Erratics: a collection of linked stories

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Erratics: A collection of linked stories

by

Dana Thomann

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
K.L. Cook, Major Professor
Abby Dubisar
Barbara Haas
Paul Lasley

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2016

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DEDICATION

For the smart, strong, and selfless woman who always puts her family and the “fanch” first. Without Ma Sue’s nurturing spirit, this work would not exist.
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PUBLICATION ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Grateful acknowledgement to *Flyway Journal of Writing and Environment*, which first published “Flood Gap” in 2014. Sincere thanks to *Glimmer Train Stories* for recognizing “Heavy Lifting” (previously titled “Mother’s Day Tornado”) and “Burial” as a finalist for publication in the New Writer’s Award competition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Iowa State University is exactly the place I needed to create Erratics. The Creative Writing and Environment MFA Program and the Sustainable Agriculture Program at Iowa State University provided me with inspiration and ideas I would not have gained elsewhere. I am grateful to have been given an academic and writing home in my home state of Iowa.

I had the distinct pleasure of working with the brilliant K.L. Cook who took me under his patient wing as my major professor. He never stopped being an advocate for each story in this collection. His mentorship is something I will aspire to emulate when working with my students.

Professor Barbara Haas, Dr. Dubisar, and Dr. Lasley also deserve thanks for serving on my committee and kindly offering helpful insights during my defense.

Special thanks to my MFA cohort: William Bonfiglio, Corinna Carter, Chloe Clark, Sam Futhey, Elizabeth Giorgi, Erin Schmiel, Kelly Slivka, and Adam Wright. Your relentless encouragement and good cheer kept me writing.

Dr. Daniel Johnson Platt, I’m so grateful Iowa and literature brought us together. I look forward to having you, a gifted intellect, alongside as we both strive to publish work that pays homage to the ever-inspiring, natural world we both adore.

My sustenance, my muses: family and home. Love and thanks to my sisters Deanna and Temple—the best Southeast Iowa walking buddies a gal could ever have. Trail’s End Angus is my favorite place in the whole wide world, full of pasture and songbirds. Without the work ethic of Pa Dean and Ma Sue, it would not exist. Pa and Ma are the most noble, sustainable “fanchers” I know. I am grateful they allow me refuge on our humble “fanch” whenever I need. The “fanch” and people of my place never cease to inspire me. I am proud to be a farm girl from Iowa.
PREFACE

My MFA thesis, a short story cycle entitled *Erratics*, follows two farm families from 1986-2015, the Deans and Elsasses, who live in Buccan County, Iowa. Told through many voices and in twelve separate stories, the collection begins as the families and their community confront the 1980’s Farm Debt Crisis and continues to document the aftermath of the crisis, particularly the effects on human bodies, landscapes, and the primary source of income for the families, swine.

Why did I choose the 1980’s Farm Debt Crisis as the subject matter for the collection? In Southeastern Iowa, I was a farm child born into this tumultuous historical and political beast. I recall the palpable tension, sorrow, and anxiety of the time, especially during an uncle’s farm sale. In 1986, I was four-years-old when farmer Dale Burr shot his wife, banker, another farmer, and himself in Lone Tree, Iowa—the community in which my mother was raised on a farm. The murder-suicide occurred only a few miles down the road from my family’s farm in Riverside, Iowa. Burr, a once successful farmer, was being foreclosed on by the bank. I attended high school with a friend whose father was murdered in the tragedy.

An article clipped from the *Iowa City Press Citizen* detailing the Dale Burr incident is nestled at the bottom of a wicker basket, a place my family keeps articles of significance. Stacked beside this article is another piece, dated February 1985, entitled “Farm Debt Blowout Looms, Farmers Threatened by Serfdom.” It features a prediction by Dr. Neil Harl, Iowa State University Professor of Economics, that family farmers would soon become industrial serfs to larger corporate agricultural interests. I used to rub my fingers along these articles as a young child, both fascinated and appalled as I read. When my family started losing money, due to both
falling prices and swine disease, on our pig herd in the late 1990s, my mother would repeat, “Serfs. We’re turning into serfs.”

In 1999, I became one of two students in my rural class of forty-four whose family’s sole income was generated by the farm. In the 1980s, at least half my classmates’ families’ sole incomes came from family farming.

As a teenager growing up in the aftermath of the 1980’s Farm Debt Crisis, I felt embarrassed about my family’s livelihood. Although we had, unlike other farm families, survived, we were considered failures. We worked hard in adverse conditions (heat, manure, rain, ill livestock), got very little in return, and felt an intense anxiety that we would lose the farm, our home, the place my parents precariously tried to make payments on each month. I loved growing up on the farm—my animals especially—but I felt being the daughter of farmers made me poor, marginalized, and academically inadequate. My parents did not have college degrees. I studied and worked incredibly hard to leave the farm behind.

After attending the University of Iowa as an undergraduate, I moved to South Dakota to teach on the Rosebud Reservation through Teach For America. I document this to acknowledge a turning point in my thinking about my upbringing, especially the shame I often felt as a child of a multigenerational farm family. Digging into issues of power and privilege, I started to understand that good, hardworking people can be forced into bad situations through no fault of their own. (Of course, I fully recognize as a person of the dominant culture, I have an abundance of privilege not experienced by people of color.) People in corrupt systems are not necessarily to blame as much as the system itself.

I started to understand that oppressive systems most succeed when people are led to believe they, as members of the system, are an embarrassment. They shy away from speaking
out, for fear of calling attention to what feels like personal, family, or community failure. This cycle of shame further perpetuates oppression. When my Lakota students on the Rosebud Reservation felt courageous enough to write about their culture, the grotesque and the beautiful, I knew it was some of the most moving writing I would ever read. I always say my students taught me more those two years than I could have ever taught them, and in an indirect way, I am indebted to my students for giving me the courage to tell the stories of my own family, my own culture, and the ways we have dealt with a crisis that feels beyond our control. Silence only undermines the oppressed. My hope is that Erratics will give voice to strong people who knew the world of pre-industrial farming, who knew pigs before they were put into confined animal feeding operations, and who knew farmland before the use of glyphosate. The two families featured in the collection are no saints, but they are hardworking, smart, and resilient, and they are confused by what is happening to them and what it means for not only them but for their children and grandchildren and the tradition of family farming. They cope and endure, and still they sometimes come up short.

Ironically, my personal evolution as a farm kid coincided with the appearance of a new, hipper farm movement. Books such as The Ominivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan, Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser, and the organic food movement have gained momentum. This movement provides a support group of sorts, gives me confidence to add my voice to the many voices contributing to the complex discussion of the United States’ agricultural system. When my Teach For America colleagues from cities, who grew up with CEO lawyer parents and graduated from Ivy League schools, started listening to bluegrass, growing and canning their own food, and talking of wanting their own farms, I was stunned. I would have never imagined
the “embarrassing circumstances” in which I was raised would become vogue and that my own story, and the story of my family and community, might be worth telling.

Upon entering the MFA program at Iowa State University, I knew I wanted to write agrarian fiction, but in retrospect, I had little clue as to how to go about creating a book-length work in that tradition. The early stages of conceiving a book-length project occurred during a course devoted to the short story cycle. The short story cycle (also known as linked stories or novels-in-stories) is a form in which each individual story is self-contained but also part of a larger narrative design. Each story can be understood and enjoyed on its own, but can be added to a larger body of other linked narratives to accentuate theme, deepen characters, enhance setting, and develop plot—to in short, create a novelistic effect. My story cycle, *Erratics*, is designed this way. My hope is that each story will be rich and enjoyable on its own, yet become richer and larger when read in combination with the other stories. Primary unifying strategies in this collection are the 1980’s Farm Debt Crisis, family, place, and agriculture. These are the central “links.” Such a form allows me, as the writer, to tell the individual stories of characters while also capturing, through the juxtaposition of these stories, the families and the community in crisis.

How does this work specifically? One example: Clara Dean is a central character in my collection and the character most closely inspired by my own experiences. She is the protagonist and narrator in three separate stories and also appears as a secondary or minor character in other stories, such as “Act of Contrition” and “Flock.” Clara Dean’s character is an example of how a short story cycle is ideally suited for a book-length work of fiction that features a variety of voices and point of views.
While Clara’s story and her voice are crucial to the whole book, hers is not the only story I want to tell. I strive to triangulate the truth of this era in rural Iowa history by contrasting her voice with that of her parents and grandparents and other farm families. I want to convey to the reader both the human picture and the macro picture and enter empathetically into the consciousness of many different people affected by this crisis. The polyphonic short story cycle is advantageous for this subject matter, because the 1980’s Farm Debt Crisis impacted not just adults, but the elderly and children. It impacted not just farmers, but bartenders and priests, too.

Linked story collections such as Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, both dealing with families or family-like groups caught in the crossfire of historical and political forces and systems beyond their control, inspired me as I shaped *Erratics’* form.

Other key texts also influenced me as I conceived, wrote, and revised the thesis. The idea to include shorter informative stories (flash-fiction) to break up the longer stories and to suggest larger historical forces at work is inspired by the intercalary chapters of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Beyond form, I attempt to put my work in conversation with many of the themes of *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of the great American agrarian crisis novels. Just as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Erratics* documents a time in American agriculture when people are victims in an unjust system and characters long for stability. I also strive to accomplish a sense of place in *Erratics*. I want Buccan County, especially its landscape, to be a character. For place-based writing inspiration, I turned, beyond Steinbeck, to the work of Annie Proulx’ short story collection, *Close Range*. The genre of contemporary rural gothic literature, such as that of Joyce Carol Oates in her upstate New York stories and novels, also informs *Erratics’* aesthetic. Because of the prevalence of death, farm stories are always tinged with the gothic.
Iowa State University’s Special Collections was an invaluable resource as I wrote *Erratics*. I spent a great deal of time researching the Farm Crisis special collection, learning about PrairieFire Rural Action, Priest Joe Fagan’s strategy to community organize, Farm Aid, and the toll of the crisis on American family farms in Iowa and the United States. Participating in Iowa State University’s weekly Sustainable Agriculture Colloquium also increased my understanding of contemporary issues in agriculture, in particular manure management plans, food hubs, and Women in Food and Agriculture. The MFA fieldwork component allowed me mentorship by inspirational females working in agriculture.

I am grateful to have learned how to create a short story cycle, and I am proud of the project at this stage of the process. I look forward to revising more to make both the individual stories and the book as a whole competitive for publication. Beyond what you will read here, I plan to add two longer stories that will help unify the collection even more and provide narrative bookends for the reader. The first new story, which will occur early on, after “Heavy Lifting,” involves a handful of Buccan County family farmers, including the Dean and Elsass families, as they get together for a Fourth of July celebration in the 1980s. To conclude the collection, the same families will gather for a Fourth of July celebration in 2015. This story will strengthen *Erratics*’ community theme, show more connections and personalities within the community, and provide a present-day snapshot of the Crisis’ aftermath in rural Iowa.

*Erratics* is ultimately my attempt to document and evoke the contemporary life of the quickly diminishing, non-corporate family farm and farm families, as I knew and know them: not perfect by any means, but independent minded, smart, and strong, and struggling to reinvent themselves in the face of political, historical, and market forces they have little control over. I hope you enjoy the stories.
FAMILY TREE

GEROT FAMILY

Vernon Gerot---------------------------Rosemary Niland
  |                        |                        |
  Everette Dean----------Maggie Dean       Sherry Lasek       Robert Gerot
  |                        |                        |
  Eloise                   Clara

REDBURY FAMILY

Hal Redbury---------------Mary Redbury
  |                        |
  Jane Coffman----------Rick Redbury        Laura Elsass-------James Elsass
  |                        |
  Randy                             Paul                   Lucy
erratic
[ih-rat-ik]

adjective
1. deviating from the usual or proper course in conduct or opinion; eccentric; queer: erratic behavior.
2. having no certain or definite course; wandering; not fixed: erratic winds.
3. Geology. noting or pertaining to a boulder or the like carried by glacial ice and deposited some distance from its place of origin.

noun
4. an erratic or eccentric person.
5. Geology. an erratic boulder or the like.

"I got to figure" the tenant said. "We all got to figure. There's some way to stop this. It's not like lightning or earthquakes. We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change." –John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath
PART I. HEAVY LIFTING

“Keep the grain and export the farmers.” –President Ronald Reagan, 1985
Everette Dean’s voice flooded Father McCall with warmth. These words, “Bless me father, for I have sinned,” streamed a ray of sunshine. Of course, Father McCall couldn’t see the strapping Dean brother. He was kneeling on the other side of the reconciliation room, a wall between them. Father McCall wasn’t particularly good at voice recognition, but his flock was small in the rural Iowa placement. His work was new to him. He remembered things.

He wished he could see Everette. Was he clasping his strong, calloused farm hands in prayer? Was he fidgeting? Father McCall knew Everette was struggling, but then, what farmer wasn’t these days?

Everette was close in age to Father McCall, late twenties, could be one of his brothers. It was an interesting vantage point, this priesthood. For the first time in his life, he could watch other people his age deal with their various milestones. He couldn’t help comparing. Would he have two young daughters like Everette’s, Clara and Eloise, had he not joined the priesthood and denied his sexuality?

Everette delivered his next words methodically. “I want to kill someone tomorrow.”

Father McCall recalled his training. Last month, volunteer social workers with PrairieFire Rural Action held suicide prevention meetings with “community pillars.” Training couldn’t solve it all. Last week, a parish a few counties over had to bury two of their own. A murder-suicide. A bitter farmer and his banker found dead in an abandoned barn. The local news reported there were more than five hundred farm sales a month in 1985. This year didn’t look to be much better.
He had to keep Everette talking, figure out if this was just a passing thought or a clearly laid-out plan. Father McCall pulled on his earlobe with his index finger and thumb, a nervous tic.

“Tell me more.” Father McCall tried to sound calm, inviting.

“The sale is tomorrow. I don’t want my brother to lose his tractor. The John Deere 730. It’s the first tractor he bought, and if that ol’ fat cat fucker—sorry, Father—gets ahold of it. I’m gonna shoot him.”

The Dean brothers, especially Everette, were hot-tempered. A proud farm family. All muscle. All strength. They weren’t used to people telling them what to do, and to be honest, they shouldn’t have to. They worked hard, went to church regularly, fed, clothed, and sheltered their families. They were independents, a well-known Catholic family in the community made up of nine brothers and sisters. Each made it to worship on Sunday mornings.

The first sale in their family, the eldest brother Leroy’s, was going to be hard on all of them. Leroy was at the wrong age at the wrong time. Just as he got into farming, the interest rates shot up over night on farmland—a grain embargo imposed. Even with these impossible systemic circumstances, farmers like Leroy still blamed themselves. It wasn’t for lack of working. They couldn’t escape the struggle.

Relief. Father McCall felt an odd relief when Everette said he wanted to do something, even if it might be an act of violence. Father McCall had been preaching to the people of this community Sunday after Sunday. When he arrived in the spring of 1979, his congregation seemed to reach upward during his homilies like the corn they’d planted fence row to fence row under the Secretary of Agriculture’s sunny predictions. But Father McCall watched his flock’s faces grow haggard, new crevices of crinkled skin sprawled across otherwise young faces. As if
the fall of the markets was a straight-line wind, it pushed strong shoulders earthward each week. Thank goodness the pews held their bending bodies upright as they genuflected.

He thought of his family, his people in New Jersey. What would they do in the face of such thievery? They would not sit politely idle had CEOs driven them out of their jobs overnight. The crisis pushed these Midwestern people into themselves, instead of out into the world of activism. They each suffered silently, and silent suffering was brutal suffering. One farmer, Vernon Gerot, actually said of the farmer who killed his banker and then turned the gun on himself, “He’s probably better off now.”

Father McCall censored his thinking. What was he thinking? He remembered the words of the archbishop. “Remember your place.” He was in the Midwest now. The archbishop said, “Remember Isidore, saint of farmers and rural living? Through his belief he was always rewarded in the end. Food would appear bountiful to feed the hungry folks, even when his wife, Maria, insisted there was no more food to be had. Angels would come to help him plow his fields when he’d spend too many morning hours in the church. Your flock will be rewarded in the end.”

Yet, Father McCall’s flock slumped in the pews, and no angels appeared. Even St. Isidore didn’t wait this long. This was more than an exercise in delayed gratification.

Father McCall asked Everette, “Who is the man you want to shoot?”

“Orson Phelps. A fat cat from Davenport. Comes over here to steal our machinery, for pennies on the dollar, yet a price we can’t afford. Carts it all off to his dealership. He has old money, the bastard. The crisis is nothing to him, but an opportunity. Our neighbors, they understand. They won’t bid a finger on that tractor. But Phelps is a bastard.”

“I see.” Father McCall paused. “Do you have a gun?”
“Yes.”

“Do you have it on you?”

“It’s in the safe at home.”

“Now think real hard about this. Could this be God’s test of your character?” Father McCall pinched his earlobe. “Would the good Lord want you to use that gun on another man?” A pause; the response took more time than Father McCall was comfortable with.

“No, Father.”

“That’s right. It’s not the Lord’s way.” Father McCall started soft. “Now, I’m coming to that sale tomorrow, and if I think anything is up, I may have to intervene, because it’s not the Lord’s way to take another person’s life. I’m going to stand right next to that tractor when it sells. I’ll be right there, and I’ll be darned if you try anything that will land you in prison or hell. You hear me? Because you’re nothing to your family if you’re rotting in prison or burning in hell.”

“I know, Father.”

The Deans were mostly bark, no bite. Father McCall didn’t want to report this. No use in putting the family through more than what they had already been through. He’d just keep his eye real close on the situation. Pray on it.

“I want you to say three Hail Marys as penance, and as you recite those prayers, I want you to picture your own mother. How would she feel if you followed through on such a rash plan?”

“Yes, Father.”
Adulthood complicated things. Just last week a class of wriggly third grade religion students was herded through confession. They repeated sins of playground fights, swearing, or hiding vegetables under beds.

Everette recited the Act of Contrition. Father McCall avoided the desire to tell Everette to slow down, to let the words soak through him so he could recall his voice tonight in bed. After Everette left the reconciliation room, Father McCall rested his head on his clasped hands. He said a prayer for the Dean family, and promised to do so many times before the auction. Should he call Maggie Dean, Everette’s wife, and warn her? Betray Everette’s trust? He contemplated the myth of the American dream. How could you pull yourself up by your bootstraps if the bootstraps were weak as noodles?

It was 5:59 p.m. Confessional hours over. Father McCall gave himself the sign of the cross, rose from his genuflected position, and proceeded to switch off the church lights. No matter how downtrodden the flock, the place of God seemed cavernous and cold without its sheep.

Outside, a brown Chevy Scottsdale parked in the rectory’s lane. He was good at matching parishioners with their vehicles, but he could not place this vehicle. When he came around the truck, a woman was making her way down the rectory’s porch steps. Her hair was dark and long.

“Oh, I was just leaving,” the woman said, not meeting Father McCall’s eyes.

“Well, I’m glad I caught you then.”

“I don’t mean to bother you, it’s just. I wondered if you had food. My family. If my husband knew he’d be—”

“Yes. Yes.” Father McCall eagerly nodded. “Come in.” He didn’t know what he’d give the woman. His cabinets were mostly bare, and the community center where food donations were
organized was closed. He had been meaning to get a key for emergencies such as this. He’d make due. “Sit down.” He gestured toward a chair when they entered the kitchen. Father McCall opened cabinets bare except for some salt and pepper.

The woman’s voice started softly, “It’s just that, he, my husband, thinks food will just appear, like it will multiply if you think it will, but food doesn’t work that way. I can’t make it work that way. You can only stretch a square of yellow cheese so far.” Had he seen this woman before? She looked familiar. Maybe she had been in church a few times, then disappeared. That happened from time to time. Half the woman’s face was obscured by dark, thick bangs that swooped downward. Father McCall wanted to reach out, pull the bangs from her face, cup her face in his hands, and tell her he knew. He knew what she was saying.

“Can you wait a moment? I know a place I can get you some food, but it will take me a minute? Could you wait?” The woman nodded.

Father McCall felt his feet carry him forward. Overcome. It was as if he were on a runner’s high. He smiled the whole time his feet struck pavement. He slipped into a jog, then a full run down the hill toward the community center. He stopped at the community center’s back door, looked around, and slammed his full weight against it. The sound of wood splintering surprised him. The door opened. He swiped a cardboard flat from the countertop, filled it with canned vegetables, canned soups, boxes of macaroni and cheese, and balanced three sacks of bread on top. He closed the door as best he could behind him and pounced back up the hill as if the concrete was a buoyant trampoline. He didn’t realize he was winded, or his arms were weak from lifting the heavy box, until he reached the woman in the kitchen, sitting patiently. Her eyes darted from the kitchen clock to him—a man who must’ve seemed a chaotic breeze whooshing through the doorway.
Her eyes grew. “Oh, thank you, Father.” She rose from the table. “Thank you,” she said again, bowing her head.

“Will this do?” he asked, catching his breath.

“Yes, yes.”

“Good! I’ll help you get it into the truck.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“But, before we do that, might I ask one thing?”

“Anything.”

“Might we have a quick prayer?” The woman nodded yes. “What’s your name?” It annoyed him that he couldn’t place her.

“Maria.”

Father McCall put the box on the kitchen table. Of course, her name was Maria. Was this a coincidence? She shared the name with St. Isidore’s wife. He took Maria’s small, calloused hand, which she offered readily.

“Thank you, Jesus, for bringing Maria to me. She has taught me a great lesson. Thank you for your bounty that is available to us when we act. May Maria’s table be full of love and sustenance from this day forward. Amen.”

“Amen,” Maria added.

Maria and Father McCall walked to the truck. Maria settled into the driver’s seat, as Father McCall put the box of food on the passenger seat. Father McCall expected to shut the door, wave a hearty goodbye, and never see the woman again, until Maria said, “Father. Did you know them?”
Father McCall didn’t have to ask. He knew who she was referring to. The banker, the farmer.

“People like them. Lots of people like them.”

“There are times I think . . . I think it’s not bad. What the farmer did. It doesn’t seem like it’s all his fault.” Maria looked out the windshield. She lifted her fingers to the roots of her bangs, raked her fingers through the roots to the ends of her hair. It was as if she were pulling a curtain to reveal her dark eyes. She turned these eyes toward Father McCall, inhaled. She exhaled. “Newspapers say, by the end, if there is an end in three years, 937 total predicted suicides.”

“I hope, for God’s sake, Maria, those predictions won’t hold true.”

“It depends on us, I guess.”

She turned her gaze back to the windshield and started the truck. Father McCall closed the passenger door and waved goodbye, but it wasn’t his usual hearty ado. It was anemic: arm raised at the elbow, a static hand in the air. She appeared too busy maneuvering the truck out of the driveway to wave in recognition. His raised palm wilted like a flower. She was gone.

Father McCall found himself sitting at the kitchen table in the darkening twilight where the woman had sat just moments before. On the seventh final chime of the clock, he looked down. A dark hair rested on the placemat. He picked the hair up between his fingers. He felt its coarse strength, wrapped it around his index finger.

He needed a drink. The parish Cadillac waited outside.

The car’s radio dial was pre-tuned to AM WMT. The weather was forecast, the markets recited, and then, “There will be a farm sale tomorrow at the Leroy Dean property, Rural Route
4, Box 79. Sale starts at 8:00 a.m. Home goods, John Deere machinery, and a fine set of tools will be. . . .

Father McCall punched off the radio dial, pulled at his earlobe. He pushed play on the eight-track. A few local musicians were thinking about selling the eight-track as a fundraiser for area farmers. He pushed stop. Let the sound of tires on gravel accompany his arrival at the VFW.

Inside the VFW, Trudy Musser was tending bar. “Well, hello Father!” she greeted.

“I just held my confessional hours, Trudy, and you weren’t there. I guess I can assume you’ve been sin free?”

“Yeah. We’ll go with that. What can I get you?”

Father McCall couldn’t believe this woman. Even in the worst of times, she could remain upbeat. So bright. Her cheeks were literally a pinkish hue of happiness. He saw the opposite from her husband, Bob, these days. Bob was a farmer. This was a new job for Trudy. Were they on hard times, too? Father McCall didn’t want to make worry where worry wasn’t. He had Everette Dean to worry about. Father McCall took a seat at the bar.

“Slow night?” he asked.

“Yeah. I think everyone’s getting prepared for the Dean sale tomorrow.”

“You going?”

“I might. Just for support. I don’t like buying anything at those sales. It just seems wrong.”

