the ground. I am running right out of my fingertips into the warm black dirt. Soon I will be empty. A shadow falls across me. It is the spell, but it is too late. I have returned to the earth.

"Shannon, Shannon." It is my brother John's voice. It strokes my hair and my arm. I see his foot now just at the corner of my eye. His boots are big and heavy. They crush the white crown of the clover. In the far distance are the buffalo waiting, and the wind calling, and the long, long sun spun days.