Father McCall nodded his head. “I know what you mean.” He thought of Maria. Thought of what folks would say around town when the women of the ladies’ auxiliary found the community center’s door busted down, a few cans of food gone.
“Usual?” Trudy had only worked this gig for one month, but she already remembered he liked Jameson on the rocks.

“Yep.” Trudy turned to prepare the drink. She set it by his wrist. He took it to his mouth, let the warmth flood down his esophagus. “I think I did something bad today, Trudy.”

“Are you making a confession? Promoting me to priestess here? You know, I can only multi-task so much.”

Father McCall smiled. He had to tell someone. “I broke into the community center to get some food for a woman. Hard times. You suppose Bob might help me repair the door before Bernice finds out?”

“I think he might. You don’t want to make Bernice angry. You know what I also think?”

“What?”

“I think you better say three Hail Marys.”

The bar door cracked open. What little light remained in the dusk sky glinted into the dank bar. A handsome man, about Father McCall’s age, strode in. He had a handlebar mustache, wore a John Deere farm cap, Wranglers, a red Western shirt, and cowboy boots. Father McCall hadn’t seen him before. He was cleaner than the types that actually worked in the dirt for a living, folks around this area.

“Father.” The gentleman nodded at Father McCall, whose white collar gave his profession away.

“Evening.” The man took a seat next to Father McCall.

“You back again?” Trudy asked the man.

“Yes. Got some dinner. Now I’m here for few more rounds. That okay with you?”
“Fine with me as long as you tip proper. Father?” Trudy began, plopping another drink next to Father McCall’s wrist.

“What’s that?” Father asked.

“Maybe you could do confession hours here.”

“What do you think I’m here for?” Trudy smiled and put a dish of peanuts with the shells between the two men. He wondered if Trudy was insinuating this man had something to confess.

“You done that three times since I walked in this bar,” the man, sipping his whisky, said to Father McCall.

“Done what?” Father McCall was confused.

“You’ve pulled on your earlobe. You better be careful. That’s a body part that’ll sag with time if you keep pullin’ it like that. Earlobe’s like that new candy—Laffy Taffy—used to be called Beich’s. You keep pulling it, it’ll stretch. Don’t some African people do that? Put stuff in their lobes to stretch ’em?”

“I think you’re right.”

“About what, exactly?”

“Everything. It’s a thing I do when I’m nervous. It’s tense around here. These people don’t deserve what’s been going on.” Father McCall took a drink of whiskey.

“What’s been going on?”

“The crisis.”

“Ah. It’s like Butz says. If you can’t handle the heat, get out of the kitchen. Get big or get out. It ain’t all bad. Sorts the weak from the strong. It’ll make better managers out of all of us.”
For the ugly things this guy said, Father McCall couldn’t help but feel intrigued by his straight, white teeth, the way he stretched his vowels. “You may not want to say that too loudly around here.”

“Ah. I’m not scared. Sometimes the truth hurts.”

The man put his hand out to Father McCall to shake. The hand was not solid like the hands of his flock when he wished them, “Peace be with you.” The smooth skin of the hand was clammy and weak. “Father Jim McCall.”

“Orson Phelps.”

Father McCall heard Everette’s voice. Orson Phelps. Fat-cat fucker. A fat-cat fucker who had been delivered to Father McCall. Father McCall envisioned Phelps to be an old fatty, not young.

“Where you from, Orson?”

“Davenport.”

“And what brings you here?”

“Auction tomorrow. Before drinks and dinner and more drinks.” The man burped loudly and smiled. “I went out that way to scout som’a the stuff. Got some nice tractors out there. Hope they go low.”

Trudy, who had an ear on all conversations, started to speak up, but Father McCall spoke before he could think or censor. An instinct to protect his flock.

“Trudy, get this man a shot. No, two shots. Two shots of good whiskey. He’s from out of town, going to the sale, and, well, two drinks seem better than one.”

Trudy gave Father an inquisitive look, shrugged her shoulders. “Whatever you say.”

“Hot dang, we got ourselves a drinkin’ priest.”
“Irish Catholic drinking priest. We don’t shy away from a drink. It’s true.”

“Well, I don’t either.” With that, Orson took a shot glass in each of his hands, which Trudy had placed and filled in front of him. He hammered each shot back. Orson slammed the last shot glass on the table.

“What-e-e-e! That has got a slow after-burn!”

“Yes, I think it does.”

Father McCall ordered them more drinks, and Trudy kept serving. She was quick to recognize her role as a co-conspirator. Let the gluttonous fat fucker from Davenport drink! They made small talk about the equipment business, about Davenport, about the Mississippi.

Though he was drinking far less, Father McCall felt the effects when Orson finally declared, “Well, Father. I do thank you for the drinks, but I gotta get along. I gotta get to that sale in the morning.” Orson started the struggle to get upright.

“Oh, come on. Have another drink. You want to play shuffleboard? I came in this evening to play shuffleboard, and there’s no one around, except you.” Father McCall thought he should really let the man go, but he couldn’t be sure what he’d done would really make a difference on tomorrow’s sale. He had to make certain he did his part.

Orson smiled at Father’s offer. “I really should hit the hay for the night, but it’s hard to turn a good Father down.”

“If you’re staying, what about another round? Trudy, could you get a stiff drink made up for this fine new friend I’ve made?”

Trudy gave Father a wink. “Coming up.” Trudy grabbed the Everclear and started to create a concoction, as Father distracted Orson with the shuffleboard table. Trudy started to put a slender red straw in the drink, thought better of it, and placed a larger white straw in the glass.
Trudy approached Orson with her creation, a large glass filled with an alcohol content Father McCall wouldn’t want to touch over the course of a month.

Orson, ignoring the straw, took a swig of the drink. “Hot dang, girl, that’s good. What’s that called?”

Trudy didn’t miss a beat. “The Orange Orson special.”

“No, not the drink. Your ass, honey.” Trudy pursed her lips, looked like she was going to smack Orson upside the head. Father McCall quickly stepped between the two, and directed Orson by his shoulders to the shuffleboard.

“C’mon Orson, let’s play.”

Father McCall didn’t really know the correct rules of the game. He didn’t think it’d matter, considering his opponent looked like a newborn colt that couldn’t quite get his legs underneath him. During Orson’s turns, the pucks magically landed in point zones.

“I warn you, Padre. I am one lucky bastard, pardon my French.”

When the pucks stopped, Orson swayed back and forth and yelled, “Whoo-eeee. I’m gonna get ya, Father.” He ordered another whiskey to celebrate. Instead of a shot glass, Trudy pulled out a water glass and filled it to the rim with the cheapest stomach rot whiskey she had.

Father McCall felt sick and confused all at once; he needed a break. He needed a break from the alcohol. He needed a break from his thoughts. He needed a break from this pompous Orson man who felt like a splinter you couldn’t fish out with tweezers. He walked toward the bathroom. Inside, he turned on the cold-water faucet. The water spit then flowed steady. He splashed his face. Three, four, five times. He stopped and looked at himself. A nascent wrinkle creased between his nose and eyebrow. Narrowed eyes. Slumped shoulders. He was starting to wilt like his flock. He looked down. Against the white porcelain sink, a long, dark hair stuck. He
pulled the hair from the porcelain and held it to the light. He smiled with recognition, the familiar coarse heft. A wrapped piece of cheese can only stretch so far. Maria. He wrapped the hair around his thumb, took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders upright, blinked, and opened his eyes wide.

Back in the bar, Orson had lowered himself onto a chair near the shuffleboard table. “Kinda got the spins,” he reported to Father McCall, who sat next to him.

“Yeah. Those’ll creep up on you. Take a drink. Relax.” Orson’s whole torso swayed. He put the glass to his lips, tipped it back. Maybe a teaspoon of the whisky actually made it down his throat, maybe less. Most of it dribbled down Orson’s chin. His head came to rest on the table, snores soon after.

“Orson? Orson?”

“I think you got him out cold,” Trudy said. She had been pretending to watch “M*A*S*H” on the tiny black-and-white TV set at the bar. She added, “Good work. Now what?”

“I’ll find his keys. Drive him back to the motel. Hope he doesn’t wake until after the sale.”

“I like your take-charge style, Father. Kinda makes me want to go to church with Bob.”

“Whatever’ll get you through those doors, Trudy.”

Father McCall found Orson’s keys in his front pant pocket. He left Orson sitting, or rather crumpled at the table, and decided to pull whatever vehicle Orson drove to the front of the building. Maybe Trudy could help him maneuver Orson out of the bar and into the vehicle.

There were only three vehicles in the lot. Trudy’s blue Oldsmobile, his Cadillac, and a new navy Ford pick-up. The truck was unlocked. Father McCall placed the keys in the ignition,
and the truck started. He drove to the front of the building, left the truck running. Inside the bar, he hauled Orson on his feet, put his arm around his shoulder. Trudy helped. Grunting, pushing, and pulling ensued until Orson flopped onto the passenger side.

“Night, Trudy. I’ll find a way to get my car in the morning.”

Trudy didn’t say goodbye, just waved and turned back inside.

Father McCall drove out the lane of the VFW and into the dark horizon. He turned toward the motel. A lone streetlight shone through the truck window. It illuminated the slick white of Orson’s hands—those clean, smooth fingers.

He remembered his place, just as the archbishop prescribed. He was not in the East. He was not in the West. He was a priest in the Midwest. To him, this meant he served his flock. If he couldn’t serve his flock, protect Everette Dean and even Orson Phelps, he’d rather be dead. He couldn’t risk this man waking up, and getting to that sale. Father McCall suddenly turned the truck in the opposite direction of the motel. Maggie Dean could rest easy tonight.

He drove the Ford a couple miles outside of town where the pavement turned to gravel. Putting weight on the accelerator, he felt as if he were running down that long hill for Maria, for the banker, for the farmer. He turned onto a random uneven lane stretching through a cornfield. The dried cornstalks leaned north, looked fragile and ominous in the headlights. They reminded him of his flock slumping in the pews, dejected. The stalks would soon be harvested by a combine, and for what? For nothing. The work of these people, it was worth nothing, until someone made it worth something.

He followed the dusty lane that led all the way to the English River. He stopped the truck, cut the engine. In the silence, a soft wheeze rhythmically sounded from Orson’s open mouth. He
was a mouth breather. Father McCall pulled Orson’s shoulders so he was lying across the bench seat. He exited the truck with the keys in his hands.

The keys. He plopped them in the truck bed, then worry got the better of him. What if Orson woke at ten, found the keys? He’d have time for the machinery sale. The big items always sold last, sometimes late into the evening. He climbed over the tailgate and retrieved the keys. His foot slipped off the hitch, and it caught his knee. He ignored the throbbing swell. He could keep the keys with him, but he didn’t want the reminder haunting him.

Why hadn’t he heard the answer talking to him all along? The river babbled in the night, babbled all the way through the farming communities in the area. He tried to slow gravity as it hurried his steps, his aching knee, down the riverbank toward the sand bar. He stopped at the water’s edge. The brown water was nearly opaque, but in the moonlight, he caught a glimpse of something under the water, perhaps a type of algae clinging to a branch. It float-waved like Maria’s long black hair.

The keys felt cool in his hand. He squeezed the jagged metal in his palm until he couldn’t manage to squeeze any tighter. Releasing, he hurled the keys into the current.

The consideration was over. The noise of the keys plunging into water was less abrasive than expected, almost therapeutic. A simple plop. He fed those keys to the river that flowed through the community of his people. When the keys hit the muddy water, they unfurled ripples. Jesus turned water into wine. He limped up the riverbank and started to recite the Act of Contrition.

“O My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee.” Past the truck.

“And I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments.” Onto the path leading through the corn.
“But most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love.” He repeated these lines for two miles, all the way back to the Cadillac parked at the VFW.

He omitted, “I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.”
HEAVY LIFTING

Dean Cousins 1988

After a tornado scattered Uncle Greg’s farm for miles on Mother’s Day, our parents arrived to do the heavy lifting. They forgot about us, their children, as they strode toward ruin. We wandered among crumpled bulk bins ripped from foundations, tractors overturned with broken windows, empty feed sacks waving in tree branches, insulation strewn across the yard.

We organized. We gave ourselves serious tasks. We plucked coopless chicks from the wet ground, and placed them in boxes with straw. We caught loose piglets by back legs and placed them in a makeshift pen.

Cousin Elizabeth’s scream stopped us. “A nail! I stepped on one!”

Cousin Erik carried Elizabeth to a cement slab for a full examination. By miracle, the nail shot between her toes instead of through flesh and tissue. Not a speck of blood was shed.

“Really. You’re not hurt,” Erik consoled, until her breathing calmed.

We grew hungry and tromped to the powerless (yet spared) farmhouse, determined to pop popcorn under the glow of our flashlights. Cousin Elizabeth braided Cousin Lauren’s long hair to pass the time it would take the kernels to pop. Our hopes waned. The glow of a flashlight was not strong enough to bust the kernels to white puffs. Our stomachs grumbled. When dusk-pink started to peek through clouds, a neighbor arrived with a box full of cold-cut sandwiches. Our bedraggled mothers walked to the house to collect us and a sandwich before heading home.

Even though we slept, heavy from exhaustion, some of us were tossed from the refuge of sleep by images of twisted steel. Into adulthood, storms still unearth memories for us of the small farm our parents tried to lift back up.
Our parents knew the weight of farms, the heft of lifting a dead horse struck through its barrel by a two-by-four. These things they tried to protect us from seeing. They told us it was in our best interests to study—stability existed in books and monthly paychecks, never in the weather, weather that didn’t even observe Mother’s Day.

So we find ourselves, the farm kids of yesterday, as animals in confinement. Our feet in clean shoes beneath desks, because our parents warned us. The wail of a weather siren takes us back, makes us wonder if picking up a family farm in the late ’80s from a tornado’s wrath was an act in vain. What would it have meant to leave the pieces strewn about, the animals to roam, because the pieces were never to be ours?

Seasons change outside our office windows. Anti-depressants are covered by healthcare plans. Tractors drive themselves. An acre of land sells for $6,000 in Buccan County to an absentee landlord in California. It is too late for us, though we still grope for the soft down of a chick as we imagine triumphantly scaling our cubicle walls.

We must work on Mother’s Day to meet a deadline for the corporation. Our supervisors talk in meetings. Their idle words do not carry the weight we long to lift.
WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT CHARLIE

Clara Dean 1990

Our pa said never to follow our neighbor Charlie, but my sister Eloise and I decide to do it. We probably really shouldn’t be following Charlie to the English River, especially as he holds a rifle in his fourteen-year-old hands. But I seen the way Charlie treats his step-dad’s dogs, Pancho and Lefty. Pancho and Lefty are German Shepherds. I know ’cause I asked Ma about their breed. I hear Charlie out there in the yard sometimes talking baby to them. Yes! Talking baby! I don’t think a guy can be all that bad if he talks baby to dogs.

“You want to go huntin’ wild pigs with me?” Charlie had asked us from the living room’s screen door as the credits to Reading Rainbow played. We sat like starving barn cats waiting for someone to throw us a scrap of food. We’re hungry. Hungry for excitement. But we know our heads could be bit off if Ma or Pa find out.

It’s been sixty-three days since the bus dropped us off for summer break. The only places we’ve been are church and three trips to the Fareway Grocery. Ma wouldn’t even let us buy a 99-cent box of wafer cones for ice cream last time. The pig markets are bad. So bad, we can’t afford anything. We can’t afford a vacation like the Tillmans who are going to Disneyland.

Oh! But when we go to Fareway in Iowa City, my sister and I wear our best outfits and swing a purse we each got for Christmas over our shoulders. We both filled out the ID cards for our purses. If someone finds our purses, they’ll return them. My card reads “Clara Ann Dean.” And then I have carefully printed my address. My handwriting looks shaky compared to my sister’s looping cursive: “Eloise Sue Dean.”
I have two dollars in my purse. My sister has thirty-five whole dollars! She’s been doing chores for my ma all summer. She’s saving up for a pair of boots she seen in a Sears catalog. The boots are pointy, cut off at the ankles, and are made of gray suede. She tells me they’ll feel soft as the muzzle of a horse. She can buy them if she saves five more dollars.

Last time we went to town, Eloise wore Strawberry Shortcake lipstick, but she wouldn’t let me borrow even a bit. Always says I’m copying her. “I don’t want your germs on my lipstick,” she snaps. Sometimes, I sneak the Johnson and Johnson No Tears Shampoo she bought with her own money because I want my hair to be shiny and brown like hers, though, I have blond hair and it’s always tangled and it’s ‘bout as shiny as a black coat in a dark closet.

Ma will let us stray from her in the grocery store if she gives us an item to find, like flour, and only if we go together. We really like it when a song comes over the grocery store speakers, say “Material Girl” or “Faith,” and we can sing along and look for the flour in the cool of the aisles, our jelly-shoes lightly striking the brown and white tiles. So that’s been our summer.

Through the screen door, when Charlie was convincing us, he held up the gun. He offered, “Don’t worry. It ain’t got no bullets in it. You guys really watch that baby show, _Reading Rainbow_?” He spit out the side of his mouth.

Charlie is from Wichita—one of the reasons our pa don’t like him. Pa says Wichita is big, a place we don’t know much about, and Charlie doesn’t go to church. He moved into a rental across the road from our farm with his mom and stepdad. The rental was built by a neighbor. Pa says that darn neighbor, Mr. Sweet, built the one-story house there to get even with us. Pa says Mr. Sweet wanted to buy our farm, but Pa bought it first, and so the neighbor built the rental and
puts trash in it to make our lives miserable. Pa calls Mr. Sweet “Boar Face” because his face is all jowly like a boar’s.

Here’s a bad thing I might tell Father McCall during confession. Mr. Sweet’s pigs are being murdered! Mr. Sweet has a pasture next to the rental property where Charlie lives. He keeps pigs in there. If nobody’s watchin’ ’em, Pancho or Lefty will go over to that pasture, snatch a squealing piglet up in their mouth, carry it to their yard, kill it, and eat it. I’m not lying! Ma’s even seen it happen.

“Oh, my word!” Ma exclaims. “Those dogs are eating the neighbor’s pigs!”

Pa think’s it’s funny that Boar Face’s pigs is being killed. I think it might be bad, but we don’t like Boar Face.

Ma told us to tell her if Charlie ever touches us. Eloise nodded yes to Ma and nods yes to Charlie after he tells us the gun has no bullets, and I wasn’t going to sit on the couch all afternoon alone. Zoobilee Zoo is bound to be a rerun, and maybe I am her copycat. Besides, Ma and Pa are moving out sows from the nursery. They won’t even notice we left the farm.

Lefty, smiling all big, tries to follow us as we head to the river, but Charlie don’t want him followin’ us.

“Ah, Lefty, you big lug,” Charlie says, patting him on his neck. Lefty’s tail whips back and forth. “Go back to the house, Lefty. Back, you hear?! We can’t have no dog scarin’ the wild pigs away.” Lefty whines a little, puts his head down, and trots back to the rental house.

As we trudge through the cornfield that leads to the path that leads to the English River, I can smell Charlie. He smells like some of the men at church when I shake their hands and
whisper, “Peach be with you,” before communion. Yep, Charlie smells of Old Spice, incense, sweat, and cigarette.

“You wearin’ Old Spice?” I ask Charlie.

“Yeah. Like it?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Is it your pa’s?”

“My stepdad’s.”

Charlie’s stepdad, Dick, beats up old cars in the front yard. Pa says he’s into demos-derbies, likes to crash his cars into other cars. Late into the night, after we hear him yell at his wife, and his wife yells back at him, Dick slams the front door. He smashes at the cars with a maul. Pa uses his maul to drive stakes in the ground, but Dick uses his on cars. He’s always smashing those cars with his maul. Sometimes, when he’s been going at it for what seems like hours, he stops and pets Pancho or Lefty. They always stand guard. Sometimes I can’t sleep because of the sound of it. The crushing sound of it. I want to ask Charlie about it, but I can’t, and I don’t know why. Maybe it’s ’cause Dick scares me, and I don’t want to talk about him for fear Dick’ll hear me. He looks like a less nice Grizzly Adams with the beard and all.

Charlie wears a bandanna like Karate Kid, black tennis shoes, black shorts, and a KU jersey. He has a rattail that he braids down his neck. He holds the gun by his side, and every once in a while, pauses, crouches down, and scans his gun across the cornfield. Even though we haven’t stopped, he motions us on after he scans. My sister rolls her eyes. Charlie is two years older than her, but not taller than her. He’s big, though. My ma calls him a hefty boy.

When he gets on the school bus the kids chant, “Boom-boppa-boom-boppa-boop-boop-boomp.” I’m not sure if Charlie likes it or not. He seems to bounce with the beat, a boom box on his shoulder when he walks down the aisle to the second seat on the left. The seat is always
empty, as if it’s reserved just for him. He slops into it. Maybe he deserves the boom-boppas even if he doesn’t like it, because he, and the Sweet boys, tell us girls to shut our legs when we go by stinky pig farms on the way home from school. I don’t quite know what it means, but it makes me feel like going directly home, getting into the shower, and scrubbing my body with Ivory Soap. My sister thinks the boom-boppa-boom thing is mean. I heard her telling Ma so after school one day.

“You guys read about the feral pigs living down by the river?” Charlie asks. He’s breathing heavy, and the black bandana around his head is soaked in sweat.

This is news to me, but my sister says, “I read about it in the *English Current*. Gary Kron shot one, but Pa says that was, obviously, miles from here.”

“Obviously.” That is her new word this summer.

“Pigs get around. They got four legs, ya know.”

My sister rolls her eyes again. “Obviously,” she says.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask.

“Obviously, I didn’t want to scare you. You’d wet the bed if you knew just how mean those things can be. And, obviously, I don’t want you wetting the bed *I* sleep in.” Charlie smiles, and I can feel my cheeks grow warm as the pancakes fresh off the pan Ma makes special on Sundays. My sister says, “A little girl, about your pea size, got mauled by one last week in Railroad Park.”

A girl mauled by a feral pig? Dear Jesus. I’ll need to pray to him about that when I kneel at my bedside tonight. “Now I lay me down to sleep, please don’t let the feral pigs eat my feet!”

Charlie adds, “I rode my bike into town today. That’s all everyone is talking about. Feral pig this, feral pig that.” Charlie gestures widely, holding the gun in one hand. He stops. I feel his
eyes on my feet, “Hey, why don’t you two ever wear shoes? If we get chased, you know we’re gonna have to run.”

“We don’t wear shoes in summer,” my sister sasses. “Shoes are annoying, and by July our soles are so calloused, we don’t even feel a thing.” My sister demonstrates by stomping over two stones in her path and past Charlie.

“Bad ass,” Charlie says, shaking his head.

Behind her, I slam my feet onto the stones just like her, but no one sees me and it hurts.

“You know, they’re offering rewards, if you kill one of the feral pigs. It’s like $500, and if I catch it, I’m gonna get a bigger boom box, and a cab back to Wichita where my dad is and live with him for the rest of the summer. My dad’s a doctor, but he’s really busy right now with the patients. He’s curing cancer, so he can’t get up to see me.”

My sister rolls her eyes at me.

We finally reach the path that leads to the English River. The grasses are up to our heads on either side of the path, and the trees dull out the sun. It’s a relief, a cool relief, and it smells syrupy. My feet dig into the mud of the trail, and I wiggle my toes, letting the cool mud squish between them. Charlie puts the gun up to his shoulder and walks forward cautiously, scanning the gun right to left, left to right.

He whispers, “Let me know if you hear anything.”

We make it to the river with no excitement, but the walk still beats Zoobilee Zoo. If I have to watch the episode with Talkatoo, a creepy and annoying woman dressed up like a cockatoo, lay anymore eggs and squawk around the television set, I’m going to scream.

Charlie takes his shoes off, and we walk into the brown river just enough to let the water rise to our ankles. Frogs spring out of our way. Charlie grabs one and holds it to my sister’s face.
“Dammit,” she curses.

Oh! If only I could tell Ma she cursed. Ma doesn’t like cursing. The Easter Bunny takes candy from our basket if we cuss.

“Get that thing outta my face!” she demands.

Charlie laughs and drops the frog. I think he knows my sister could lick him good.

“I want to be a teacher when I grow up,” I tell Charlie. “Do you want to be a doctor like your dad?”

Charlie swishes his feet in the water and says, “A priest.”

My sister laughs. “A priest?!”

“Yeah. The priest in town is pretty nice. He has a nice house, drives a badass Cadillac—all those things are free, by the way. He gives things to people who need it, and gets everyone’s attention on Saturdays and Sundays. He gets to see dead bodies. Drink wine and eat Jesus. Seems like a pretty cool gig.”

“You know they can’t get married? Right? And, what if you meet someone and fall in love and want to get married? Obviously, you’ve got to think of a plan B,” my sister says.

“Then I’m going to be a professional basketball player.”

I squint at the sun that reflects off the sand. Ma says not to stare at the sun, but sometimes I can’t help it. I just have to look at it—full on. I like the colored dots I see when I close my eyes afterward, like the glow of Dick’s cigarette hanging in his mouth at night as he bats at the old cars with his maul. I look down and see something silvery in the water. I put my hand down and pull up a set of keys. “I found keys!” I yell, but no one seems excited.
Charlie coolly wades over to me in the water and takes the keys in his hand. “Huh. Ford truck keys. Cool. Bet some poor bastard lost ’em when they was fishing.” I put the keys in my pocket.

Maybe I’ll show them to Pa. Pa likes trucks. The cicadas cry out over the water, and my sister announces, wading out, we have to get back. Charlie nods, grabs water up in his bowled hands and splashes his face.

Back on the river path, I start humming the *Reading Rainbow* theme song, and my sister thumps me hard on the shoulder with her fist. “Stop it, Cla—” Before she can get my name out her big mouth, Charlie shooshes us. And, that’s when I hear grass swooshing and swaying, something approaching faster than Mrs. Smith marching to scold the fighting boys on the playground.

“Get down!” Charlie demands.

My sister and I drop bellies to the ground, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Charlie flop to his belly and aim the gun straight out from his chest toward the direction of the noise. I can feel my heart about to spring out my chest like the frogs at the riverside.

My sister is the first to call it for what it is. “So, obviously, a deer.”

“Fuck,” Charlie cusses, balling his hand into a fist and striking the path.

The deer is out of sight. And then we all take in the hairy brown streak that follows the deer, and Charlie rolls back into position and fires, and that gun, that gun goes off. The sound seems to bounce off the trees for hours, and then we hear a squeal and a thunk.

Charlie gets up faster than I ever seen him move. His face is white. My sister stands slowly and brushes off her shorts, looking in Charlie’s direction. I can’t move. My ears ring.

“I got it! I got a pig!” Charlie yells.
I can’t look. I can’t even stand. I stay pressed to the muddy ground. The gun had bullets in it. I want to tell my ma; I want to go home and tell Ma, Charlie is bad. I don’t like guns.

My sister shrieks, and Charlie staggers back from the mound of brown. And that’s when we realize what Charlie did. Lefty lies sprawled on the ground. The dog flops its entire body and whines. Blood drips from its mouth. I think Lefty might get up and start chasing the deer again, the way he’s moving his legs, good ol’ Lefty, but he twitches his legs one last time and stops moving.

Lefty didn’t have time to close his eyes, and those brown eyes just stare me down. If I felt like joking I might say, “Lefty, you might as well take a picture. It’ll last longer!” I can’t joke. I just wish Lefty would stop staring those brown eyes at me.

After silence seems to fill the whole darn timber, Charlie falls to his knees, and rocks back and forth. “Oh, damn. Oh, damn. I’m fucked.” I don’t know who to feel worse for, Lefty or Charlie. I think I feel worse for Charlie because his stepdad looks like a mean Grizzly Adams. I want to tell him that sometimes Ma gets mad at me ’cause I wet the bed. I do. Sometimes, I wet the bed, but I stay quiet. I can’t talk. Lefty’s looking at me.

My sister squats next to Lefy. She places her hand where Lefty’s heart could be. She pulls her hand away and shakes her head. She puts the same hand on Charlie’s shoulder and says, “You didn’t mean to. Dick’ll understand.”

She’s lying. My sister’s lying with that last line. We all know she’s lying. She knows Dick swings that maul. She’s going to have to confess to Father McCall and God in the confession booth. And Eloise don’t like goin’ in that confession booth with Father McCall because he gives her the creeps. But then she tells a truth. I know it like I know the tune to Reading Rainbow. “We’ll help you get out of this.”
Charlie sniffles and tries to hide tears as we walk back to our farm. He holds his head down. He never looks up, not once. Eloise tells Charlie to go home, act as if nothing has happened. “Obviously” Dick won’t notice the dog is gone for a while. Charlie needs to come to the porch tomorrow, during Reading Rainbow time.

When we get in the house, I don’t ask my sister any questions. She seems deep in thought. She bites her lower lip, paces in our room. When she hears Ma come in the screen door, she suddenly becomes alert and whispers, “Change your clothes!”

I do as she says.

It’s odd, having this big ol’ secret stuffed inside me, like I swallowed one of them hedge balls that fell off the tree in the pasture, and it’s just there inside me. Lefty is dead. Lefty twitched before he died. Lefty let out one last whine. It doesn’t help Ma made meatloaf for dinner. I usually put on the ketchup real thick, but I can’t tonight. All I see is Lefty, blood pouring out his mouth. Yet everything with Ma and Pa at the supper table is normal. They just chomp away, and Ma keeps dishing up food to our pa who looks hungry and tired.

In bed, my sister and I don’t talk. I don’t ask her to read me a book. There is yelling from the house next door. The door opens and closes. Dick yells, “Lefty, Lefty,” into the dark night. We know Lefty is dead, down by the English. He’s covered up in the grasses. A bullet through his head. His pink tongue peeking out his mouth. Then we hear the crunch of the maul on metal, and it’s never sounded so close, never sounded like he’s crushing the dresser to bits right inside our very room. It’s silent, and I hope, I hope, hope, hope he’s gonna just be quiet, but Dick yells again, “Lefty, Lefty, Lefty?!”
Pa turns on the light in the hallway. He comes into our room and looks out the window. Pa looks tired and groggy.

“Everette?” Ma walks tired-eyed into our room. She turns on the lights.

“His dog must be missing,” Pa says to Ma. “I bet old man Boar Face caught on and killed it.”

“It’s late, and that’s not your problem,” Ma says.

I want to add, “Yes! Yes! Yes! It’s late. It’s late. Let’s all go back to bed under our covers. Deep under our covers,” but I don’t. Eloise is acting like she’s asleep, so I only open my eyes real quick-like and then pretend to be asleep too.

Dick yells, “Dean! I see you in that window. You seen my Lefty?” Pa uses the Lord’s name in vain, and I can’t pretend to sleep anymore. “Dean. Come out here. Let’s talk!”

Eloise sits up in her bed, and her eyes are wide. “Pa, don’t go over there. That guy is nuts.”

“He’s had a lot to drink,” Ma adds.

Pa doesn’t say anything. Nothing. He just walks down the stairs, and we hear the farmhouse door opening and slamming shut.

Ma starts to pace in our bedroom. She shuts the lights off. I ask her why. She says so Dick cannot see in our room. She is smart. I can feel the hedge ball of a secret starting to rise in my throat, and I feel like I’m gonna vomit all over my bedspread like I did last winter ’cause of the flu. And then I look over, and see Eloise crying like a baby. Big tears roll down her face, and Ma is soothing her real nice saying, “It’s alright. Your pa is gonna be just fine.”
It feels like hours pass, though Ma says it’s only been ten minutes. Pa starts walking back across our yard home. Ma shuts the blind, and turns the lights on. When Pa gets upstairs, he tells us, “Says his dog is missing. You girls seen it?”

I look over at Eloise. Her face is bright red and streaked with tears. She shakes her head no. I shake my head no. I muster, “Maybe Boar Face killed it.”

Pa nods. “Well, keep an eye out for it, okay?”

I don’t cry, but Eloise sure does.

The morning feels like one of Father McCall’s sermons. Long. Ma and Pa are out doing chores again. When Levar Burton signs off from Reading Rainbow, my sister and I aren’t really looking at the TV. We’re looking out the window at Charlie as he boom-slops up the lane and onto the porch.

“Hey,” he says through the screen.

Eloise gasps. I gasp. Charlie looks like his face has been in a car accident. His eye is all poofy and purple. His cheek is yellow.

I almost ask him what happened to his face, but I’ve watched enough after-school specials to know. Eloise’s eyes get real big again, and I think she’s going to cry. So, I tell Charlie to sit on the porch swing. I take Eloise by the arm and pull her into our room where I did not cry last night.

I take out her purse and count out all the money she’s saved. All the dollar bills that add to thirty-five. I say, “This is for Charlie. He’s got to get out of here.” Eloise nods.

I race back to Charlie. I tell him, “It’s all we have. Ride your bike into town, and get to your dad in Wichita.”
Charlie looks like a shocked opossum playing dead. Then, he grabs for the money as if I might change my mind.

“Really?” he asks.

“Really. You’ve got to get out of here. We won’t say a word.”

“Promise?”

“Pinky swear!” I say, and my sister rolls her eyes.

Of course, there is a big hub-bub-ba-loo about Charlie missing, but I stay silent, and my sister stays silent, and Dick keeps whacking the cars at night, but it doesn’t scare me so much anymore. A rumor goes around that Charlie was chomped dead by a feral pig. Charlie’s mom eventually finds out he’s in Wichita.

“I knew he’d tried to go back,” she tells Ma one day in our driveway. “I really wasn’t all that worried about it. He’s a survivor with a mind of his own.”

At supper, Ma rants, “I can’t believe his mother was so casual about it all. I can’t believe a child would do such a thing. You girls would never.”

My sister tells Ma that she isn’t going to get the boots after all; she’s going to save the money for college.

It’s a shame I can’t tell anyone at school. Jill Tillsman met Mickey Mouse in Florida by the ocean, but by the corn, by the English River, I obviously had an adventure too, but all I say is, “I watched a lot of Zoobilee Zoo and helped Ma grocery shop at Fareway.”

Sometimes, my sister and I go into the woods and peek at the dead dog’s body. At first, it stank sour like a dead pig, got all bloated, and then the buzz of hungry flies and maggots started
to eat it away. Now fall, all that remains is a bit of hide, soft when you touch it, and bones, and teeth covered by brown elm leaves. If you don’t know just where to look, you’ll never find it, but my sister and I, we can find it. We know it’s there, Ma and Pa don’t.

In bed at night, I’ll sometimes open my purse. In the side-pocket I take out the truck keys and a pearly white dogtooth the size of my thumbnail. I rub the smooth dogtooth between my fingers. I will never forget Lefty.
“Grandma, you still got your wedding dress?” Clara asks me. Clara is 16. Hard to believe, I gave birth to my first, Leroy, at her age.

I tell her.

Before her father is born, tears pour out my eyes like a river reservoir let loose during a wet spring. Through tears, I eye my wedding dress in the closet, pull it from the dark crevice, trace my fingers across the rough, yellowing lace. Clutching it in one fist, I walk out the house past the children who fight over a John Deere toy tractor. The bottoms of their feet are a dirty black. I stop at the farm’s burn barrel where all house garbage is disposed: tin cans, plastic sacks, tissues, newspapers. These fragments heap in a black ash pile. I put my wedding dress in the heap. Strike a match. Light the dress on fire. I watch it burn, something calming inside. There is no regret in the tone I use to tell Clara my wedding dress is ash. She should know the laundry, the dishes, the chickens, the garden, all the shitwork made me do it.

When I stop the welder, I hear the Barnard owl plain and clear up in the sycamore tree. He calls, “Who cooks for you?” The owls are the reason I call this business Barn Owl Welding. I got six more gates to weld for an order tomorrow. My help went home at five. I guess it’s probably midnight now. Even though I got the welding mask on, this is when the sparks dance hypnotically, seem closer than they are.
I got stuck in this shitwork after the bank took my farming operation in ’86. At my farm auction the best selling item was a gate I welded. Well, hell, I thought, might as well weld gates for a living since they took my farm. So, I did. And damn, the thing took off. Have more money than I know what to do with. Bought the kids a pool.

Sometimes, wealth can be a curse. Father McCall preaches it in church. When my wife was going to pick up a pool part in Ottumwa, she collided with a car, killed a child in the other car. Now she ghost floats around the new house we built. She’s probably opening the deluxe refrigerator door about now, the refrigerator glow illuminating her hand as she pulls out another carton of banana yogurt. She floats back to the living room, hovers over the couch, then settles on it, falls asleep to late night infomercials, the kind where old people use necklaces to call for help. “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up.”

Some people around town say I’m having an affair since my wife is a ghost. The owl hoots, “Who cooks for you?”

**Name: Dean, Clara  
Age: 16  
Sex: female**

Under this miserable sun, doing chores, I tell myself, at least Pa ain’t having an affair like Uncle Leroy. Still, my pa, Everette, leaves my ma and me from 7:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Says he doesn’t want to be a hog farmer anymore. Says Ma doesn’t want to sell the pigs, so she can just do the shitwork herself. Pa’s gonna lay ag tile for other farmers, other suckers. Nobody asks me.

So we do the monthly weaning of the pigs.

When we’re done lifting piglets from the farrowing crates and dodging all those angry sows, we’re covered in shit. We studied Ophelia in tenth-grade English. If Ophelia were a farm
girl, she’d have drowned in manure. You can’t escape it once you fall into it. The pigs just spew their shit all over, in your hair, on your shoes, sometimes projectile onto the lips. Here we are, while my Uncle Leroy is out philandering with another woman, and Pa flirts with tile.

Name: Dean, Everette Age: 42 Sex: male

Raising pigs today ain’t like it used to be. Nowadays, there’s the pork check-off, the weak markets, the Porcine Respiratory and Reproductive Syndrome of pigs, the confinement of pigs, the wretched sour stink of pigs, the bloated bodies of dead pigs, the greasy pigs. All for what? The guarantee of nothing except debt and more debt.

My cousin’s drainage tile company is a sure bet. He offered me a job when I showed interest. Here I spend eight hours a day driving the Gold Digger Tile plow to work other people’s fields, and I get paid $80 each day. Maggie, my wife, she’s mad. She wants me to be on the farm. Stay on the farm. Keep the pigs.

She acts as if it’s my fault. It ain’t my fault. It is the fault of three men—Reagan, Butz, and Stockman. And, if I had my way, I’d run ’em down with the tile plow today, bury ’em, hope for a good long soaker rain to carry their decomposing bodies,’ their blood-nitrate sediment through the tile. Drain ’em to the stream, the English River, the Mississippi, all the way to the dead zone.

Today, I’m hot, and I look across the field where the tile is newly buried. I can’t help but think of scars on wrists. That’s how the unsettled dirt looks on the land. I remember Bob Musser, that poor, damned son of a bitch.
Name: Musser, Trudy       Age:  50       Sex: female

God. I must’ve looked like a farmyard bitch on a chain leash, my anxiety seething in fits.
One second, sleeping. Bark-biting air the next hot instant. Now I have almost a decade’s
perspective. Who wouldn’t have a breakdown after scrubbing their husband’s blood from the
bathroom tile grout, after losing the family farm you’ve lived on your whole life?

A few weeks after his death, I found myself widowed, a farm refugee living in town with
streetlights. I couldn’t sleep. I padded to the pantry, stared at the jars of preserves as if in a
trance. Bob loved canned tomatoes.

I started pulling at my chains. Moving. I found a spade in the basement. I dug a large hole
in the backyard. I was not going to do the shitwork anymore: the planting of tomatoes, the
growing of tomatoes, the picking of tomatoes, the washing and peeling of tomatoes, the washing
of the jars, the heating of the water, the boiling of the water, the canner, the lids, the seals, the
time, the funneling of hot tomato juice in the mason jar. I was done. I would buy the fifty-cent tin
can of Pace tomato sauce off the grocery store shelf. I had choice in this matter. I buried the
mason jars.

Name: Elsass, Paul       Age:  17       Sex: male

Yesterday, Trudy Musser served me a beer at the VFW. She knows she shouldn’t do that.
It’s illegal. But she knows I had a bad day, and she’s seen bad days too. She knows what those
are all about.

My parents both have shit jobs at the University as janitors during the day, so when my
little sister, Lucy, and I get home from school, we chore.
We were doing all the same shit we do every day—working up the newborn piglets. Lucy was gathering piglets from the sows so I could clip their teeth and tails. Sure, the sows can get a little pissy when you’re taking their babes, but it’s usually all posture. I hear a sow bark low and fast, so it almost sounds like a hiccup bark. But then there’s this high-pitch scream. I look up to see the sow has my little sister’s face clamped between its jaws. Lucy is screaming, and I’m cussing. I beat on the sow’s head. Shit, if it weren’t for me, she could’ve been one of those pig casualties—the type reported on the TV news in Iowa from time to time, the type where people pass out in a pig lot or suffer a heart attack and are suddenly reduced to pig feed—bone and hair ground to fragments by pigs’ busy mouths.

When I manage to beat the sow off her, Lucy rolls onto the ground holding her head. Teeth marks etched into her temples. Doctor thinks the marks may always be there, may turn to indented scars. A sow’s teeth are about as dull as can be. It’s like the shop teacher says, you better hope you get cut by a sharp tool rather than a dull one.
PART II. WEANING

“Today, as I sign the North American Free Trade Agreement into law and call for further progress on GATT, I believe we have found our footing. And I ask all of you to be steady, to recognize that there is no turning back from the world of today and tomorrow. We must face the challenges, embrace them with confidence, deal with the problems honestly and openly, and make this world work for all of us.” – President Bill Clinton, 1995
I have this feeling in my chest. It’s like there’s a baby piglet stuck up in there. Its hooves thrust off my ribs, scrape across my lungs. Its body spins faster and faster. Sometimes it feels as if it’s going to twirl itself up my esophagus, kick its legs against my throat, emerge from my mouth with a squeal.

I had this same feeling a few years ago in seventh grade. That’s when I went from elementary school to junior high, a fixed desk to a locker. I also got these vicious headaches, so I started taking Sudafed sinus medicine. Dousing the piglet with the thick, yellow fluid seemed to calm my chest, tame the headache. I stopped measuring the medicine with the plastic measuring cup, just drank it straight from the bottle. I had bottles heaped in the bottom of my junior high locker. I remember seeing the heap, really seeing the heap, for the first time as the halls flooded with people running to lockers. And I thought, That’s a heap. Somehow I got through the rest of junior high. Eventually, the piglet disappeared, the Sudafed too. But now, the piglet is back, kicking inside, just in time for me to be a junior at Prairie High School.

Today, Ma and I are weaning pigs. I make my way to my sister’s room. This summer, after her first year of college, Eloise got an internship with the city. Sometimes she comes home on the weekends. Sometimes she stays in her city apartment. She gets to wear office casual, type, and stay in air-conditioning. They give her eight dollars an hour for that. I shuffle through the flannels she wore during her grunge phase.

I need a pair of ratty jeans. I cannot wear my good jeans into the mess of the farrowing house. Those pigs, their shit, that’d be death to my good jeans. I find a really old pair of
stonewash tapered jeans and try to wiggle myself into them. My sister is taller and skinnier than me, but I make them work.

The smell of incense lingers in her room. Band posters are taped to the walls. Alice in Chains, Smashing Pumpkins, and Nirvana. The poster for Nirvana is a close-up of Kurt Cobain’s face, super-saturated in an orange-yellow light. My sister says this is the last frame in the music video for “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Music executives didn’t want the video to end that way. Who knows why? Probably some sort of economic corporate interest. But, Kurt, he insisted that’s how it ends. He was such a badass.

Downstairs Ma leans against the kitchen counter. She’s eating a banana. She’s gotten skinny. Super skinny. She runs a lot nowadays, and she doesn’t even own a pair of running shoes. We just find her out in the cornfield running in her work boots, even when it’s hot. I honestly don’t know if this is a good thing or a bad thing—her running. At the beginning, she said she was exercising to lose weight. I don’t know what she’s running for now. She keeps a daily list of everything she eats by the toilet in a spiral notebook. She looks at the banana she’s about to bite, then looks to me.

“Ready?” Ma asks.

“In a minute. I’ve gotta go.”

“Glad you found a pair of jeans that’ll work,” she says.

“Remember when I used to wean in shorts?” I ask.

“Yeah. You insisted it was too hot to wear pants sometimes.”

“My legs would just be covered in pig sh...” I almost say “shit,” but I catch myself. Ma doesn’t like me saying “shit” even though Pa uses the word like there’s no tomorrow.

“You were young. You didn’t care,” Ma says.
“I’ll meet you outside,” I say, starting to turn toward the bathroom.

“We’re doing this by ourselves,” she tries to say optimistically. “Girl power! We can do it!” I turn back toward her, and try to muster a smile, but all I can think of is the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls are too bubblegum for me. Ma is being all upbeat. I think it’s because she feels guilty there’s no one else to help her but me. The youngest always gets stuck with the ish.

I need to pee now or forever hold it. I’ll be sweat-soaked soon, unable to pull the tight pants back onto my body. On the toilet, I pick up Ma’s food list. July 18, 1999: banana. I wad the toilet paper and wipe. Blood smears the white paper brilliant red. Without fail, my period syncs with weaning every month. Women will sync to other women in a house. I wonder if I sync with the sows. Like they start having their cycles a month after giving birth to their piglets, and all those female hormones manipulate my hormones. There are a lot of hormones on a farm.

I wait for Ma outside the old red barn near the farrowing house. The red barn is a friend, a home base to the ever-growing barn cat population. It was one of the first buildings, along with the house, built on the property in the 1910s. It shelters me in a welcome shadow.

I pull my hair up into a tight ponytail. There’s no way I’m going to let my long hair mingle with the ish. The noon whistle sounds from the fire department in town. Town. Filled with clean people. I want to be there. I think of Sam Polk. Sam is a basketball player, a football player, a jock, and I think he’s cute. He’s cuter than the boy from 4-H who does like me. A few nights ago, the 4-H boy called me. Asked to take me on a date. Pa said it was okay, so I went, and at the end of the night, I let him put his hands up my shirt. When I think of it, I feel bad, dirty almost. I mean, there are plenty other girls who do way more with boys, but maybe it’s better with a boy like Sam Polk. A boy I really like.
There’s another boy in 4-H I like. His name is Paul Elsass. I don’t think he even knows I exist, though. He’s always winning grand champion with his market steers and heifers at the 4-H fair. I like watching him show.

Sam Polk and Paul Elsass. At least, I have romantic interests. There are some years it seems there’s no one to even consider dating. I’m mostly related to everyone. I bet I’ll have to go to prom with the foreign exchange student, just to make sure I’m not going with my cousin.

I have one of Pa’s old work-shirts on and canvas shoes that are a size too tight. I’d be mortified if Sam or Paul saw me now. I hope they wouldn’t recognize me. Usually I’m all done up, my hair, my makeup, my clothes inspired by the Delia’s catalog. I have a plan, though. If anyone comes by, I’m going to run into one of the nearby buildings until they leave.

I wish I were Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, even if it does mean I’ll vanish at age thirty-three over the coast of Martha’s Vineyard. What would it be like to be in an airplane, to float across the clouds into the sun? I’ve never been in an airplane, let alone an airplane piloted by John F. Kennedy Jr.

Last week, I made brownies and cookies in the kitchen and listened to Peter Jennings going on and on about their disappearance. It was a ninety-degree day. Pa was cranky I had the oven on, but there’s nothing better to do on the farm in July than bake and dream I’m Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy. Maybe they just disappeared on purpose. Like they bought their secrecy and privacy, and they’re just getting away from it all until JFK Jr. emerges a little grayer, decides he wants to run for president in the future—I don’t know—in 2016 or something.

I do know I probably won’t be president someday, but I will be something, and that’s why I am in every extracurricular at Prairie High School, except volleyball and cheerleading, but only because I’m in other things. Everyone knows a diverse resumé gets you ahead. And I must
get ahead if I am going to get into town. In my acceptance speeches for Lawyer of the Year, or winning the Pulitzer, I may credit the farm for a strong upbringing, but I won’t tell people of the stonewashed jeans, or the maggots, or the greasy pigs, or my parents, or how I mucked through ish up to my knees.

The John Deere tractor sounds like it’s grunting at first, and then turns over. The piglet stirs inside me. I gasp.

Ma drives down the slope next to the farrowing house on the John Deere with the hog trailer hitched. Slowly, she shifts into reverse and starts to align the trailer with the farrowing house door. I stand behind the trailer and try to mimic the motions she makes when helping Pa back up. Pa needs little help, but Ma is less confident. I hold my arms out wide trying to indicate how much farther she has to back up, while also pointing which direction she should turn the wheel. We give it three tries. All failed attempts. On the fourth, she’s frustrated, backs into the siding of the building. The smile she’s been using to encourage me turns into a baffled frown, and I’m hot. She finally gets the trailer close. Good enough. All I’ve done is will the trailer to align with the farrowing house door, and now, sweat trickles down my back.

“I got it, Clara!” Ma exclaims, suddenly self-conscious of the frown she let creep onto her face. She turns it to a smile. At least someone is thrilled to work with pigs. Again, I try to muster a smile for her.

Upstairs, where our bedrooms are, we have an unspoken family rule because of the way she mothers. Over protective. We keep bedroom doors open all the time. I never questioned it until I went to friends’ houses. My friends’ bedroom doors were shut, but in our farmhouse—open-door policy. It was nice when I was in grade school, always knowing Ma and Pa would hear me if someone wandered in off the interstate to kill me. But, it’s become a little awkward
now, especially with the way I want to rub my hands across the sculpted chests of boys like Sam Polk and Paul Elsass.

“A family who keeps their doors open trusts more,” Ma told my sister and me ever since we were young. “Plus, don’t you feel safer knowing we’re there?” She vows she’d never feel right snooping through our things even though our doors are open. I believe her. Ma worries about us, cares about us. Wants what’s best for us. I wonder if Kurt Cobain would be dead if his mother cared enough to keep bedroom doors open.

So, I feel guilty, looking at her arms that I could wrap my fingers around. A few weeks ago, I went into her room to grab a magazine that had a recipe I wanted to try. When I went to pick *Country Living* from the floor, I noticed two books under her bed. *How to Grow St. John’s Wort* and a book with a glowing sun on the cover titled *Coping: How to Kick Depression*. I left the room in a hurry.

I half-keep expecting Pa to come around the corner and back the trailer up perfectly. Or my sister to come out of the red barn and give me ish for wearing her old, stonewash jeans. “Fashionable,” she’d tease, but they’re not here. Maybe Pa’ll come later.

Ma and I enter the farrowing house. Ma looks at me. She puts her finger to her lips. Quiet. I get what she’s doing, and it is clever. It will only take one sow to notice our entrance into the building. It will bark. “Whoof!” And, like a dry prairie catching fire, the whole building will be chaos—barking sows, snouts lift-clattering metal feeders, piglets stirring and running and running and running, tapping hooves on slats in their little pens.

The quieter we are, the more peace we will have as we snatch the babies from the pens, put them in a cart, wheel them to the trailer, shoot them with the vaccine Ingelvac by syringe, heft them by back leg into the trailer that waits outside, start again in another pen. Repeat ninety-
nine more times. That’s not an exaggeration. We have two farrowing houses. Fifty-crates in each.

When we wean with Pa, he tears into the building on a mission. If my sister and I complain, look tired, or upset, he yells, “I used to do this work every day before I could barely walk. You girls are spoiled. You have it easy.” With Pa, we stir up the piglets and grab, grab, grab, grab. We are never quiet. “Come on, girls!” he yells to encourage us. “Let’s get them piggies!”

With Ma, we are quiet. We don’t talk like we used to. I don’t even know what she thinks about Carolyn and JFK Jr. I just watch her run and run and run in the fields.

Weaning usually means docking tails, clipping teeth with sharp pliers, and castrating the males, but Ma did it already. At least we don’t have to do that. As the last few cycles of piglets were born, hog markets kept crashing, and Pa started to cuss when he heard “p-i-g” mentioned. So, Ma got into the pens and stole the sleeping babes quietly from the sows. She clipped their teeth and tails, cooed to them, and made calculated slits to pull the nuts from the males. She tossed the warm purple-pink orbs to our farm dog, Bo. In the absence of Pa’s interest, she taught herself to do these things, and do them well. She takes pride in the herd, her tiny, calculated slits by castrating knife.

I think I could castrate too, if Ma needed. I grew up watching Pa castrate, casual as sipping coffee and reading the *Des Moines Register* on Sunday. I think the thing that’d get to me most would be pulling the last sinewy threads from the piglet. The part that follows the orb. I mean, that’s gotta hurt. And I’d wear earplugs. I’d be worried about my hearing, the way they squeal-scream so high-pitched when you’re yanking the manhood right out of ’em.
We make it through three pens before a piglet squeals that I’m lifting out of a pen, and it squeals and squeals bloody high-pitched murder. A sow barks. “Whoof!” And the whole building is up on their feet oinking and running and banging metal feeders with their snouts.

Ma shrugs her shoulders. We tried. Now it is an all-out war. Peace is out the window with the fresh air, and I can imagine it floating with Carolyn Bessett-Kennedy, over cities, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The melody of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” starts clanging through my head. *I feel stupid and contagious. Here we are now, entertain us.*

The sows are bitchy. Thirty days in confinement in July. Piglets squeal and root their needy snouts in their mother’s sagging teats. Ninety-degree exterior July heat. One-hundred-and-ten-degree interior heat. Pull their babes from them, and they gnash their dull teeth at my head.

I used to ride the school bus with Paul’s sister, Lucy Elsass. She was working around sows one day and got her temples chomped by the strong jaws of an angry one. She still has migraines eight years later, teeth mark dents on each temple. Can’t handle the slightest racket. I jump as a sow—“Whoof!”—chomps.

Ma sees me start. “I’ve got an idea,” she says.

Ma goes to the other side of the building and wheels around another cart. The outside aisle is narrow. Only room for one cart, so she positions her bird-thin body between the two carts. One has a scoop and pig feed in it. The other, the piglets. Ma feeds the sow to distract it, while I grab piglets. Back legs are the best way to get them. Nab, grunt, lift. Back in the day, when the piglets were healthy, we’d be pulling half my weight, fifty-pounders, out of the crates for weaning. I’d have to nab a back leg, pull, put both legs in each hand to control the heavy rascals. They’d jerk their back legs like jack-hammers, and I’d grit my teeth and hold on, because the harder you work, the faster the job will get done, or so Pa’d say.
Normally, the sows wouldn’t be in the pen with the piglets, but after this cycle, they won’t go back to the lots. There’s no reason to move them to the lot, when they can just be moved onto the semi, taken to the packing plant, and turned into a pork burger. Pa decided. We are selling the swine herd that’s been on the farm for twenty years.

This is why, last night, Ma slammed her bedroom door shut. I had never seen the bedroom door shut. Sobs echoed off the hardwood floors.

She yelled at Pa, “I don’t think I can handle a town job. I’ve never worked in town. Those women! They’re all catty. Don’t make me. I can’t wear heels and slacks every day. You couldn’t do that. I want to keep being a farmer. I want to keep the pigs.”

Pa yelled, “Stop thinking about what you want. We’ve barely made a dent in paying for this farm. We could lose it all if we don’t have a stable income soon. And start thinking about Clara and Eloise. Jesus. You’re out in those fields running yourself to death. You’ve got daughters to think about. Are you trying to kill yourself? Do I have to use what I learned from the extension office about farmer suicide awareness back in the ’80s?”

“That’s not fair, and you know it. I’d never leave my girls. We can make what we got work. We can keep the pigs and grow St. John’s Wort. I’ve been reading about it. There’s a market for it,” Ma pleaded.

And Pa snarled back, “I sure as fuck don’t want to keep working ninety-hours a week without a guarantee I’m going to make anything under this administration. NAFTA has fucked us up the ass. Packing plants have fucked us up the ass. Can’t keep pig disease down with all the corporate confinements in North Carolina. I’ll work and work for a solid, guaranteed ten dollars an hour if I have to. Tomorrow I’m taking a job with Kalona tiling, and you can’t stop me. Wean
the pigs. Just wean them on your own if you think you can do it. You can have the sick
motherfuckers. You can have ’em on your own.”

Pa left the room, slammed the door behind him. The door stayed closed all night.

I am sure Pa is right about one thing. PRRS is a sick mothertrucker. I don’t even know
what it stands for, but I do know it messes with the sows and birth. Causes the sows to absorb
their fetuses. It started when the big companies in North Carolina started putting piglets in

In our sheds, some sows only have a piglet or two at their sides. Most are stillborn.
Causes the piglets to lose their breath, weak lungs. PRRS transfers by air up to two miles. Think
of that! An illness spread that far on nothing but air. We aren’t even a mile from the interstate
where semis pass again and again full of pigs from other farms hauling them to the packing
plant.

I would never tell Ma, but weaning is easier with PRRS. I don’t have to lift as many
piglets. If the sow does manage to have babies, they’re runts. Fifteen pounds at most. I don’t like
having to lift the infected, dead bodies from the pens. In the heat, their bodies smell sour, bloat,
and decompose faster. When I go to pick them up, sometimes all I get is a leg. We are far from
the days of litters with thirteen healthy piglets at fifty-pounds each. Sweat floods down my neck,
down my back, down my legs. The top of my head is covered in cobwebs and pig dust.

The buildings are usually cleaned every three months. The pressure sprayer blasts away
dry and wet ish, aggressively cuts through cobwebs, blows away the dried maggot carcasses,
blasts at the rusting crates. It’s been four months since the building was washed. Ma is too tired
to wash, and Pa doesn’t care. It stinks.
By the tenth crate, we have a rhythm—that’s how my band teacher would put it. Ma pulls the cart around the pen so I can start picking up pigs to place inside. Ma feeds the sow, then climbs in the pen to help me trap, corner, and capture pigs by their legs. We hurl piglets up over the crates into the cart. When the last pig is placed in the cart from the pen, I jump over the pen bars to get to the next sow, pigs, and crate. The pigs piss and ish in shock at their capture. The pigs with diarrhea scours spray yellow, sometimes green, sometimes red and bloody ish.

Pointed hooves dig, grind, and bruise as they dart over my canvas shoes, crash off my thighs. Again and again in the heat, the lifting and bending and tossing repeats. The cart is heavy with pigs, pounds and pounds of flailing pig. In North Carolina, one confinement is ten-times the size of our family’s. I can’t imagine! But, I guess they don’t farrow to finish—the whole process like we do with sows, boars, and piglets. They might contract with Smithfield Pork, and just get weaner pigs from another farmer on contract, and raise the weaner pigs to market.

I use Pa’s shirt to wipe the slithering drops of sweat. I inevitably wipe plastered ish from the shirt to my face. My clothes are a mess of modern pig art—piss and scour and blood. The worst is the scent on my skin. My hands and arms will hold the smell of pig, even after showering. The odor lingers like garlic.

“Do you need a water break?” Ma asks.

I shake my head no, too tired to talk.

The pigs in the outdoor trailer pant loud as big dogs. No sweat glands, prone to sunburn—something they had never been directly exposed to until now.

Ma remarks on the sound of stress heaving from their bodies. “I suppose I should spray them down.”
She goes to find a hose to connect to the nearby hydrant. I sit in the shade, take in the breeze. Though humid, the outdoor air is fresh and welcome after the stale and putrid air of the farrowing house. Sitting is stupid. It will be harder to get up and move again, to finish off the last row in the farrowing house.

We work and work hours after the lunch whistle blows in town again. Pa still isn’t here. In the second farrowing house, Ma captures the very last pig from its mother. It is time to put the piglets in the nursery. I always consider the nursery the college dormitory for piglets. It’s the first time they’re away from their sows, their farrowing house home. They’ll meet new piglets. Share bedrooms. Figure out who they truly are.

I ride on the open trailer, as Ma pulls it by tractor, with the hundreds of piglets swarming and biting my feet—something I realize I’ll never feel again because we’ll never wean again. I know this because Ma and Pa don’t usually fight, unless it’s about something big. I know Pa will get his way. I slowly pass the farm’s features. There’s the big red barn, the farmhouse, the crab grass lawn, a piss elm, and irises.

It takes Ma several tries to back the trailer up to the nursery. When we finally get it close to perfect, more work. The hotter the pig, the less it wants to move off the trailer. We step over and sometimes onto the sea of panting pig and make it to the back of the trailer. We start quietly—pushing the pigs with our voices—but the pigs need more to get them moving. We get down on our knees in the ish-covered trailer bed and yell and slap their backs and moan at the pigs.

They aren’t moving. They refuse. My sweaty skin burns and tingles under the gnawing sun. We do this work, and do it without Pa. We do the job.
Half the pigs are in the nursery, and we break from pushing. Instead, we move inside the building and sort pigs by size. The biggest go in the front pen. The smallest to the back—less weight to carry all the way to the back. The pigs, in the company of new and different litters, fight ferociously, nibbling ears and biting foreign puckered asses. The smallest suffers the most. I try to guard them, swat the big douche-bags from the runts. I swat one hard, and it grunts and rolls.

“Take a break,” Ma says. “I need to use the bathroom.”

I separate a runt into a pigpen for the tiny. My world dizz-blurrs, like static on a TV, when I swing my head from looking down at the pen to the ish-stained walls. Maybe the trailer is cooler. Maybe fresh air will help. Ma hobbles toward the house.

“Ma!” I call out when she’s near the farmhouse door. I suddenly feel as if I’ll never see her again. If she were to leave me, I’d have so many questions left unanswered. With sudden urgency, I want to ask for answers. The questions flood me. Like, when did she learn to drive a tractor? And, when did she meet Pa? Are things so bad that when they ship the last of our family’s pigs off on that semi-trailer, will they say goodbye to their marriage too? Is she depressed? Could growing St. John’s Wort save the farm? Will she get an off-farm job like Eloise, and would that be so bad, working in the air-conditioning? Am I bad for letting a boy in my 4-H club run his hands, dirtied by horses, under my shirt last week? Am I awful for breathing heavily as he touched my body? And Carolyn. What about Carolyn? Is she really gone, or is she sipping a sweet, fruity drink on an island? If she’s dead and drowned, did she feel a piglet in her chest as she went underwater? Did JFK Jr. hold her hand as she sank?

Ma doesn’t hear me call to her. The screen door closes behind her. I don’t call out again.
I sit with the remaining pigs. The sea of piglets makes me consider crowd surfing. A few curious piglets venture toward my feet and begin to nibble and poke at me, as if in search of a nipple. At the end of the “Smells Like Teen Spirit” music video, extras sitting in high school bleachers form a chaotic mosh-pit. A few people begin to surf on the fingertips of the crowd. Kurt Cobain’s face radiates at the very end as if encased by sunlight.

I want to surf. I want to be carried elsewhere.

I lower my throbbing body, position myself on top of the pigs’ backs. I am transferred from pigs’ backs to pigs’ backs. I hear Kurt Cobain singing the lyrics to “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” but the tempo is slow, he is backed up by piano, and his singing voice turns breathy. He croons instead of shouts.

*Hello! Hello! Hello! How low?*

The piglets aren’t making us any money, but they are worth something to me. The sun beams into my chest. The sun is too bright, too overwhelming. I close my eyes.

*With the lights out, it’s less dangerous.*

Eyes closed, the piglet inside my chest is soothed. I float on the herd. Their backs carry me like a tide.
The sheep’s beady eyes glinted and glowed into the darkness of the September night. There were probably only twenty-five ewes with lambs by their sides staring at us from the dry lot, but I felt as though there could be a thousand sheep. Bulging, blinking eyes watched our moves, sized us up. They chewed their cud horizontal. Their eyes and those spindly stomping legs seem to exude anxious fear, even through the dark. Magnify this frenzied anxiety with their tendency to stay in mobs. It’s the sheep’s way.

You always see those sweet, pastel Easter sheep with bunnies during spring, but don’t let that Cadbury fluff fool you. I bet the sheep manipulated those bunnies, bullied those bunnies into liking them. Stomped them into submission. I say it’s all a big public relations game. Sheep. They don’t chew their food once. They chew it, swallow it, and regurgitate it, just to chew it all over again.

We had been sitting boulder still in Travis’ humid dorm room. It was the third week of classes, hot as fuck for an early September evening. It was Travis’ idea to go out to the sheep teaching farm. Or maybe it was mine. I don’t remember. We were into a dwindling twelve-pack of Busch Light. Travis put the two remaining cans of beer, piss-warm, in his backpack, and we boarded the late campus bus to the teaching farm.

Clara, my girlfriend back home, always said I was a contemplative drunk. Like I thought deep about things, and on the bus, I was thinking. It had been almost a month since I’d been back home to our farm, the longest I’d ever been away. When you rode the bus to the university’s
sheep farm, the bus took this route up a steep hill. I swear—it was the only significant hill this flat-ass county had. At home, we have this hill by our farm. It’s the highest hill in Buccan County. The bus, grunting up the hill made me think of home, of that hill. As the scenery blurred by in the dark, my stomach felt queasy.

It was nearing ten o’clock, the time my parents were usually watching the weather on the local news before turning into bed. Dad would be asleep on his La-Z-Boy, watching the news with his eyes closed—his special talent. Mom would be in a t-shirt and flannel pants, the dinner dishes washed and drying on the rack. She would look like the day beat the life right out of her.

Clara was off at the other state university closer to home, the one known for its hippies and liberal ways. Girls let their armpit hair grow at that university. As a going away gift, I gave Clara a pink fancy shaver, made her promise she’d keep things well manicured. Clara took her showers at night. Said it made her feel gross to go to bed with the day’s grit on her body. She probably had her long hair all wrapped up in a towel as she plucked her pajamas from her closet.

As the bus chugged through the night, Travis’ head bobbed down in sleep, then bolted upright awake. Travis was a ginger, a ginger farm kid, and I’d never met a stocky, ginger farm kid before. He had been a wrestler in high school. People around my area looked like me. My hair used to be towhead, but now it’s dark. Dark eyes. Short, but lean. Pa says it’s the French in us.

This is how Travis and I met. It was the second week of school. Some kid on our floor was complaining about driving home to the farm that weekend to help bale hay. Travis was behind the kid, rolling his eyes, mouthing “soft balls” and grabbing himself.
When the kid was out of sight, Travis said, “Can you believe that shit? Mommy and Daddy bought Stevey-baby a brand new truck to drive home to the whole fifteen acres his family owns just outside of town. I’d give my left nut to drive home weekends. His Ariat ‘work boots’ don’t even have any shit on ’em. His mom and dad both have town jobs. It’ll take ’em all of an hour to bale their acre. *Calls* himself a farm kid. *Wants* to be a full-time farmer. Sheeet. I’d want to be a full-time farmer too, if it meant baling an acre of hay twice a year.”

“Where ya from?” I asked.

“Round Sioux City. You?”

“Southeastern Iowa. Buccan County. Both my parents are CEOs for All Steel.”

“No.”

“Yeah. No,” I shook my head. “I’m just kidding. We have a measly three-hundred-acres, a few cow-calf pairs. Still paying off farms, and I’d give both nuts to go home on weekends. Well, maybe one-and-a-half. This place makes me itchy.”

“Fungus?”

“Probably. Syllabus itch. Barn itch. Ringworm.” I didn’t want to tell him our herd got ringworm real bad right before I left for college, and I was secretly battling a patch on my upper arm with jock itch cream I had tucked away in my desk.

That’s how we met.

According to Travis we were “the only real farm kids” on the floor, the only ones whose families farmed full-time, maybe took a few town jobs from time to time just to make due. We didn’t have parents who graduated college. We were the only ones who felt as if the tiny dorm
rooms were caving in on us, sucking the air right out of us. Maybe that’s why we got along so well.

Ma and Pa forced me to go to college, even though they didn’t know anything about it. The soft shoes on cement, lawns without a single dandelion, tiny desks with the tops that fold up—took me a bit to figure out how to work ’em—syllabus, indoors for hours, listening to the cicadas outside. All Mom and Dad knew was to stress how smart I was. They weren’t ready to have another income for me working full-time on the farm, and “You better get a degree to be safe.” I talked them into two years at the local community college. When I’d exhausted all my credits there, I got ripped up from the farm like Canada Thistle, just when the spring planting was about ready for harvest. Maybe this was best for me, but it sure didn’t feel like it.

At this hour, on our trek to the sheep farm, all the kids on the bus were dark-skinned except Travis and me. And, we were the only ones wearing work boots and jeans. The other kids seemed to have bags full of books, stuff to study. Study on a Friday night. I felt indecent about the alcohol fuming from my pores in their presence. They must be the international students. All the white American kids were out whooping-it-up, while these kids studied. I think this was the first time I’d ever been outnumbered by people of color.

The sheep teaching farm was one of the last stops. Bus diesel fumes still lingering, we jumped the large pasture fence and made our way to the dry lot pens where the sheep huddled. We climbed the red pipe gate. Muscle memory. I still knew how to thrust my body over the gates in one fluid motion. That was the scariest thing about being away at college. The fact that you might forget how to work. How your muscles work. Getting physically weak, mentally stuck up.
Travis sat down, resting his back on the gate. I sat beside him as the beady sheep eyes glared out from the darkness.

“Here,” Travis said, pulling a small bottle of whiskey from his backpack.

“You been holding out on me all night? Nah.” I pushed the bottle away. “I’m kidding. That stuff ’ll fuck you up.” My uncle told me us Elsasses don’t do hard liquor. Tears us up. We’re beer people.”

“Just take a swig, you pussy.” I took a tiny sip, trying to make it look like a gulp.

Maybe Travis’ people were only good with one beer. He was moving like a cow-hocked bull on tranquilizers when we got off the bus.

He didn’t look it tonight, but Travis was smart. Because he took college courses in high school, he was able to skip into my upper bio class. Bastard could remember definitions and numbers without studying. He wanted to take over his family’s farm too, but there was no place for him either. He didn’t seem to mind. Aced all his tests. The way he talked, though, his family was as scared of livestock disease, debt, and foreclosure as mine. The ’80s. Our parents can’t forget the ’80s.

“Well, Paul, we are taking this little field trip to explore mutton,” Travis announced in an authoritative voice. He gestured his arm outward toward the herd. “Mut-ton. Bust-ing.” The sheep stood snug against the opposite gate. In the dark it was hard to tell where one wool orb ended and another began. Their spindly legs seemed to belong to the whole, one big woolly centipede.

“I’ll leave the busting to you,” I said.

“Nah, nah, nah. They’re gentle little animals,” Travis said.
“You’re ignorant if you believe that shit. We used to have ’em. The ram had the temperament of a rabid tiger. Used to put his head down and go after my mom in the pastures. And during feeding time, they’d ’bout tackle her off her damned legs when she carried buckets of corn to their troughs.”

“Still got ’em?” Travis smiled.

“Yeah, she still has her legs.”

“No. Fuck-twad, the sheep.”

“Dad made Mom sell ’em when I was young. Said they weren’t making money. I think he was scared of the ram.”

“You scared?” Travis asked.

“Of sheep?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Want to mutton bust then?”

“Fuck no. That stuff is for little fifty-pound kids with helmets and vest armor at family rodeos.”

Travis got up and took a drunken curved route to the sheep herd. He yelled back, “These look like Columbia breed, Paul. Their faces are ugly. That’s how I know. Kind of like, what’s her name? Clara. Yeah. Ugly like your girl Clara.”

“You don’t even know what Clara looks like.”

“Yeah, well, if she’s dating you, then she’s not easy on the eyes.”
I watched as Travis moved into the herd. He patted the woolly backs and then grabbed wool with his fist and tried to hoist his leg over the animal. The sheep moved before he could get his legs situated. Travis rolled onto the ground.

I yelled, “My little cousins could do better than that. You know you have to ride for eight seconds, right?”

“Hell of a ride. I’ll get it. I’ll get it,” Travis promised. I walked over to Travis’ sprawled body and gave him his hand. For the first time in a long time, I smelled animal. It smelled much better than campus, the lawn chemicals, the lemon cleaners. It smelled of home, earthy, vegetation chewed and excreted to black beads.

Travis moved back into the herd. The herd, now skeptical of Travis’ motives, started to move toward me. That’s how it was. Herd mentality. If a herd feels as though it’s pursued by prey, it’ll move toward the next safest thing. Maybe it was the cool night. Maybe it was the moon. Maybe it was what that professor talked of in bio—fear pheromone molecules. The sheep moved like a frenzied mob. Before I knew it, I was surrounded. A sheep stuck its head between my legs. I shoved its head back outta my junk. Travis was prey. He pointed to a panicked sheep that had lost the herd. He zeroed in on its disadvantage. Travis started chasing the stray, got his hand around its woolly neck, and mounted.

Then, through no motion of my own, I watched the dark horizon blur into starry sky. What I hadn’t made sense of yet was that the sheep behind me drove its head between my legs again, with more force. My feet left the ground. For a while I was floating on air, off balance, twisting onto my left shoulder. When I hit ground, my ear flew to my shoulder and I heard a cracking pop, like hitting a fresh, fleshy walnut with a hammer. Stunned. I tried to move my toes,
fearful I had broken my neck. I watched the stars zoom in and out of focus. Tinnitus buzzed in my ears. I sat up dizzy, amazed and lucky I could move at all.

Travis yelled, “Whoa. Bud. I thought you were leavin’ the bustin’ to me. That mutton laid you flat!”

“Yeah. I heard something. Like a pop. Think I dislocated my shoulder.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll be good.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just let me sit.” I moved away from those bastard sheep and sat while Travis, worn out, sat next to me. I was the stars scattered across the dark sky, atomized, pulsing hot pain. Sprawled on my back, the street light in the distance started to fade and brighten. I kept telling myself to move toward the bus stop, but every time I started to think about getting up, the light waved and blurred. And there was a buzz in my ear. A sustained hum the pitch of a mosquito. I could handle anything physical. Prided myself on it. But the blurred vision, the buzzing, the pain.

Travis was falling asleep. I had to get moving toward a bus. I slapped at Travis with my good arm, and we walked.

“Motha’ fucka,” I’d shout as pain shot up my arm and landed as a spasm in my shoulder. Travis found this amusing. Giggled even.

“Student hell,” Travis muttered to the grass.

“What?”

“Student health. Orientation. Learned about it. Open at eight.”
God forbid. The nasty gates and the grassy lawn that stood between us and the bus stop seemed as immense as I imagined an ocean. I couldn’t swim. I was taking steps like my grandfather with his walker. “Motha’ fucka” blurted from my mouth each time my muscles spasmed. We finally got to the bus stop. The route had stopped running for the night.

“Open your bag,” I said to Travis through clenched teeth. I tried to sit, but each time I bent forward, even a hair, the damn pain bolted like a spooked gelding, all twelve-hundred pounds of it throbbing hooves over bone.

“Give me the whiskey.”

Travis unscrewed the cap, gave me the bottle, and I chugged as if I was suckling sweet colostrum for the strength of my antibodies.

Lanolin stained jeans. Broken shoulder. Humerus. Vicodin every three hours. Bright side—I went home to the farm to recuperate for a week. Though I don’t remember much, Clara came to see me, and assured me she was a fine landscaper. I told her she smelled like patchouli. She kissed me, told me the guys at school were all douche bro punks from Chicago. I fell in and out of anxious dreams trying to find my next classroom, forgetting about exams proctored by professor sheep, looking toward my feet that wore soft tennis shoes, not my boots.

Mom dropped me off at the dorm at the end of the week. I went to Travis’ room. His roommate, a lanky bro-type with acne, told me Travis left. I asked when he’d be back, and he said, he left-left. Like his parents brought the truck and livestock trailer in the middle of the night and loaded him out. He hated college. Hated not being on the farm. Said he was gonna work for an uncle who had a feed business.
Though it hurt to move, I felt like running after Mom’s Buick that was probably headed south, sixty-five-miles-per-hour, on I-35 by now. I had to get out of the tower. Rooms on top of rooms on top of rooms. We were all penned in.

I walked. I walked until the campus was far away. I ended up at the teaching farm. I retraced steps to the sheep pen. Lambs were balling. Must’ve been fresh weaned.

When I got closer, I realized, I was right. That wail was the wail of weaned lambs. The sheep were right next to their lambs, but in separate pens. It seemed torturous to be so close, yet not be able to touch. The wails grew louder and louder. Some sheep were going hoarse.

I couldn’t help it. I went and opened the lamb gate, and then I went and opened the sheep gate, and I felt woozy from the exertion. My arm throbbed. I sat and watched the mothers reunite with the lambs, take nipples in their mouths, and I took a deep breath of manure and earth, a deep breath of home.
The hospice provider declared death was near. The recording of the woman reciting the rosary had been on repeat for three hours. “Blessed art thou among women. . . .” From 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., the September sky turned dark and hardened into obsidian. “Our kingdom come, thy will be done. . . .”

Vernon Gerot’s living room was the dying room. Vernon did not want to die bunched up on a hospice bed in the living room like his wife Rosemary, and he certainly didn’t want to march to heaven under the guidance of a squat man like John, the hospice worker. John was nice enough, but if Vernon needed a hospice worker, he was going to tell his daughter, Maggie, he wanted it to be a woman.

Vernon reached across his La-Z-Boy and clutched Rosemary’s hand resting on the bar of the hospice bed. “Her breath is growing shallow,” John declared. Vernon thought these declarations too enthusiastic but blamed it on John’s nerves, and to be honest, Vernon was nervous too. He had never lost a wife before. “A few seconds, she’s got maybe thirty-seconds,” John announced. “Remember, she can still hear you. It’s the last sense we lose as we die.”

Vernon wished he could have whispered words about their favorite place, about the bird-shaped mound in the timber, how he loved watching her fall to her knees at its allure. But that was only between them. Vernon looked at Maggie who held Rosemary’s other hand, and then to his granddaughters, Eloise and Clara. He was trying to work up his courage to be openly affectionate as Eloise, Clara, and Maggie professed their love. He wanted to say, “Goodbye Ma. I love ya, Ma. Goodbye.” That’s what she was. A ma. Always.
Always, so small. She sacrificed the larger pieces of butchered chickens for her family during hard times, insisting the neck alone filled her. Now it seemed she was a chicken neck in the bed, and the bed was swallowing her up. The cancer had made sure of it.

“It’s okay, Ma, you can go,” Maggie whimpered. She appeared as Rosemary, years younger with flesh on her bones. Maggie had Rosemary’s dark black hair and dark eyes. French. Alsatian.

John lifted his head, looked into Vernon’s eyes. “She’s home now.”

Sixty-eight years of marriage. Three kids. Six grandkids. Church on Sunday. Five minutes early to be seated at the front pew. Their new home built just for her to nest and store the hundreds of books she read in the evenings.

“Well,” Maggie said, laying her ma’s hand on the gaunt body. Maggie wiped the tears from her face. “I’ll call the others.” She had always been the pragmatic one.

Robert, Sherry, and the priest. Maggie walked away, cell phone in hand. Surreal words floated from the bedroom. “Ma’s passed.”

Robert and Sherry, Vernon’s son and daughter, lived a few miles away. Farm communities. No one got far. Farm kids married farm kids who rooted to the land for generations and became elderly only to repeat the cycle. Maggie’s husband, Everette, rented and farmed Vernon’s ground.

Eloise and Clara had grown into little Maggies. College-aged, they sat on the couch across from Vernon’s La-Z-Boy in silence. The body of their dead grandmother grew more rigid. Could they feel it? They must. They were farm kids. They knew what a dead animal’s body does. Grows rigid. Bloats. Stinks. Tears fell from their cheeks. Though these kids dressed in overly casual sweatpants and sweatshirts, and glorified liberal conspiracy theorists like Michael Moore,
they were good. During peach harvest, Clara and Eloise would bake him pies and put them in his truck so Rosemary wouldn’t find out. (Rosemary was vigilant about his diabetes.) Vernon would hike the farmland rent on Everette and Maggie if ol’ Gramps weren’t so sweet on his granddaughters. He didn’t like his son Robert’s kids. They had attitude problems, especially little Shelly, who liked to say, “Grandpa, take a pushpin and press it to your belly. You’ll deflate!”

And, then Vernon saw the damned fly. No. Two flies, buzzing around the body. Flies festered on dead bodies. One buzzed around Rosemary’s face. Another landed on her arm, crawled to her lips. “Eloise, honey, grab that swatter.” Vernon motioned to the magazine stand next to the couch. Eloise pulled a green Pioneer Seed flyswatter from the stand and handed it to her grandfather.

Each time a fly landed below Rosemary’s bosom, Vernon tried to slap the life out of the winged creatures. She had barely stopped breathing, for goodness sakes. His efforts were futile. His granddaughters stood, in open-mouthed dismay, while Maggie shouted, “Dad, what in the hell are you doing!” John wrestled the flyswatter from his hand.

Maggie and Everette drove Vernon home after the funeral. Canada goose flew into the purpling horizon as Everette drove the Buick up the lane. Vernon used to call the birds Canadian Geese, but a county biologist stopped that with a scold.

“The species name is Canada goose, Vernon.”

When Vernon was a boy, the geese were nearly extinct in Iowa. By federal mandate sixteen Canada goose, penned for production, were used for repopulation. Rosemary told Vernon that. She read it in *Iowa Magazine*. Now it seemed as though endless flocks honked and flapped their way through Iowa sky every fall and spring. They had such purpose, places to be.
“We’ll get you inside, Pa. Maybe have some coffee?” Maggie offered.

“I’m fine. You two go home.” Vernon slammed the car door. He looked skyward. The Canada goose faded away on the horizon.

Maggie called out the window, “I’ll be by in the morning.”

Cats surrounded Vernon’s feet as he climbed the porch steps. They caressed their bodies against his gray funeral pants, meowing.

Facing the dark, empty house he regretted telling Maggie to leave for a minute. Sixty-eight years of marriage, and he’d rarely been alone. He couldn’t wait, though, to take his pants off. To be in the house, and just take the damned stifling pants off and walk around without pants on. Facing the empty house, he unzipped his pants right then and there. He left them in a bundle by the door.

He went to his bedroom. He didn’t want to be in bed without Rosemary. He went to the living room, sat on his La-Z-Boy, but that was no good. All he could see were the hospice bed’s leg indentations in the cream carpet.

Taking the long cushion from the couch, he dragged it into the hallway. There were few memories in the hallway. Just passing by. That’s what people did in hallways. He took off the rest of his Western funeral wear, struggled with the socks. He felt free, finally stripped to his underwear. He lowered onto the cushion. When he closed his eyes, all he could see was the Iowa dirt being put on Rosemary’s grave, how it would take time for the dirt to settle, and then more dirt would be added, and he thought of his secret mound.

The bird-shaped dirt mound was along the English River on the two-hundred acres his pa owned and passed on to him. The mound was to be kept a secret—only he, Rosemary, and some archaeologists knew. The archaeologists said once people found out, the burial site risked being
vandalized. Vernon thought of the ancient man under the earth; the archaeologist said it was a man anyway. Something to do with the shape—a bird—meant it was a man. It was odd, wasn’t it? The man was buried with care so he would be remembered, but the only person who remembered him now was Vernon. He felt moved to say something, if only in his head, a kind of telepathic communication that he’d been having with the man for decades now. He called him Ancient Joe.

“Ancient Joe, did your old lady kick the bucket before you?” he asked. “Ancient Joe, say ‘hi’ to Rosemary up there, will ya?” He stopped. Something seemed forced about this.

Vernon turned onto his grumbling stomach. “Here we are,” he said into the emptiness of the house. He felt unsettled. He climbed from the cushion and pounded down each basement step, clutching the railing. As he neared the bottom, the temperature cooled, and he wished he at least wore long johns. The large chest freezer hummed in the corner of the basement. He lifted the freezer door. When the door creaked, he instinctually winced, but then remembered. No one was there to catch him. The freezer light illuminated the cookies, the pies, the desserts. Rosemary loved to bake, and she stockpiled for visitors, but for diabetic Vernon she parceled out each grain of sugar. A quarter-teaspoon was a luxury.

He grabbed a Zip-Lock full of monster cookies from the freezer. He opened the seal, snatched a cookie, and bit into the frozen disc using his back molars. The peanut butter and M&Ms, frozen at first, warmed and melted in his mouth. Then he got the idea to dip the cookies into the gallon of ice cream reserved for visitors: vanilla Blue Bunny Ice Cream. Made in Iowa. A quarter of the ice cream remained. He dipped his large hands into the bucket. A trail of thawed ice cream crept into the crevices of his wrinkled hands. He licked the oozing drip, licked the ice
cream from his palm. Another scoop of his hand, he retrieved more ice cream. As it thawed in the bucket, he could barely keep up with the sticky liquid running down his wrists to his elbows.

He could see it in their eyes at the funeral. Sorrow. Sorrow that it was Rosemary and not him. The tenth cookie. The eleventh. He chewed like a cow turned to spring grass. He was the culprit. He chain-smoked cigars in the tiny kitchen where she worked over a hot stove. Secondary smoke. Lung cancer. And here he was, the one all bloated, a diabetes-filled abscess— but still alive, goddammit!—while she looked bright and healthy to her last days.

Tired of standing, feeling the weight of his questions, he slid down alongside the freezer. Cookie-flecked ice cream had dripped and stuck to his chest hair. Why couldn’t he just eat his weight in cookies and ice cream and be done with it? Rosemary wasn’t there to stop him. The house was empty. It didn’t judge. It would be a glorious way to go. He chomped and chomped through the frozen cookies, dragging them through the ice cream that had become exhilaratingly pliable. Too soon, he was left with a bag of crumbs and even those he poured into his mouth. The stragglers clung to his white chest hairs, which he plucked and placed on his tongue. He lifted the ice cream bucket and let the sweet cream flood into his mouth. He sighed, looked at his feet. His toenails were getting longer. She had always cut his toenails for him. Who would cut his toenails now?

The first month, they doted on him. Sherry and Maggie took turns making him breakfast. He would drive to one of their houses at noon and have lunch, then Sherry or Maggie would pack enough for him to microwave for dinner. The second night was a disaster because Maggie made the mistake of putting the leftovers in an aluminum pan. How was he to know that microwaves and aluminum did not mix? It was a hell of a display, but gave him an epiphany.
Why was he eating leftover crap? There was angel food cake that he had thawed from the freezer.

That night, he started putting the leftovers down the disposal and eating from the cache in the freezer.

Sherry and Maggie also divided the house cleaning. Every weekend one of them came over to wash his clothes, clean the toilets, burn the trash, vacuum, sweep, while he watched reruns of *Hee Haw*.

“Dad?”

“Yeah,” he called back to Sherry from his La-Z-Boy. Years had taught him what to expect from that tone—high-pitched, sweet nagging. Where had they learned that tone? From Rosemary? Weight-gain, Dad? Is he looking puffier than usual, Maggie? Is he taking his diabetes medication?

“Maggie and I are wondering if you’d be okay doing breakfast on your own. Bought you a few cereals to try. All you’ll have to do is pour some milk into a bowl and add the—”

“I know how to fix cereal.”

“It’s just you’re used to your hot breakfast.”

He turned up the TV volume. *Hee Haw*’s Buck and Roy were gearing up for picking and grinning on the Rural Farm Network. The Rural Farm Network was one of the fancy cable TV stations he loved. But cold cereal? Good God. What next? An old-farts’ home? They already took away his keys to the tractors.

Between picking their instruments, Roy said to Buck, “I heard you and your wife had a fight last night. Liquor, I suppose?”

Buck said, “Well, not this time. She licked me.” Laughter. Usually Vernon would smile.
“And Dad?”

“What?” he said, not turning to face her.

“If you could feed the cats like Ma did, that’d be great. Food’s in the blue storage container in the garage. Two scoops keeps ’em full for the day. It’ll be good for you to have something to do.”

Jesus Christ! Rosemary fed those things? She never let him see her do it. Knew he wouldn’t put up with paying to feed the dumb bastards. He’d grown up at the tail end of the Depression, after all. No wonder the vermin were always under his feet. Mice, moles, rabbits—isn’t that what a cat was supposed to eat? He’d feed those cats. Feed ’em to the coyotes.

The instant Sherry left, Vernon shuffled to the freezer. A few pies, a few more angel food cakes, three trays of brownies, and two bags of Pride of Iowa cookies: his breakfast. If they weren’t going to feed him, Rosemary would. And when he ran out? Running out of Rosemary.

Vernon used his tongue to dislodge blackberry seeds between the few front teeth he had left. He stepped into the crisp October morning the next day. The cats howled, but he would teach them a survival lesson. Stoop down to their level, reach into that container, put his money on the ground so they could eat it and shit it back out in his yard? No.

Vernon drove toward the river bottom ground where Everette harvested corn. Vernon once fit the horses for his grandfather and father during fieldwork, drove one of the first combines in the county, and now, he had to sit in his pick-up watching Everette drive the Deere combine up and down the field. Everette gave Vernon a hearty wave. Vernon flipped him the bird, then quickly turned the bird into a wave. Everette took two glances out the combine window, veered from the row and missed six stalks.
Vernon was banned from machinery two years ago. Pulling a grain wagon into the town elevator, he underestimated the width of the bridge and an oncoming school bus. It was a mess. Lucky for him no one was hurt, just stuck like two fat pigs trying to force themselves through a one-pig chute. My god, did the community roar over that one. He got that talk all men his age in farming got at some point from their children. Safety. Worried about you. Concern. No more driving large equipment, not even the damn tractors. At least he had his truck. For now. Vernon patted the dashboard of the old Chevy.

Everette harvested more rows of corn. Vernon drove down the dirt path leading to the mound. He got as close as he could to its location by truck. His legs were not as steady as they used to be; even just a month ago, at the funeral, he could walk with more gusto.

Vernon discovered the burial mound as a child when he climbed to the highest bluff. Atop the bluff, he noticed the slight rise of land, a formation through the trees that had yet to leaf out. He returned to his father who was working the field. Out of breath he announced, “There’s something in there. Something in the woods on the bluff.” Vernon’s father said he was just seeing things. The next morning Vernon woke before chores, before sun-up. He half-ran, half-walked to the bluff carrying a trowel. He dug a foot deep and came across the blackest stones.

“Think I didn’t find something in those woods yesterday?” he said to his father who sat eating at the breakfast table. Vernon’s father eyed him, dropped a half-bitten sausage to his plate, and smacked his face. Vernon tried to hold back tears from the sting. His father’s hands were big and rough and calloused. Vernon withdrew a shiny black rock from his pocket. Vernon’s father took the rock from his palm.

“Found this there. Found it in that mound I saw.”
“Don’t you have cows to milk?”

As a child, he thought the mound was maybe a dream, but every time he visited, it still loomed from the earth. When his father died, Vernon’s own plow started encroaching on the timber ground. He didn’t want to disturb something not meant to be disturbed. Vernon called up the Iowa Geological Survey. The survey sent out a man in bib overalls with hair too long. The hippie looked at the mound and said, “Hmm. Hmm. Those rocks you collected as a child, that’s most likely Rocky Mountain obsidian. Tells us the man lived in an extensive trade route. Can you keep this a secret?”

Vernon didn’t tell the man he’d already kept it a secret for years, and Rosemary was in on it.

Vernon met Rosemary Niland at St. Mary’s Catholic High School. Her dark French eyes and slick black hair made Vernon’s sturdy farming legs weak as a newborn calf’s. Her nose was big for her face, but he could overlook a physical imperfection. Besides, he had learned she was a good cook, could garden, and put up chickens. Vernon could not do—would not do—those things. Rosemary’s mother died at childbirth, so Rosemary had to look after her father at a young age. She was smart, too, top of her class. She always had her nose hidden in a book, which made her more attractive to Vernon, maybe even off-limits. Really, it was a pity about that nose, but perhaps the nose would keep the other boys at bay. It was her one fault, and he had many.

Archaeology was the title of the book she held. It dawned on him. Archaeology.

She was a pious Catholic. She said, “It’d be wrong of me to walk with a boy alone.” But when he mentioned the secret burial mound, she relented. On the walk she barely spoke, except to acknowledge the blackberry vines on the fencerow.
“Does your mother pick berries for pies?”

“No.”

Silence gulfed between them. Perhaps he should’ve said his mother did pick the berries.

As they approached the earth, rising like bread dough from the landscape, it all became okay. Rosemary slowed and began to tiptoe nearer and nearer as if the mound could suck her in like quicksand. She dropped to her knees and crawled closer, extended her arm, and stroked, then patted the mound of grass with her delicate hands.

“Do you know what this is?”

Vernon shook his head no.

In her satchel, she retrieved the green archaeology book, stood, and turned the pages with frenzy. “Look. Here,” she said pointing to a page. Vernon leaned over her shoulder. Her neck smelled of biscuits. The page showed a mound shaped as a bird in Toolesboro, Iowa. Hopewellian. 100 BC.

“This is amazing!” Rosemary dropped back onto her knees. She put both palms on the belly of the bird as if to feel it breathe.

“I haven’t shown this to anyone. Well. I told my father about it, but he thought I was crazy,” Vernon spoke. “I’d like to just keep it between you and me.”

“You might want to verify it, with a man from the county survey, but I’m pretty certain you have something here.” She sat on the bird’s belly. She closed her eyes. Minutes passed. Vernon watched her. When she opened her eyes, she asked, “Can I come back? Can I visit? Look at it every now and then?” She rushed her words.

Vernon blushed, “I’d like it if you did. I’d like it if you’d let me know when you want to see it, and I’d like to go with you. There are some mean coyotes around here. I wouldn’t want
you to get hurt. You can even pick the blackberries come July.” Vernon looked to his feet then back to the mound. “You know, I dug into it, right there, when I was a boy, and I found deep, dark polished stones.”

The next day he took one of the black stones and placed it in Rosemary’s lunch pale. At lunchtime, she discovered the rock and smiled at him across the room. In July she baked him a blackberry pie that oozed the deepest purple across his white plate. That’s all it took. When she graduated from Catholic school two years later, they were wed, and she made his meals the next sixty-eight years.

On the fumes of memories, Vernon slowed the already slow moving truck, parked, and stepped into the brisk October air. At Sherry and Maggie’s insistence, Vernon had replaced his slick-soled cowboy boots with Velcro tennis shoes years ago. He wouldn’t admit it, but he was grateful for the shoes as he dodged tree trunks and nearly tripped over twigs in pursuit of the mound. Heaving, he found Ancient Joe right where he’d found him years ago. He sat atop the bird’s curved body.

He turned his body so he was lying on his stomach. Funny how the bird was the length of his own body. The earth cradled him as nothing had since Rosemary. And then he heard, “Vernon? Vernon?”

Vernon turned his head from the ground and looked up at the leafless elm branches. There was no one around.

“Vernon?” the voice called. It was a husky voice. “Care to share a cookie with me? They’re meant to share.”
Vernon was not delusional. He knew this much. He rolled off the mound and managed to get to his feet. His mouth was a dry cornhusk. He had to get away. He wished he could run, but he hadn’t been able to do that for years.

He tried to forget the voice at the mound, let the days crawl into late November. Pretended it never happened.

A few days before Thanksgiving, sitting in his recliner, just as he was to indulge in a slice of angel food cake, Maggie barged onto the house porch. He tucked the slice under his thigh, grabbed the *Iowa Farmer Today* from the lamp stand and reclined his chair.

“My gosh!” she shouted, gusting inside with the cold air. “Thought Sherry was going to have you feed cats. It’s like fending off paparazzi. Have you been feeding them?”

“I grew up in the Depression. I don’t feed no cats.”

“Ma grew up in the Depression. She fed cats. We live in different times. Some pet-activist will call the local news, and you’ll be featured for animal cruelty.”

Vernon crinkled his nose. “Ah, no I won’t. I’ll be the people’s activist. People go hungry in this world, I’ll tell ’em. They’re farm cats. They should go find mice and stuff. What was it the guy with the wheel, Bob Barker, used to say?”

“What in the world are you talking about now, Pa?”

“Bob Barker. With the wheel.”

“You’re not making any sense,.”

“On that show. That goddamned show.”

“Are you talking about *The Price is Right*?”

“Yeah, what does he say about pets?”
“Calm down.”

He felt confused. “Who’s upset?” And the look on her face made him worried for the first time, that combination of pity and alarm that he’d seen on her face after the incident with the bridge and the school bus. A look that said, Pa’s losing his marbles.

“I guess I’ll have to send one of the girls to feed the cats?” Maggie asked rhetorically.

“No. I’ll do it. Just don’t expect me to buy food. You know, people starve in this country.” He turned the page of the Iowa Farmer Today with a snap. “Supply and Demand of US Soybeans” an article was prominently titled.

Maggie left him in his recliner and started running the vacuum in the bedroom. Ready to leave two hours later, she kissed his forehead. A tenderness he didn’t trust. “Anything I can get you before I leave?”

“Water,” he said. He’d been so thirsty lately. He wondered if he should tell her, tell her that he hadn’t pissed in a day or so, that his toenails were very long. No. He didn’t need to give her any more evidence.

Maggie came back into the living room and set the glass of water on the end table.

“Feed the cats,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah.”

When the Buick was out of the lane, he dislodged the warm cake smashed under his thigh. Brown recliner felt and his own gray hair stuck to the cake.

He rolled the cake into five balls and hoisted himself out of his recliner clutching the orbs. He opened the door to the garage and lobbed four balls to the cats. They hungrily guarded each white ball, claws extended. The fifth and final orb rested in his palm. Supply and demand. He chuckled under his breath. Using all his arm strength, he threw the last piece at a cat.
Admiring the power his old arm still had, his feet teetered on the threshold. He tried to right his
himself, but it was too late.

He reached for the railing, the Chevy truck in front of him, anything to grasp. His fingers
only found air. His body rolled over the threshold, down the garage steps. His cheek met the
concrete floor. His whole body followed. He sprawled on his back, wheezing. Maybe he yelped,
because the cats bolted in urgency. He watched what was to ensue from the ground. A gray cat
tried jumping from the truck bed to the garage rafters. In its scramble to catch the rafter, it
teetered on a storm window balanced between two rafters. With the cat’s weight on one end, the
storm window flipped upward. The frame of the window began its descent. It struck the
windshield of the Chevy. An impressive spider-web pattern cracked across the driver’s side.

“Fucking cats,” Vernon muttered. He closed his eyes, thought of Ancient Joe safe under
the earth.

After marrying Vernon, Rosemary took license to visit the mound when she wanted.
Shortly before they conceived their firstborn, he would find her basking on the mound. His
favorite time to find her there was in July, when the blackberries were ripe. Books would be
scattered around her body, her feet bare, freshly plucked-from-the-vine blackberries in a bowl by
her side. Often, he waited whole beats before he let her know he was there. He watched her.
Nose in book, she plucked a fat blackberry from the bowl and rolled it in her mouth. Amid
cookbooks and history and biology books, she always brought a few to the mound she thought
he’d enjoy: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Animal Husbandry*, *Random Harvest*.

Once she noticed him, spying her from behind a bush, she’d say, surprised, “You found
me!”
He always wondered if she knew he was there and was just feigning surprise. “Yes. And good thing I did find you, too. I wrestled a pack of coyotes just to get here.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“I brought books for you.” He looked through the scattered assortment and picked up *Female and Male Anatomy*. He shook it in Rosemary’s face, and she half-blushed. “I’m a married woman now. I have to know about these things.” She grabbed the book.

“Oh, really?” he asked.

“Yes, really. Did you know that if a man doesn’t have regular… it will shrink? Something about lack of oxygen.”

“Well, I think this is the book we ought to read. For the both of us.”

Rosemary snuggled into Vernon’s arms. She opened the anatomy book. Each system—skeletal, digestive, circulatory—was illustrated on a transparent page that overlapped to make a whole human being.

“Close your eyes,” Vernon said. She settled even more into his arms and closed her eyes. He drew her fingers across the illustration and said, stop when you want. She stopped on the human eye. Vernon placed a blackberry on his eyelid. “Okay, you have to eat it off. No hands.” Her sweet breath exhaled on his neck and through his eyelashes. Goosebumps rose on his skin. She plucked the blackberry with her tongue.

“Your turn,” she said. Vernon’s finger stopped on her neck. He leaned over her body, picking the berry with his teeth. He bit it and let it half-glide down to her breasts. He followed the trail of juice with his tongue, found the other half in her cleavage. The late sun filtered through the dragonflies’ wings, reminding Vernon of woodland fairies. The game did not get old.
They played until sunset, when the stars shone on the rippling water of the English River, and the owls hooted to one another from tree branch to tree branch.

In the morning, they would wake in their bed finding their nails and hands stained dark purple.

“Your face!” Maggie exclaimed when Vernon showed up for lunch the next day. Besides a little tightness, Vernon didn’t think to pay it much attention.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath. He touched the abrasions already turning to scabs on his cheeks.

“Excuse me?” Maggie said.

“Fell. Those cats you want me to feed. One little shit tripped me up.”

The kitchen door opened, and his son-in-law, nearing 50—poor bastard—stepped inside.

“What happened to your windshield, Vernon? What happened to your face?”

“The damn cats!”

“Cats?” Maggie asked, exasperated. “The cats aren’t to blame for this. Have you been taking your diabetes medication? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I was feeding the cats, and one tripped me, and…”

“Maybe he hit his head on the windshield coming over here,” Everette said.

“Now you’re fucking talking like I’m not even in the goddamned room!” Vernon shouted.

“Calm down. I’m sure we can figure this out,” Everette said. “What’s the last thing you remember doing when you were in the truck?”

“I don’t have to deal with this.” Vernon got up and started out the door toward his truck.
“Vernon! Vernon!” Everette shouted after him. “I don’t think you should be driving.”

Vernon got into the truck, locked the doors just before Everette tried jumping in the passenger seat. Vernon waved his middle finger at Everette. He gunned the Chevy out the lane and toward his house. He had just begun to settle into his La-Z-Boy, when Maggie and Everette, and Sherry arrived simultaneously in separate vehicles.

They barged right into the house. Christ! They never bothered to knock. “Leave me alone. This is my house, and I won’t have people coming in without knocking first. Your mother would be ashamed, girls. Ashamed!”

“Daddy,” Sherry began. “We’re worried. Your truck, your face. Something happened.”

“I’ll tell you what happened. Those fucking cunt cats tried killing me.”

“Jesus, Vernon—the language!” Everette said, his voice rising like a woman’s.

He knew he shouldn’t say anything, shouldn’t rise to the bait. It would only make things worse than they already were. But he couldn’t help himself: “Well, that’s what they are. Fucking, little cunts.”

“Did you almost hit one with your truck?” Maggie asked, her voice low and wary, as if she were talking to a boy who’d just thrown a temper-tantrum. What did they think they were going to do? Wash his mouth out with soap? He was nearly a century old. He’d earned the right to talk the way he wanted.

“No! I was feeding them, when one fell onto my windshield.” Now Vernon was confused by all the drama. “I mean, what happened was—”

“Pa,” Maggie interrupted. “We’ve been considering it for a while now, and we’re thinking it’s time you take a break from driving.”

Sherry added, “It’s been a hard few months, and a rest at home might be good for you.”
“We’ll visit, and make sure you have more than enough company,” Maggie began, her voice soothing now, as if she were trying to tuck him into bed. The little shits were conspiring against him. He watched as Sherry took the truck keys off the end table. Maggie marched to the key holder in the kitchen, and took the spare sets off the rack.

“We’re going to give you some time to let this sink in,” Sherry said. “You can be mad at us, but we’re doing this because we love you. We love you, and we want you to be safe.” Maggie and Sherry exchanged looks. They couldn’t look at him. He wouldn’t want to look at them anyway.

As quickly as they had stormed the place, they left with his keys. The place echoed with silence. He wanted to take his pants off. None of this would’ve happened had Rosemary been alive.

Three months since Rosemary’s passing, and he had little left: two Pride of Iowa cookies and a set of truck keys he remembered Rosemary had hidden in the kitchen junk drawer. With care, he placed the cookies in his coat pocket, drank a big glass of water. Two days before, he stopped taking his diabetes medication.

He filled a coffee can of cat food and sprinkled it on the cement in the garage. He watched as the cats jumped over one another to secure a spot to eat. He wouldn’t do it for them, but he would for Rosemary. In fact, when he put the can back into the container, he decided just to leave the lid off. Let them grow fat and lazy. What the hell.

The spider-web crack across the truck windshield made it hard for Vernon to see out, but he couldn’t be stopped. He shuffled at lame horse speed into the VFW and took a seat alongside Fred Schnole at the bar. Fred graduated from St. Mary’s with Rosemary.
“How the hell are ya, Vernon?” he asked. “Ain’t seen you round here in a while. I’m real sorry ’bout Rosemary. A great woman.” A heat wave of Peppermint Schnapps rolled from Fred’s mouth.

“What can I get ya?” the bartender, Trudy Musser, asked. “Let me guess. You want an Alabama Slammer?”

Vernon nodded sheepishly. His granddaughter, Clara, had acquainted him with Alabama Slammers a few summers ago when she talked him into playing a game of shuffleboard at the VFW. She said it was what all the college kids were drinking, and Vernon liked sweet liquor. It tasted like punch. Trudy had teased him about it since, but she never forgot which drink to make him.

“What the hell happened to your face?” Vernon sat, felt his body stiffen. Fred carried on, “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

At the mention of “cat,” Vernon huffed. “Can we change the subject?” he asked.

“Sure. Well, let’s see. Rosemary. Rosemary was a great gal. My Valery has been gone five years now,” Fred said, taking a deep breath. “It’s awful hard, but it gets better every day. A little better.”

Trudy slapped the pink drink on the bar. “Want another snowshoe, Fred?”

“Yes, please! One thing I really miss is her home cooking, though I don’t miss the way she regulated my sugar intake. Now I have myself some cookies at the Kent Feed Store at lunchtime, with a little gossip from the boys. I roll over to Kalona, grab me two carrot cakes every week. Casey’s donuts are okay, and I eat my dinner here in the evenings. It works out.”

“That’s a helluva diet,” Trudy said.
It sounded reasonable in theory, but Vernon wasn’t a theory man, and he wasn’t the known lush Fred Schnole was. Vernon didn’t want to eat anyone’s desserts but Rosemary’s. He poured back the Slammer, and asked Trudy for another. It had been a while since he drank.

“Sometimes, when I get really lonely, I go into her closet, put on her socks or something. Connects me.” Fred leaned closer to Vernon.

Vernon should have sat elsewhere. In his day, Fred was rumored to be a swinger with his wife, and now he was a swinger with desserts. Vernon gently placed his hand into his pocket and fondled the two cookies. Trudy watched a “M*A*S*H” rerun on an ancient looking television set behind the bar. Vernon finished the first Slammer.

“Put that down kinda fast, Vernon. Huh? What would your daughters say?”

“I don’t give a good goddamn what they’d say, Trudy. I’m a grown man. I’ll take another.”

“If you say so.” Trudy prepared a second Slammer and placed in front of him. As its namesake, Vernon slammed it back to spite Trudy. He left a ten-dollar bill on the bar, and said, “Trudy, Fred, good to see ya.”

In his truck, he reached into his pocket and ate one cookie. He let the coconut linger in his mouth before swallowing, sucked on the chocolate chips, and mashed the oatmeal to the roof of his mouth. Rosemary.

He drove to the river bottom. It was an unusually hot day for November. He was sweating. He rolled all the truck windows down. Indian summer. The weather that lulls Midwesterners with its warmth until all the cold shit breaks loose. That’s what it really was.
Even though he was sweating, Vernon walked toward the mound as if he might find Rosemary there. He still walked the pace of a lame horse, though his bones didn’t ache so much as tingle. He arrived at the mound, realizing just how comfortable the curves of the bird looked.

He placed the last cookie at the bird’s mouth. “For you, Ancient Joe.” He positioned himself belly-up on the bird’s abdomen. He stretched his arms across the wings and imagined the women who buried the man. That’s what the hippie had told him—that women buried the man. It was the tradition of these people, a matriarchal society. Vernon imagined the topless women from artist renderings mounding the earth around and over his body as he sprawled atop the bird.

A fly landed on his face, but the women shooed it away. They smoothed the dirt on his face so he would be protected from the flies; he wouldn’t have to feel the tingle of the fly’s legs any longer. They caked and patted Iowa soil into each crevice of his body until he was covered and could only, ever so slightly, feel the gentle patting of their fingertips.
Whiskey on his breath, Uncle Greg nudges me with his elbow and whispers in my ear, “Clara, Clara, I have a saying for you.”

It’s Pa’s birthday, and Pa’s birthday always coincides with calving season. When Pa’s brothers arrive to celebrate another year of him, we inevitably end up shoulder to shoulder in the calving barn.

“What’s your saying, Uncle?” I whisper, a necessary volume in the presence of a heifer about to give birth. The heifer, unlike a cow, has never given birth, has no memory of another organism coming from its body. This is new.

From the heifer’s back end, white hooves and the spindly front legs of the calf appear. Normal presentation: foot pads down. Not breech.

Uncle Greg stammers, tries to recall his saying, rubs his thick farmer fingers through his dark hair. “My best day. No. Nope. That’s not how it goes. My worst day with a sow. No. Nope. That’s not how it goes. Okay. This is it. My worst day with a cow is still better than my best day with a sow. There! I could make it better, maybe add some words here or there.”

Uncle Leroy leans into the conversation. “I could make it better. How about, ‘My worst day with a cow is still better than my best day with a fuckin’ sow?’”

I whisper, “Why didn’t you all just start farming with cattle?”

“Cattle were for rich farmers,” Pa whispers back. “You need pasture. You need time to build a herd like I got now.”
It’s unseasonably warm, but our breath still forms little white puffs of condensation. Maybe it really is cold, but we’ve forgotten what it feels like to truly be warm in February, the bowels of Iowa winter.

The heifer lies down. Gets up again. Her hooves rustle the cornstalk bedding as she moves in a circle. A viscous, clear fluid strings down her legs, vibrates with each tromp of her hooves.

She’s got time. We’ve got time. I ask another question. “Remember pressure spraying hog sheds? Shit spraying all over the place, sticking to your hair, and getting in your mouth?” The uncles groan in chorus.

Uncle Greg starts, “Went in to get my teeth cleaned one day. Told the hygienist, ‘I took a shower. I did, but that pig smell gets so deep in your skin.’ You know what she said to me? She said, ‘I swear, you pig farmers. That smell just must come out your ears.’”

The heifer moans. The wet nose of the calf protrudes, then disappears. Maybe it has pulled its head back inside upon smelling the world. Maybe the heifer has contracted her gut.

Uncle Leroy adds, “I had this sow that kept eating its piglets. Vet said sometimes they do that if they haven’t had enough time to nest in the farrowing house before giving birth. Anyway, the only thing I could think to do was wrap duct tape around its snout. Stopped her from eating her young. Jesus.”

The heifer lies down again, then hefts her half-ton body up, leaning on her front legs. She moans guttural and low. Slop. The babe spews forth on a fountain of red and pink afterbirth. Slap. It hits ground. The heifer twirls to see what has come from her body. She sniffs the bewildered, wet, black mass. The babe’s head wavers, trying to find its neck. The heifer licks it. Accepts it. Next year, she will remember this. She will be a cow.
Pa says, “We used to use the stapler on the piglets. Slip too far, too deep with the castration knife, staple the skin back up.”

Uncle Leroy recalls all the illness pigs could contract once we put them in buildings. Once land grant institutions funded by corporations studied ways to breed piglets so they could stand on cement all day, instead of root in the dirt.

“You’d just find ’em dead when you walked in the farrowing house door. Dead everywhere. Illness. Greasy pig. PRRS. TGE. Coccidiosis. Something. I heard Smithfield Pork gives their producers a bolt gun along with their contracts. Some days those boys’ll kill up to fifty head of diseased piglets. Pop. Pop. Pop.”

I shake my head. Hundreds of baby piglets in confinement, a viral petri dish. “I feel so bad. The way the sows and piglets had to be confined in the farrowing house for thirty days.”

Uncle Greg says, “It’s worse today. Well, back then, even. Some farmers used to tether their sows. Instead of have them in pens during farrowing, they’d just put a big chain around their necks.”

There is a collective sigh. The bull calf is already up and sucking from the teat. Soon, a primal hankering will overcome the heifer. She will chomp her nutrient rich afterbirth. A little later, the pair will be put in an open lot with other pairs. Come March, when the grass establishes its fecundity, they will masticate on open green pasture. We walk toward the house where a frosted birthday cake awaits.

My words break the sound of our feet tromping downhill. “You know… I read somewhere, maybe Iowa Farmer Today, pigs can remember up to seven years. Seven years.”

“Shit,” Uncle Leroy says. He slows so much Pa almost walks into his back. “I wonder what that is in human years?”
Our gait takes on more gravity. It is the same deliberative gait I remember. The gait we took while walking toward Grandpa Vernon’s burial site on a rainy November day. He used to raise Tamworth pigs in the timber by the English River. By the water, the pigs took care of themselves, did everything on their own, even snout-built their own shelter from sticks. The thoughts in our heads become heavy with swine. Our necks relent. We bow our heads in memory of pigs.
PART III. RURAL BODIES

“I do think that there is a big difference between family farms and agri-business, and one of the distressing things that I think has occurred is with consolidation of farm lands. You've seen large agri-businesses benefit from enormous profits from existing farm programs, and I think we should be focusing most of those programs on those family farmers.” – Senator Barack Obama, 2004
Laura Elsass is known in Buccan County, Iowa as the woman who carries an armload of stones two miles every day. At mile one, the stones are a newborn baby cradled in her arms. By mile two, they grow into heavy toddlers.

Head down, in a march toward a burgeoning effigy, she numbly passes greetings—quick farmer nods. Neighbors, who once tried to give her rides, now slow their vehicles for her safety, but keep driving past, knowing Laura will continue her non-responsive gait past them. In the back rooms of bars or feed stores she has become, she imagines, a joke between old men.

“Mistake her for county maintenance, or the gravel truck,” they might chuckle, trying to make light of a tragic situation, unsure what to do or say otherwise. It is their way, and this is her way. When she’s in the act, transferring land, she cannot stop.

She lifts two stones stacked by a flowerbed on their family’s farm. She and her son, Paul, placed the stones there years ago. “Heavy hunting,” Paul called it. Paul and Laura would collect from the soil the rocks left by the glaciers hundreds of thousands of years ago. They would venture toward the back of the farm where 180 acres of tillable land spread forth. Laura would pull a wheelbarrow along the clods of soil. Sometimes, Paul would climb inside the empty wheelbarrow and bounce around, imitating the heavy boulders they were about to harvest.

“Keep pappy’s disc from being hurt!” Paul would declare. “I see a heavy!”

Paul would go tromping over the plowed land, and Laura would follow, teasing that she’d get the heavy first. Paul always got the heavy first. Pink, gray, or sand-colored, he’d lift it to his tiny chin and hurl it into the wheelbarrow.
“Paul one. Mom none,” he’d giggle.

Sometimes, Paul would just stop in the middle of hunting. Transfixed, he’d look to the west of the farm, where the hill, the highest point in Buccan County, rose from the otherwise flat land. So tall, it cast a shadow, when the sun was up, over most of their 180 acres. Laura suspected this was the largest glacier erratic of them all.

“I want to climb it!” Paul would beg.

“Maybe someday we can get permission.” They never did.

Back at the house, wheelbarrow brimming, they’d lug the erratics out of the wheelbarrow one by one and build a border alongside flowerbeds.

Today, Laura rubs her palm across a rock’s surface as she mulls the instances of her betrayal, Paul’s death. Her son’s death. She cradles two erratics, and begins her two-mile march.

As a toddler, Laura requested her mother’s help to dress in a frilly gown once a week. Her mother obliged. After the gown was zipped, Laura waited by the white refrigerator doors where her mother handed her a cold stick of butter from the fridge. Dressed, butter in chubby hand, Laura sat at a wooden kiddy table built just for her tiny legs and arms. The table was positioned in front of the TV. Sitting, she peeled back the wax wrapper and sucked on the sweet butter, her lips momentarily suck-smacking together. Music swelled. Bubbles floated across the TV screen. Laura was a bubble. She was lighter than air. Bouyant. She stood, swayed with the opening music to her favorite, The Lawrence Welk Show. She was cute, a chubby, coddled toddler with curly brown hair, the “oops” baby born into a farm family content with their boy. Washed over by the sound of music, Laura could not help but wave the stick of butter as one
would a wand. Taking up the space of the living room floor, she danced to the music of Lawrence’s big band.

The seventies dawned. The bubble Laura floated on popped as if poked by a dull needle. Laura, who abandoned the butter stick long ago, replaced the oral fixation with a toke. She no longer liked dresses, preferred bellbottoms. Lawrence was replaced with Led Zeppelin. Shedding baby fat, she grew hollyhock tall. At night, she wrapped her hair around a big empty tomato juice can on her head to straighten her frizzy curls into a long, glossy brunette cascade. Her cute phase transformed to beauty made people resent her, including her own family members. She left home the first chance she got, wore her engagement ring while holding a high school lunch tray. To her parents’ dismay, she married a poor farmer, James Elsass, in August—too soon after the high school put the black diploma in her hands. Her parents. Didn’t they know she wasn’t the only one in her class wearing an engagement ring just before graduation? That’s what everyone did in the community who wasn’t going to college.

Children followed, Paul, then Lucy. Laura couldn’t help but be a woman full of fright when they were born. So much responsibility! She rubbed her hands together more than usual, skin on skin, sweat on sweat, like the grinding pressure of glaciers that formed the granite stones left scoured across Iowa farm fields; she loved her children with the same raw, pressurized intensity. She knew all the mischief a child could get into from her own youth. Laura put her energy into them, following them around, praying they’d stay safe on an Iowa farm with all the hazards—open manure pits, PTO shafts, heavy machinery. These things could render a grown man’s body unrecognizable, let alone a child’s. She disapproved of mothers who let their children run rampant on farms.
No matter how much she tried to protect them, Laura’s two children couldn’t be rescued from the farm poverty they had been born into. Each year, they struggled to come out ahead on the operating costs the bank loaned them. They lived below the poverty line. Their farmhouse was falling apart. Linoleum peeled from the kitchen floor. Upstairs windows were missing panes. Chipped paint flecked the exterior. Sure. There was food from the garden or a sow to butcher on the kitchen table, but there was a never-ending struggle to make the monthly farm payment, own a reliable vehicle, and give her children little luxuries like coloring books and construction paper. Laura knew poverty could do ugly things, but wealth could be even uglier. Those kids had chosen the wrong parents if what they wanted in life was wealth.

The children looked forward to their Grandma Redbury’s visits. She carried the scent of spearmint gum on her breath and heavy perfume on her skin, scents from a rich, foreign farmland.

Grandma Redbury accelerated the car up the gravel lane. The boat Buick float-bounced over the ruts, the backseat brimming with stuff. Some might call it secondhand junk, but to Laura and her children, Grandma Redbury’s car possessed luxuries that Laura’s family could never afford. On this visit, the car contained matching lamps from a department store downtown, a collection of Farm & Garden magazines, a grocery bag full of dainty scarves, three framed paintings of flowers, tiny soaps gathered from hotel rooms on the recent winter trip to Florida, and of course, premade goodies from Hy-Vee. Grandma Redbury doled out the goodies just as she had handed Laura those sticks of butter years ago. Her grandchildren’s arms were filled with premade cupcakes billowing with too much frosting and colored dye, pre-cut fruit, and sacks of jellybeans and circus peanuts.
Preparation for this visit, like most of Grandma Redbury’s visits, gave Laura a welcomed reprieve from the daily grunt work of the farm. When Grandma Redbury said she would visit, James chored alone, while Laura took time to ensure the house was presentable. Her children, though old enough to walk upright, could not yet reach the kitchen counter, and their clothes-folding skills left much to be desired. After days of working farm stock in the summer heat, Laura could finally dip her hands into cool soapy water and clean the heap of dirty dishes, fold baskets of clothes, put more clothes on the line, bleach the area where fungus—full-grown mushrooms—grew out of the bathroom shower tile, dust the cobwebs from the corners of the ceilings. Cleaning was more tedious, but less intense than helping James outdoors. When the house odor was covered by the scent of lemony cleaners, Laura began making bread. Her mother loved the bread.

The items Grandma Redbury brought littered the kitchen table. The lamps, the soaps, the scarves, the sugary foods. “I could never make bread from scratch. Grandma can’t bake!” she’d giggle at the table, watching the butter melt, slip, and pool across the white bread.

Laura knew her mother was a good baker and a good liar. She cooked and baked feasts for the hired hands when Laura was a child. She just didn’t want to bake and cook now that their large farming operation was tended to more by her grown son and his wife. The operation was built by Laura’s father, and it was doing quite well, though Laura and James and their kids were excluded from the increased family wealth. The Redburys’ tractors were large and the harvest was good. They weathered the 1980s with only a blink; in fact, they capitalized by buying foreclosed farms, the blood of one foreclosed and suicidal farmer barely dry, when they signed the closing documents on his farm.
Dinner could be bought pre-made. Grandma Redbury was content to drive her Buick into town, get a container of potato salad and a rotisserie chicken from the deli to feed her husband in the evenings—so much easier than making a meal by hand. Laura made everything from scratch, her children’s nourishment dependent on the perfect amount of rain and sun, the bounty of the garden.

Laura took a circus peanut from the bag and let it dissolve in her mouth as Grandma Redbury chattered on. The fluffy sugar liquefied in her mouth. Lucy and Paul sat at the table, but grew impatient, until Lucy grabbed the bag of scarves.

“Momma! Mom. Look at these pretty scarves.”

“They are pretty,” Laura agreed, looking at her youngest. She recognized some of them belonging to her great grandmother. Lucy and Paul flitted to the living room with the sack. Laura wished she could go with the children. Feel the cool silky scarves between her fingers.

Grandma Redbury was full of gossip, just as full as her three bottles of the same perfume, an extravagance that particularly annoyed Laura, though she never said a word to her mother about it.

“Did you hear about Marilyn?” Grandma spouted, eyes big, putting another mouthful of buttered bread in her mouth. The vendetta her mother had with Marilyn—always competing with the neighbor lady. Laura shook her head no, enjoying the feeling of a seat in the late afternoon.

“Turns out her son is gay! Can you believe that?”

Giggling, the children burst into the room. Paul had tucked the scarves into Lucy’s underwear, creating a very eclectic looking skirt. Lucy laughed and did a twirl, then dashed out of the room.

“So, what do you think about Marilyn’s son?”
Laura readjusted her back on the chair uncomfortably and looked past her mother, almost wishing she were out in the heat working instead of picking at something that had already been picked at enough.

James referred to those early years of farming as, “Days we didn’t have a pot to piss in, nor a window to throw it out of.” Lucy and Paul were still little, five and eight. It would be nineteen years until Paul’s passing.

James learned at the feed store that “Bump” was going to retire and sell the large hill next to their farmland. Bump, of course, was a nickname, and Laura couldn’t remember his real name. That’s how it was in these parts. Nicknames outlasted birth names.

Forty-acres of hill! The hill Paul loved. Thirty-five acres of the land that crossed the road and flattened out like a piece of paper and led to the English River. The landmark hill attracted geologists. It rivaled the Sand Hills Laura had once seen on a rare childhood vacation in Nebraska. Locals guessed it was created during the glacial age. James’ father once owned it, but he sold it off to a friend during the Depression. It was so steep, it was suicide to plant crops, but James figured he could strip crop it, at least make a little off of it. It would be the only way. If they were to buy it and could make it work, they’d have more independence, have much more say than they did with the fields they rented from know-it-all landlords, landlords who told them what they should and shouldn’t do, landlords who sporadically raised rental rates.

“What do you think?” James asked Laura, who sat at the kitchen table while Paul and Lucy slept.

“Risky. We just got this place on FHA loan. If we can’t make both payments, we’ll lose everything.”
Laura’s face, though mostly youthful, had gained a few premature wrinkles around her eyes from the crisis of helping James’ sister-in-law move out of their foreclosed farmhouse. They stood by as James’ brother’s machinery sold to the foreclosure vultures. She couldn’t sleep for days after they bought the 180 acres in '86 from James’ father. She woke from nightmares—selling James’ beloved 730 to an asshole neighbor just to make the mortgage payment.

The hill was a voluptuous beaut, though. She could easily imagine her children sledding down the hill at an exhilarating speed, imagine the cattle James so badly wanted to own someday grazing atop the hill. She could see Lucy or Paul wanting to continue farming and having a solid platform from which to start, a hill so high their heads could scrape clouds.

James offered, “It’s Sunday. Why don’t we go up to your parents’ place and ask your dad’s advice? At least see what they have to say.”

Laura took this into consideration, wiping the table where she had dripped coffee. She wiped and wiped and continued to wipe even after the drips were clearly gone.

“Just advice. I’m not asking for anything else.” Laura nodded. What the hell. Her father had made a profitable farmer of himself. They had given her brother so much. They could, at least, ask for some advice. Perhaps her parents would offer to help with a loan without being asked.

Before the family traveled to the Redbury farm that afternoon, they chored together. Chores complete, they walked to the farm field and gazed at the hill.

Spring had been a trickster in ’88. It felt like summer one day, only to return to wintry temperatures another. Today, though, felt of spring, smelled of spring. The farm field’s soil radiated an earthy odor. Birds chirped on fence posts.
Paul took off across the field. Lucy ran after him. Paul bent to the ground, picked up a pinkish gray rock, and held it up for Laura to see.

“A heavy!” Laura nodded and laughed. “Are you going to carry that all the way back to the house?”

“Yes!”

“But, it’s heavy!”

“Not too heavy for me.” Paul stopped, tilted his head back to take in the hill stretching upward before him. “We could own it?” Paul asked.

Her children sat, ramrod straight, in nice clothes on their grandparents’ davenport. Laura had told them, no shenanigans. Be thoughtful and nice. She didn’t know why, exactly, but they always obeyed her and put on a civilized display for Grandma and Grandpa Redbury. Perhaps the air-conditioning stunned them. They had no such thing at home, even when the July heat was smotheringly thick.

While the children and Grandma Redbury talked pleasantries on the couch, Laura tried to listen in on the conversation James and Grandpa Redbury were having on the opposite side of the room in La-Z-Boys. Grandpa Redbury was reclined, eating handfuls of peanut M&Ms from a king-sized bag. James kept brushing his battered farmhand through his bangs, something he did when he was intimidated.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” her father said in his nasally authoritative man voice. “I don’t think now is a good time to be extending yourself too much. M&M? They’re peanut.”
“Oh, no, no. I’m fine,” James said, and Laura could tell he was both embarrassed and angry by her father’s advice. “I actually have to get home and check the hogs. It’s hot out there. I don’t want to lose any from the heat.”

“No. Nope. That’d be bad.”

In bed that night, Laura took off her wedding rings and soothed some lotion into her chapped hands. James, beside her, didn’t utter a word. She thought about how her father sounded and resembled Porky Pig atop his fluffy La-Z-Boy. After rubbing the lotion in, she turned the lamp off that her mother had given her.

She spoke into the dark. Things were more easily said in the veil of darkness. “A little part of you thought he might offer to sign a loan, or even offer a bit of the down?” Laura asked.

“I guess,” James said rolling onto his side to spoon her.

“They aren’t that way. I’m not a Redbury. You’re not a Redbury. We’re the erratics left on the fields, the leftovers.” Laura paused. “You know what that woman had the audacity to say to me during the height of the farm crisis?”

“Who? Jane?” James said, referring to Laura’s sister-in-law. He needn’t have asked.

“That woman” had become her name, as if her real name was unmentionable.

“Yes, that woman. We were at the mall in Cedar Rapids shopping for Christmas gifts a year or two after Lucy was born. Of course I couldn’t buy a twentieth of what she stacked in her cart. She had two carts, one of which Mom was pushing. She put another gift in her cart, stared me down and said, ‘Well, if this is the farm crisis, I hope it keeps going on like this!’”

“Bitch.”
“I know.” Laura sighed and rubbed her feet along James’ legs. “We don’t need any of them.”

By fall, the hill was bought by a developer. None of the locals could compete with the sealed bid. Every day, Laura had to look at the hill scoured with house frames. As construction workers drove bulldozers, she felt as though her innards were being dozed into her throat. Native grass was uprooted, never to flow through the rumen of a cow. Each dozer scraped piles of fine topsoil, loaded it into a truck, and bagged it to sell—a fraction of the geologic time it might’ve taken glaciers to push and form the land into a hill on flatlands. Foundations, craters like acne scars, were gouged into the earth. Laura wanted to drop a match on a dry summer day, watch the flames lick the wooden frames to ashes.

By the third year, the people who squatted on the hill in their new houses realized living on an exposed hill took thick blood. In the winter of ’90, the winds blew like dull butter knives hitting skin. Laura still could not look at the hill, even though she walked by it, she didn’t look up. She scanned the ground, picked up and filled empty feed sacks with the remnants of shingles and trash blown onto their fields from the development.

Tinsel was tossed. Holiday spices bought. Life went on. The Redbury family gathered at Laura’s brother’s house for Christmas. The fake tree reached the ceiling. Half the tree was obscured by the bounty of gifts. Laura’s brother, Rick, had fallen from a grain bin that autumn. He only had a few days left before the external fixation on his right arm (the arm he used to break the momentum of his fall) would be removed. The external fixation looked robotic—something from a science fiction novel—steel and bolts fastened to skin trailed up his wrist to elbow.
“Come here now, come look at these screws in my arm!” he teased the kids as he awkwardly tried bending to their height. He wheezed and pulled air in through his mouth when he laughed. His laugh, Laura imagined, would be the noise a castrated hyena would make. She didn’t much care for her brother, who was already out of the house by the time Laura was in grade school. She was glad that Paul and Lucy were closer in age.

“I’ll tell you, Lauranie,” Rick said, “don’t fall from a fifty-four-foot grain bin.” Laura had heard this before, many times, when she visited Rick in the hospital, though he was only seven feet up when he lost his footing.

Rick’s boy, Randy, was Paul’s age and a terror. He came roaring up the basement steps. “Come down, Paul. Let’s wrestle!”

Paul looked to his mother. He didn’t like playing with Randy. When they’d leave Rick’s house, Paul would begin a litany of grievances in the car. During the last family gathering, Paul declared he wasn’t going back unless he took a nut cup with him. Apparently, Rick liked to pinch balls when he was losing at wrestling.

“Don’t worry, Paul. He won’t pig tie ya too much,” Rick said, hyperactively rubbing his hand back and forth across the top of Paul’s head. Paul smiled half-heartedly and proceeded down the steps. Lucy followed. Laura would certainly hear about this in the car.

Laura wondered if her house smelled like Jane and Rick’s, of deeply dingy shag carpet, cat food, and pig shit. Of course her home smelled this way. She was a hog farmer, too. Things just smelled different in the lime green ranch house built in the ’70s. Maybe air didn’t circulate as it should, but just festered. Rick’s house used to be Laura’s teenage home. Before it was passed to Jane and Rick, there used to be an old Victorian farmhouse on the lot. Laura loved that home. Cried as a child when they tore it down to build the modern home in its place.
“That old house was just rotten,” Laura’s father would often remark, but Laura didn’t think so. In fact, it was nicer than the house she was living in now. This new home had yet to achieve its soul. Hardwood floors had soul. Modern shag carpets harbored pieces of hard and smelly unvacuumed food.

“Dinner, come get your dinner,” Jane yelled down to the children in the basement an hour or so after Laura and her family arrived. Jane wore pleated khakis and a red sweater with a gold chain. She was tall like her husband. Her hair was a permed bubble of frizz that she had expertly shaped with sticky hair spray. The three children burst up the stairs.

Everyone sat at the Ethan Allen oak table, except for the children who were relegated to the card table. Laura chose to sit near the children on a La-Z-Boy. This brought her a much greater sense of ease than sitting among the adults. She could observe instead of engage with the implicit games adults so often played.

“Hey, James. What do eating spinach and, ya know . . .” Rick made the gesture of jerking off, then plucked at his nose with his thumb excitedly. “. . . up the butt have in common?”

“I don’t know,” James answered.

“The more you are forced to do it as a child, the more you hate it.” Rick leaned back in his chair, flung his head back, and castrated-hyena laughed.

“Oh! You pervert!” Jane scolded Rick with a sly smile creeping across her face.

“What’s it like having all those city neighbors to the west of ya?” Rick asked James.

“Well, it’s different. We’re not used to it.”

“Damn. If that was gonna happen to me, I’d buy the land. What’d it go for?”

“Eleven-hundred an acre. Around $75,000.”

“That’s nothing when it comes to privacy. I bet you’re just kicking yourself now.”
Laura watched James put a piece of meat in his mouth and chew, then grind the food in his mouth.

“Get that rusted trailer floor fixed?” Grandpa Redbury asked James.

“Yeah. It was in pretty rough shape. Regardless of the rust on the body of the trailer, the floor should last a long time. That’s what they say. If the trailer floor is good, that’s all that matters.”

Rick chimed in, “We just bought a new Feather Light trailer to haul livestock. Seems like it will do the job, though we’ll trade it off in a year or two.”

James took a hard swig of his beer.

At gift opening, Jane held her video camera (the newest and most expensive model, of course) and documented the rich bounty being torn into by little fingers. Laura thought the volume of presents extravagant. Lucy wouldn’t let go of a china doll since opening its packaging, and Paul’s jaw dropped when ripped wrapping paper revealed the contents of a large square package: a Nintendo. It was generous of her family to give to her children in this way.

Paul had been asking Laura over and over for a snowmobile, circling models in magazines, and finding used snowmobiles for sale in the Farm Bureau classifieds. Of course they could afford no such thing. A Nintendo would satisfy him this winter. Maybe, someday, they’d have enough money so James and Paul could get a snowmobile—a beater they could fix up.

On Christmas morning, Laura realized a Nintendo cord had been left at Rick and Jane’s place. Paul was insistent they retrieve it. Laura packed the kids into the old Oldsmobile and headed out into the cold day. When they arrived at the farm, Grandpa Redbury had pulled his truck with the livestock trailer up to the yard. Jane was in the window recording with the new
video camera. Everyone looked shocked at Laura’s arrival. It didn’t take Laura long to realize what was going on. Laura told Paul and Lucy to wait in the car.

    Laura opened the front door. “Here to grab a cord we left last night, and then I’ll get out of your hair.”

    Jane didn’t look at Laura. She was concentrating on the truck. “I put it on the coffee table.”

    Grandma Redbury said to Jane, “Is he coming?”

    “Yes! Yes! Here he comes!”

    Laura was trying to leave quickly. She grabbed the cord, and turned in time to see Randy walking up to the truck.

    “He thinks there’s livestock in there!” Grandma Redbury said.

    “Oh! Oh! Randy’s opening the gate.”

    “Does he see it? Does he see it?”

    Laura was out the door. Paul looked out the rearview window to see a brand new, red snowmobile revealed in the back of the trailer. Rick jumped up and down. “A snowmobile! A snowmobile!”

    It took all of Laura’s power to raise her arm and wave as she went down the lane.

    “Did Rick get a snowmobile from Grandpa?” Paul asked.

    Injustice. Paul wasn’t fond of Randy, as it was. Now the dislike had an experience to feed on. Laura tightened her steering wheel grip and forced her hands down. She held the wheel so tightly her skin burned.
Hay was ready. Before she saw him, Laura heard Paul’s boots clicking on the hardwood porch. Here was the percussion of sixteen-year-old Paul: a door opened and slammed, boots heavy and determined on the porch floor boards, a higher pitched tap on linoleum as he came into view in the kitchen. She knew the sound of Paul at this age, in this moment, wasn’t something that would be around forever. She needed to remember the sound.

Laura turned from scrubbing garden potatoes in the sink. When he entered the kitchen, his skin glowed bright red and looked hot to the touch. The color set off his buzz cut, blond towhead. Specks of alfalfa and greenery from the fields coated his arms. The dust had worn paths into the crevices of his chin. He was only a teen, but he baled hay like a capable grown man. Laura didn’t have to inhale to know he smelled of sweet hay, of salty sweat, of sun.

“Hey, Ma. I found some big heavies when we was out there baling hay. I put some on the fence posts so you can grab ’em later.”

“I’ll take a wheelbarrow up that way sometime.” They rarely went erratic hunting together now that Paul was grown. Yet, Paul still had an interest in rocks, even called them glacial erratics from time to time instead of heavy, and used words like “meltwater,” “till,” and “moraine” after he learned the vocabulary words from his high school geology book. He was considering college, and Laura wondered if geology wouldn’t be a part of his future.

“You ever give second thought to that air-conditioner Uncle Rick has?” Paul asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know. Sounds like a lot of work. Getting it all hooked up and stuff. The thing is giant.”

“I’ll help you get it in here, Ma. God, it’s hot as shit out there.”

James said as long as Paul worked like a man he could cuss like a man. Paul took a glass out of the cupboard and filled it with water from the tap. He guzzled it, then filled another glass
and swallowed. He wiped his lips, wet around the edges. Laura was grateful he still had some boyish tendencies.

“I’ll talk to your father about the conditioner. Never had a conditioner.”

“Dad wanted me to tell you we are on the last rack and we’ll start unloading soon. Says to be ready in a half-hour or so for dinner.”

Paul started to go out the door with as much percussive purpose as his entrance. “Hey, Paul,” Laura called. Paul put his tanned head back in the doorway. “I’ll take you to the river tonight. Maybe Lucy will want to go—to cool off a little.” Paul nodded and clicked out the door.

Laura started to peel the potatoes with more urgency. Anxiety suddenly jolted through her as she realized the rest of the things she’d have to do to get dinner on the table for the crew.

The crew stormed into the house, gorged on the feast she prepared, gossiped about town happenings such as the return of feral pigs to Railroad Park, and whether or not the tiny, rural town of Richmond should have an incorporated sewer system. The crew left just as soon as they had arrived. Laura started to gather the plates from the table as Paul and James sat, beet red skin radiating warmth, arm muscles defined.

“Called your brother up,” James said. “Told him we’d take the air-conditioner they don’t use in their farrowing house anymore. Paul and I are gonna go pick it up. It’s just so damned hot. I’m out in it all day. I don’t want to sleep in it, too.”

Laura turned to the sink to hide her expression. “Okay,” she said.

The beastly air-conditioner took up a quarter of the truck bed. It had to be big to cool a farrowing shed of pigs, but she didn’t expect it to be quite so monstrous. James and Paul grunted
and worked into the evening to get the thing leveled into a window. Paul hobbled inside and outside the house trying to prepare the space.

“You alright?” Laura asked.

“Think I might’ve pulled something. No big deal,” Paul said and turned away from Laura, into the conditioner. He seemed to be hurting in some way that he didn’t want her to see. A young man’s pride, she figured. When they fired the monster up, it grunted and started to splash cool air across the living room.

“Oh, man!” Paul sighed. He took off his shirt and bared his chest to the jet of air. “You have to admit, Ma. It’s nice.”

“Smells like pig shit,” she said. “The whole thing smells like shit.”

“It does smell like shit,” James agreed. “But, what do you expect? It was in a hog shed.”

“Keeping pigs cool.” Laura realized how pitiful it all sounded and smelled. And Laura knew about the smell. Once the odor of pigs got into something, it took a stronger smell to mask it, and Laura couldn’t think of a stronger smell than pig shit.

Lucy started to run the microwave. A breaker blew. The lights went dark, and the conditioner sputtered off.

“I’ll switch the breaker,” Paul volunteered. “I guess we can’t run much else than this at one time.”

Laura looked at James, who shrugged his shoulders. “What?”

In bed that night, it all came tumbling out of James. A pent-up rant.

“When we were moving the air-conditioner out of the machine shed, Randy let go of one end, leaving Paul to lift the heaviest end.”
“I wondered why Paul seemed to be hurting.”

“The little fucker did it on purpose. I’d never say that to Paul. Paul wouldn’t think that way, but it seemed intentional. You know?”

“I know.”

Paul was better at things than Randy. Paul worked. Randy drove tractors and bossed hired men around. When Paul took time for sports in junior high, he was always stronger, faster, leaner. Laura was relieved they weren’t in the same high school where, in close quarters, tensions between competitive cousins who didn’t like each other very much could build and pulse like electricity on a frayed wire.

On a summer evening in 2001, Paul and Laura sipped beer from brown bottles. They sat in lawn chairs facing a flowerbed in the farm’s yard. A stack of heavies edged the coneflower bed. Laura and Paul joked about their “heavy hunting.” Paul looked strong and smart, poised to enter his senior year of college.

“We found one hell of a stack,” Laura told him.

“Probably plenty more. Little gifts from Wisconsin.” Paul had taken a geology class in college that spring, and Laura took what he said as gleaned knowledge.

“Maybe I should set out to build a little erratic house.”

“You know how the houses up there, on the hill, how they have to be re-sided on the northwest corner every five years?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s from the orientation of the hill most likely formed by pre-glacial winds and the way the wind hits it today. Back in the day, there was a lot of mass wasting. Mass wasting, wind
erosion probably formed that hill, and they try to put human structures on it, thinking they’ll hold up.”

“Preglacial. Mass wasting?” Laura raised her eyebrows. “I have no idea what in the hell you’re saying, but it sounds wise, and I believe you. I agree. Building on that hill. It’s one of the least humble, disrespectful things a human could do to the land.” Cicadas filled the silence.

“What is mass wasting, anyway?”

“It can look like a fucking explosion! Think of a big ice glacier in the ocean, and a whole bunch of ice just slides right off of it. Could you imagine what that’d feel like? The reverberations of that?”

“Well, you certainly know your geology, Paul Elssass. I can tell you something you don’t know.”

“Try me,” Paul teased, raising his chin in the air.

“Did I ever tell you about Mr. Pigg?”

“No.”

“A man by the name of T.J. Pigg, (two ‘g’s on the end of his last name), owned that hill back in the early 1900s. Some of the old timers call that hill ‘Pigg Hill.’ Some used to joke that he had two daughters: Ima and Ura.”

“Are you serious?!?”

“About Mr. Pigg—that’s the honest truth. I’m not sure if he had daughters. I do recall the old timers at the VFW talking about how he had an orchard on the hill. All kinds of trees and varieties. Loved bees.”

“There you go again. All educated on me.” Laura was proud. She looked to the darkening sky, looked to her son fading away in the twilight. She loved having Paul home, on the farm, with her. She wanted the sunlight to last a little longer, to highlight his chiseled features. She wanted to move more erratics with him. It reminded her of when he was younger, how much he loved to heft those rocks up from the land. “You know, when I first heard the name ‘Pigg Hill’ I thought of pigs running that hill. Wrong pigs. Your pa had to explain.”

“There are plenty of human pigs wallerin’ away on it now, in their cookie-cutter houses.”

They finished their beers and sat long afterward, riveted by the rocks they had gathered throughout the years, studied them as if they were cocoons about to reveal rare butterflies.

The reds and oranges burst from trees when Laura’s father, who the kids and eventually she called Grandpa Redbury, was born in early October, three quarters of a century ago. It seemed fitting that Grandpa Redbury’s life ended during the last gasp of autumnal color in late October, when everything was brown and crisp. The death did not come as a surprise, but more as a relief. Grandpa Redbury had been confined to a care center bed for a year before he took his last breath. He had lived to see both Lucy and Paul graduate from college, though he had never really given them much attention. Even in his final dementia-ridden days, he seemed bored when they showed up and delighted when Rick rarely visited.

Laura sat at her mother’s dining room table two days after the funeral. Rick had called a meeting to go over the will. Laura felt grateful for the table’s position. It overlooked the golden fields from the rolling patio doors. The cornfield’s hills undulated into the horizon, reminiscent of a Grant Wood painting. That was the only thing Laura could take comfort in. Talking of
inheritance, with the soil on her father’s grave still settling, seemed uncouth. It made her stomach turn.

Laura had discussed with James whether or not he should be present. James thought it in good taste to stay out of this. Laura was a smart woman. She could handle this, but the minute she arrived in the house, she felt uneasy. Jane was there. Randy was there. They were both seated at the table. The paperwork was in front of Jane, lined up in neatly stacked rows of legal bureaucracy, which she felt was rigged against her and her family.

“Maybe I should call Paul, since Randy is here,” Laura said.

“Oh! Don’t be silly. This won’t take long,” Jane said.

Rick looked to Jane. She nodded her head. “We’ve got a $10,000 dollar check for you,” he said to Laura.

Laura was smart. She knew the land alone was worth five million. “And, you’ll want to cash it quick,” Jane said. “We put it in two installments. Half for this year. Half for the next, so taxes won’t be as big of an issue.”

Laura bit her bottom lip, rubbed her hands together. “I want a farm. One farm. That’s all. One hundred and sixty acres. To get Paul started. He hates his job. He wants to farm, and that will help us get him into our operation.”

“Laura,” Rick began, “you know we can’t do that.”

“We’ll be sure that it’s evened out with Lucy in some way,” Laura assured.

“That’s not what I mean,” Rick said.

“Corn is the highest it’s ever been. You’re lucky I’m not asking for half. That’s what rightfully should be mine.”
“I worked for this. I worked for this my whole life, and you left. I put up with Dad. I need all the land, or else I’ll lose it all.”

Laura’s mother sat with her lips pursed. She played dumb, looked at the walls, but when Rick said it could all be lost she perked up.

“Don’t be greedy. Ten thousand is a lot of money,” Grandma Redbury said. Did she really believe this bullshit? Or was she acting dumb?

“Mom, what about your other grandchildren? What about them? I don’t care about myself, but I care about the kids.”

“It’s not that simple, Laura,” her mother said.

“So Randy is going to get everything?”

Rick’s face had turned red, and he erupted ridiculously. “I don’t want to have to flip hamburgers. I don’t want to work at McDonalds. I’m feeding the world!”

“Oh, please!” Laura burst. “With the way land prices are, sell one farm, and you’ll have enough to retire to the Riviera, Rick. Jesus! The tractors Dad bought drive themselves. The machinery alone is worth more than one farm.”

“We could lose everything if we lose one farm!” Jane added. “We made it through the ‘80s. We are strong, but only because of what we have.”

Laura took the checks, looked at them a moment, and contemplated her options. She slid them back across the table. “If that’s how you feel.”

Laura was shaking. She must’ve risen from the table, gotten into her old car, and drove back to her family. She didn’t remember doing so. She was floating out of body.
Paul tried to advise Laura, who grew more and more wan each day. “Have you thought of calling a mediator, Ma? Maybe a mediator could get somewhere with them.” Here was her son, a good man, who wanted to be a farmer. Here were her wrinkled hands, calloused by work, but nothing to give her children except a few worthless erratics.

“I don’t know why $10,000 isn’t enough,” Jane said to the mediator. “That’s a lot of money. We cannot let go of anything more or else we’ll risk our own operation. God made a farmer, but He didn’t make it easy.”

“That math does not make sense to me,” Laura piped back. “Your land is worth five million at least.”

“Our land may not be worth that tomorrow,” Jane said. “We can’t take risks. This is what your father would have wanted, for the land to stay in one piece.”

Laura closed her eyes and counted to ten before she spoke. She started calmly. “Keep the land. Compensate me for the price of one farm. One 160-acre farm. That’s all. You have more than a thousand acres!”

Laura looked to her mother for help. Her mother looked past her, out the window. “I’m an old woman. I don’t know what’s going on,” she repeated over and over. Laura suspected they were manipulating her, too.

And her brother? “We’ll get this all figured out. Really. We offered you $10,000.”

“I want a farm. One farm for Paul and Lucy. Rick will end up with five large farms.”

The mediator was baffled. “I’ve never seen a case quite this ignorant,” she told Laura privately. “I don’t know why a lawyer would allow this to happen in a will. It’s all unbelievably legal, but very immoral.”

Jane had put everything into a corporation, and Laura would not see an acre.
“Nothing?” Paul implored when his parents came home from the mediation appointment. “They can’t do anything?”

“Motherfuckers!” James howled at the dinner table. “If that no good sonuvabitch had just one brother, one mean-man brother, that’d do ‘em good. God, it’d be good to see Randy-baby get the shit beat out of him.”

Laura couldn’t calm him. He seemed possessed by the unfairness of it all. At night, she drank a few beers to calm herself. Then she opened the beer cans in early afternoon.

The first year Grandpa Redbury was in the ground, a harsh and biting winter roared across Iowa. James had managed to build a small herd of twenty-five head, and this year calving was not for the weak. While James was at a cattle sale in the next town over, Laura watched the herd. The pregnant heifer, T-50, concerned her. The footpads of a calf had been showing out the backside of the heifer for two hours, and Laura was getting nervous. When she couldn’t reach James, she called Paul.

Paul rushed over, numbed from a full day of mindlessness lit by fluorescent bulbs in the Buccan County FAS office. He put the heifer in the head gate, rolled OB gloves over his hands and elbows, stuck his arm full up to the elbow into its backside.

“It’s got a big head,” he told Laura. “I’ll try and pull it, but I think we may need to call the vet.”

Paul pulled and pulled. The heifer bellowed and then fell to the ground. “Get up! Get up!” Paul yelled at the heifer. He kicked its large hind end with an aggression Laura had never seen in her son. It frightened her. Maybe calling him had been wrong. Laura was fuzzy from a sixth beer. Everything seemed so wrong these days. Randy was seen around town driving a
brand-new Duramax Diesel truck, and the snap of the beer tab seemed so seductive. After whooping and kicking, the heifer stood.

“Ma, you shoulda called me earlier. You guys need me. You need me full-time. I don’t understand why I just can’t farm full-time like everyone else in this goddamned shithole. I need the fucking chains.” Laura tripped over her feet, fell to her knees. “Fuck. You’ve been drinking. Great. Just fucking great. Why don’t you just go back to the house?”

Laura did not go back to the house. She started crying, a quiet cry. She wasn’t even sure if Paul knew she was crying. She got up, retrieved the chains hanging on the wall, offered him the rusted strands draped from her arms. Paul lifted the chains and hooked them around the emerging calf hooves. Paul pulled and pulled. A reservoir of pink afterbirth splat on the ground, and the large, glossy black calf hit the ground.

Laura waited for the calf to get over the stun of squeezing from the birth canal to earth. The bull calf ears drooped flat. Lifeless. Paul knelt toward the calf, used his fingers to clear the mucus from its mouth. No movement. Paul lifted the calf and started to lightly smack its body on the ground—sometimes an antidote to fluid on the lungs. Again, nothing. Paul cussed under his breath. “Well, looks like we’re bloody fucked again.” He rolled the OB glove from his arm and hand. Dropped it to the ground.

“Sorry, Ma.” That’s what Paul last said to her. Got in his old truck, and drove away. Laura tried to rub her hands warm, but it was too cold.

Laura sways from side-to-side recalling the story people have told her of that night. She needs the rocks, the erratics, to weigh her down, keep her path straight, as she imagines yet again what happened to Paul later that night.
Paul found Randy in the Ice House Bar. Paul’s hands were probably still damp from delivering the dead bull calf. There was an altercation. Words said. Cursing. There are varying versions, most likely massaged by feed store and VFW accounts, but some say Randy called Laura “a dumbfuck after their money,” or was it “Dumb luck marrying James Elsass,” or was it “A dumb duck never gets money?” No one will ever know for sure. What they do know is that the bartender chased them out the bar. Fists swung in the cold air. Paul, still the stronger one and the better athlete, was getting the better of Randy, so Randy started running.

The cement parking lot was slick, and Randy slipped all the way to his new truck. Paul got into his rusted truck. Paul chased Randy’s new truck down a gravel road, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety miles per-hour. Loose gravel. Slick roads. Paul’s old truck hit the ditch embankment and smashed accordion-style. First responders, one of them James’ cousin, said he was dead on impact. There was no reviving. Like the bull calf Paul delivered that night.

Laura thinks of it as her own form of mass wasting—the term Paul taught her. A piece of herself falling earthward, crumbling on impact. The police report cited Paul for driving erratically.

Laura lifts erratics from the sandy farmland she calls her home. She lets her hair grow long, down to her waist. She doesn’t bother pulling it back from her face or dying it like all the other women her age. Her hair has faded to mostly gray or white.

She slowly dismantles the flowerbed borders she and Paul made. She insists on carrying the stones, transferring them two miles down gravel roads to the crash site herself. She knows people talk about her, wonder why she just doesn’t load the heavy stack on a truck bed and drive it to the site, but she doesn’t care what they think, just as she doesn’t care anymore what James
or Lucy think or say, as they try to discourage her from this futile act, try to urge her back to what they still have.

She feels purposeful when she carries the stones, as if she has meltwater beneath her, carrying her and the rocks in her arms to a new resting spot. She builds with what she has. Stacking the stones, she sits on the heap she has made in all seasons. She holds tight to the rocks beneath her, for fear she’ll float away if she doesn’t cling to something.
Before passing into much needed rest, Everette Dean listened to the rain slapping against his bedroom roof. The sound reminded him of draft horses at the state fair pissing on cement. Everette wanted to roll onto his right side and listen to the evening storm, but there was the bag attached to his gut—the bag that collected his putrid, watery shit. If he accidentally rolled onto the bag, it could burst open, shit flooding and smearing across the clean white sheets. It had happened once before.

He kept his recovery record in his head like he kept the dates of his cattle herd’s breeding schedule: with accuracy. It had been eight weeks since they found the cancerous mass clinging to his colon, seven weeks since the doctors removed nine inches of his colon, seven weeks and three days since he had slept in a bed with his wife, Maggie (who insisted it was safer if she slept on the couch), and nine weeks since he’d tasted the sweetcorn from the garden that Maggie froze for the off-season. And each day, he observed the shrinking stoma, where the shit spurted. It had once looked like a ruptured pig asshole, a rosebud he called it, and then it shrunk smaller and smaller, resembling a human asshole on the right side of his stomach. It made noises, like coffee percolating in a coffeemaker when he ate.

Lying in bed, he reflected on the chores and the June heat to distract him from thinking about the relief his right side would feel if he could just turn a little. There was a hot, red rash where the bag had rubbed the leaking stomach acid against his sweaty side. Because of this, he had been waiting, just waiting for the rain. And, now it was here, offering relief, offering cooler temperatures. He closed his eyes and imagined the Iowa soil becoming super-saturated as it
absorbed the weight of each raindrop, and the summer grasses taking long swigs of rainwater and
growing taller by morning. The earth would be soggy tomorrow; his boots would leave imprints.

Everette reflected on the day’s chores, and he considered what needed to be done next. He believed this ritual, to pause and think at the end of a day, was the residual Catholic still lingering inside him. “Say your prayers, Everette,” his mother would urge before going to bed every night, so he said his prayers as a child. As an adult, he didn’t say prayers at night (he didn’t even pray when he got the diagnosis). Instead, he believed in reflection and setting a day’s agenda.

First on his agenda: he’d need to call his hired hand, Seth, and fix the flood gap on the rental pasture. The rusted wire that stretched across the creek and split the adjacent property was surely busted through by the water’s force, or covered by the rising creek water. To keep his cattle from eating the farmer’s corn on the other side, he’d need to string up more wire and power the electric fencer.

Everette was satisfied. He went to sleep with the flood gap on his mind as the team of draft horses continued to piss on his roof. The last thought of his day was of his hired hand, Seth, who was probably sleeping in a woman’s bed that was not his girlfriend’s.

When daylight started to appear, Everette sipped coffee Maggie had made before he rose. Birds cackled outside as small-town women do after church. Some mornings Everette woke, forgetting about the bag, but this morning he felt the bag clinging to his side like burdock, the rash still fresh and hot.

As Everette waited for Seth—who was already ten minutes late—Maggie spoke of a mouse she saw while making coffee.
“It zipped from the mason jars on the countertop to beneath the stove. I don’t know what we should do about all these mice,” she told Everette. Maggie bit her bottom lip standing over the counter, recounting the path the mouse had taken. She hadn’t brushed her bobbed salt-and-pepper hair yet; it puffed out in two separate directions. Everette remembered her as a cheerleader, with dark, straight hair streaming down to her waist.

“I can set some traps,” Everette offered.

“I’ll feel bad for the mice. Those traps are so harsh.”

Everette shook his head in agreement, unsure of the right answers. Then he heard Seth’s truck rattle up the lane. He hoped Seth would offer to drive the four miles to the rental pasture. He wanted to save his energy for the flood gap repair.

“Make sure you don’t lift anything today,” Maggie warned.

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, getting up for the door.

“Everette,” she said. He turned toward her before walking out. “I don’t know what to do with you. You heard what Sheila said. She got a rupture the size of a baby’s head just from vacuuming after her surgery. I don’t want to have to go through all that just because you needed to prove yourself.”

“Sometimes it’s impossible. When I’m alone, I have to lift things.”

Under the glow of the morning sun, Seth parked his Chevy truck at the pasture’s entrance. Before starting on their journey toward the creek, Everette and Seth grabbed the tools they would need for the repair from the rusted truck bed. The creek was a half-mile from the road, hidden from the country-styled suburbs popping up like acne on a teenager’s face all over the farmland—farmers selling out for a quick buck. Everette liked the descent into the pasture,
going deeper and deeper into a quiet, grassy seclusion where the housing developments could be forgotten and Iowa could be as it once was.

Carrying the tools, Everette and Seth navigated the steep creek bank on the rental pasture. Everette found his gait was slower than usual, and he struggled to keep up with Seth. The men placed their booted feet with firm purpose so as not to tumble into the muddy water that rushed below them. They dodged the thick, wiry vegetation that clung to the Iowa creek bank, especially making sure to dodge the waist-high musk thistle. They were at ease in their landscape, goats on a steep mountain.

Everette and Seth were often mistaken for father and son. Perhaps the elements of summer and the work they did had molded their bodies to appear similar: tanned skin, squinty eyes, muscles. Seth was shorter than Everette, but more filled out, stout, and his skin was more taut than Everette’s wrinkled, weathered face. They even once dressed alike— t-shirts, Wranglers, and cowboy boots— but Everette’s sickness had changed that. He hid the bulkiness of the bag by wearing denim overalls.

“They’re Carhart brand, Pas,” Clara told him. She held the overalls out to him as he lay recuperating on the couch. “Carhart brand,” she repeated. “They aren’t Oshkosh.”

Regardless of the brand, Everette still felt like an old-man-coffee-club member in the baggy, denim mass—the men who sat at the local Casey’s sipping coffee, gossiping every morning. They wore bib overalls. They all looked the same to Everette: fat, denim-dressed balloons who couldn’t manage their diabetes after their doting wives died.

At the water’s edge, the two men stopped and looked at each other. The wire that once stretched across the creek between the pasture and the cornfield had been torn apart by the creek’s force. The flood gap was no more. They didn’t need to speak to say what needed to be
done. It wasn’t their first rodeo. In fact, the two could probably do all their tasks in silence. They were an instinctual pair: horse and reins, steak and knife, plant and soil.

Everette’s tanned forehead crinkled; he squinted and shook his head at the rushing water. Seth would have to get wet. Everette couldn’t help him. No baths with the bag. Definitely no flood gaps with the bag.

“You dirty fucker,” Seth said to Everette.

Everette shook his head and stared at the ground.

“You go and get cancer, so I have to do the heavy lifting alone. Way to go, winner. Why don’t you just go get yourself a twelve-pack, an umbrella, and a lawn chair, so you can just sit here and watch me get my balls wet?”

Before Everette could say anything, Seth kept rattling.

“I know, you could get a golf club with those little white gloves and practice your swing. Screw it,” Seth continued. “I’m taking my clothes off before I go in this time. Last time I had to work in wet clothes the rest of the day. It sucked.”

“Crap, don’t take your clothes off. Somebody’ll see you and think we’re doing some stuff back here. Strange stuff. Keep your clothes on.”

“I’m doin’ it, and you can’t stop me. We’re so far back here. Nobody’s going to see me.”

Seth was a fart in a skillet. He popped out erratic comments faster than Everette could fully consider them. Everette would never imagine speaking to his elders this way, let alone strip down to nothing in front of them, but he couldn’t help but smile in response to Seth’s spirit. He’d worked with many quiet, honorable Catholic boys who did their job and said “yes sir” and “no sir” and “thank you sir,” but Seth was different. He was strong, uncensored, free-spirited. He
started working with Everette when he was in junior high school, and he had never quit. He had a mouth as dirty as a manure spreader.

The only time Everette had seen Seth unnerved was when he visited Everette in the sterile University hospital. Shortly after Everette was wheeled from the recovery room to his hospital room, Seth visited. He kept his eyes on his boots, crusted with cattle manure. There were no windows, no comfortable sheet of earth beneath his shoes, only white linoleum and tools he didn’t know how to use, but he gradually came around with colon cancer jokes for Everette: “Papa’s got a brand new bag” and “Your ass is on permanent fart vacation.” Everette didn’t have any sons, but if he did, he wouldn’t mind them being like Seth—only a little less brazen, less promiscuous.

On the creek bank, without hesitation, Seth took off his boots and white socks. He undid his belt buckle, and reached into his pocket producing a crumpled piece of paper. He turned to Everette and asked, “Did I show you this one yet?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Everette responded. Everette smoothed out the wrinkled paper, revealing a hand-drawn crucifix with roses crawling up the staff. At the bottom of the drawing it read, To my son. May your days be long and full of good work.

“That’s nice,” Everette responded.

Seth’s father had taken to being a born-again, but sometimes Everette thought he should’ve never been born in the first place. Seth’s father was in a looney bin; rumor had it that he beat Seth and his mother before they had him committed to an asylum years ago.

With gusto Seth continued to strip; he lifted the shirt over his head and let it swing to the ground. He took his pants off. Everette took a glance at Seth’s sculpted, young body—impeccable, perfect. No wonder women were seduced by him and allowed him to use them.
Everette reached down to where Seth’s jeans sat in a crumpled pile. The bag flopped at his side as he reached down. He stuffed the picture back into the pocket.

Seth broke the silence. “Are you gonna get in here and help me, you lazy fucker, or are you at least going to hand me shit?”

“I guess I’m going to just have to hand you shit—and shit that weighs less than ten pounds,” Everette said.

“You’re just lucky I’m here. Nobody else would do this kind of shitwork for you, especially with this hot of a bod,” Seth said, wading into the water, the current rushing past him.

“I’m so lucky,” Everette said. Seth’s body was gradually consumed by the brown, muddy water, first his feet, knees, and then his upper body to his shoulders. The rain had been relentless, filling the banks to a little less than five feet.

“Ooooh, doggy! That’s cold,” Seth shouted above the furious babble of the creek. “Hey, Everette, do you think you’re going to live?” Seth said, trying to stay above water. He commented as if he were talking about his recent cell phone plan. “Because I think I got Cindy—that one girl from Olds—pregnant, but I dunno. I don’t really want to claim it, you know? I mean, I think she should get one of those piss-on-a-stick tests first, and a ‘is-it-mine?’ test second.” There Seth was. A fart in a skillet with his thoughts, too.

Everette thought of his grown daughters off the farm, how they once sat in cushy auditorium seats listening to professors, taking notes, taking exams at the University of Iowa. He suddenly had the urge to put duct tape around Seth’s mouth and hands, kidnap him, make him go to college, but it was probably too late for that. Seth had been offered a wrestling scholarship at Iowa his senior year of high school, and he went for a semester until he snapped; he couldn’t handle the routine of it all, and the coach wouldn’t let him drink, a deal-breaker.
“Take the wire,” Everette said, avoiding the questions. He held out a bundle of high-
tensile fence wire for Seth to reach. It weighed more than ten pounds, but Everette hadn’t felt
anything unusual when he was alone at the feed mill after-hours and had to pick up twelve fifty-
pound feedbags, and he didn’t feel anything unusual when he lifted a heavy gate to gain access to
his pastures days ago. Since then, he’d been lifting everything and anything.

The men worked in natural silence. A type of dance transpired between them that only
farm men knew the steps to—twisting and bending wire, stretching and grunting, pounding and
straining. It wasn’t a beautiful dance, but it wasn’t ugly either. It was a dance that got results.
During this dance, Everette gave little notice to the sting of the stomach acid leaking onto his
skin, the fatigue his body felt.

He was focused on the barrier. They built a barrier that the smallest of calves couldn’t get
through. Seth fortified the two fence posts on each side of the creek by pounding them deeper
into the earth with a heavy maul. They restrung wire from post to post, and put a hot wire above
all the wires, for added reinforcement. The water would not overtake this flood gap; the cattle
could not get to the sweet temptation of field corn on the other side. When the job was done,
Everette went to turn the electric fence power on, and Seth started to wade out of the water.

“You know, Everette, it’s not too bad in here. It’s kinda nice. Kinda like a day at the
lake.”

“You’re really something, you know that?” Everette said, thinking that today’s
generation was dreamier than his.

“Fuck that,” Seth said, looking up.

“No, I mean, it. You’re really a bull that needs to be castrated. It’ll settle you down, take
the spunk out of ya,” Everette replied.
“No, I mean fuck,” Seth said. “Look.”

Everette followed Seth’s outstretched hand pointing toward a black calf that trotted on the farm field side of the flood gap, panicked.

“Shit,” Everette said. “We fenced it out.” The calf’s mother was trotting alongside the panicked calf on the opposite side of the fence where Everette and Seth stood. When the cow and calf reached the stream, they stopped and moaned low, steady guttural tones to one another.

“I’ll get it,” Seth said. In one swift move, Seth ducked under the water and disappeared. He’d have to swim deep into the current to get up on the other side of the fence. He could drown. He could get stuck in a sinkhole.

Everette waited for what felt like the amount of time it takes a bale of hay to be elevated to a barn’s haymow on a hay elevator. Click, click, click, the elevator sounds as the bale incrementally rises. Everette pushed some creek sand together with his booted foot, all the while keeping his dark eyes on the water. What would he do if Seth didn’t surface?

Seth had never disappointed him. He came up on the other side of the flood gap, like a catfish flipping out of the water for a bug on the surface. With his sudden appearance, the calf froze, frightened. Seth did not hesitate. If he did, the calf would run. Everette watched Seth, as he had watched him on the wrestling mat in high school, strike out at the calf and catch its back leg. Seth, smiling, pulled back on the leg, and positioned his body over the calf’s back. He managed to bear-hug the wiggling calf. “Pin,” Seth yelled to Everette.

“You got it caught, but how’re you gonna get it over here?” Everette yelled to him.

“Walk it around to the other side,” Seth said, already taking action.

“You’re naked!”

“I don’t give a fuck.”
Before Everette could react, Seth was carrying the calf up the pasture toward the road, where he’d push open the pasture gate and get to the other side. Seth was naked, barefooted, but he kept onward.

“You look like Sasquatch!” Everette yelled.

“You look like cancer,” Seth yelled back, and with that, he forged into the underbrush.

Everette was suddenly alone with an angsty, babyless cow bawling and pacing the fence line. In the pauses of her calls, he listened to the pasture, bugs buzzing, the creek moving, the grasses swaying, the breeze. Together, they created a harmony that only early summer could compose.

In Seth’s absence, Everette became aware of the fatigue that plagued his body, suddenly heavy and aching.

Everette didn’t know if he would live. The cancer had spread. Stage four. A tumor was wrapped and clinging around a major artery in his leg. He hadn’t told his family. The sickness was probably flooding his whole body by now. The rest of the cows grazed on a far-off hill. He took a seat on a fallen tree limb and waited.

Everette was in this world, a world unto himself for an untraceable amount of time. He thought how he wanted his burial to be like the practice of a Native American tribe he’d read about in one of his daughter’s textbooks. When they passed, tribe members just left the deceased’s body on the open plains. Over time, the body decomposed and became a part of the grass, which the buffalo ate, and the people ate the buffalo, and it was a steady flow of life, each feeding one another. He’d ask Seth to carry his body to this pasture not far from the flood gap and set his body on the ground. He’d ask him to cut the bag from his side and toss the sunuvabitch. He would be with Iowa as it once was, open, farms, fields.
Time passed as he sat on the log.

A rustle in the distance took him from the Iowa he once knew, and he saw the boy appear—mud up to his ankles, the calf trying to kick, cuts on Seth’s legs from the musk thistle. The cow advanced on Seth, ready to claim what was hers. Seth dropped the calf, and it landed on its side, stunned. It soon found its legs and ran to the creek and swam to its mother. They bawled a greeting to one another and trotted off as a complete pair, up toward the hill where the others grazed.

“You’re out of breath,” Everette said to Seth. “You’re out of shape.”

“I am not, you old bastard. I’d like to see you do what I did.”

“I work with you every day, and that’s enough. Put your clothes on, for Christ’s sake.”

Everette tried not to watch Seth dress, but he couldn’t help notice his abs, his legs. Everything in good proportion—a prize bull, a potential father with progeny. Everette looked skyward, imagined it dark with night, bright with stars, imagined himself kneeling before his empty bed this evening. In daylight, he was already composing the prayer for Seth. The prayer—his wishes for the boy—came rushing from his head and heart like the muddy creek water rushing through the flood gap.

He couldn’t help himself. Everette said, “Maybe you should get a test, you know, with Cindy. Maybe you’d be okay together. The baby deserves a father, don’t you think?”

Seth and Everette didn’t say anything. They just let time flow like the creek, furious and quick.

“Maybe you’re right, you old cocksucker,” Seth eventually answered, pulling his t-shirt over his head.
Snow’s disappearance on farmland reveals what was left in fall: tractor-tire rut, corncob, scat, pheasant feather, nitrate, glyphosate. The parched farmer gulps well water. Year after year. Nitrates flow through the English River, through his colon. Sows a weed. Super tumor roots to spine. Roundup and warm chemo. The farmer pisses his Wranglers. The rural body yields what was left in summer: widowed gray-haired woman, daughter with child.
The lump under the skin grew slow and deliberate like yeast dough rising in a warm oven. From the size of pea to a marble, it was located on Maggie’s left arm, just beneath the shoulder. She had drawn a hot bath to soak her body, hoping the red lump would drain whatever it held inside.

The bump burgeoned around the time the farm dog, Agnes, a yellow lab, started bringing dishes to the front door stoop. First it was a teacup and then a full-size plate. Next came a saucer. Maggie imagined she’d have a full set by the time winter arrived. It bothered her. She would feel a little more at ease if she could pinpoint where Agnes was retrieving such wares, but she never noticed Agnes leaving the farm. Maggie knew the dishes weren’t packed away on the farm somewhere in the garage or barn attic. No. Maggie would recognize them. They were in good condition, simple, white, Corel brand.

When the dog brought a dish to the stoop, Maggie picked it up, washed it in the sink, and put it on the dining room table. She didn’t eat at the dining room table anymore, so it really wasn’t taking up space. What mattered were the people who could be missing them. If Everette, her husband, were here, he’d know where they came from. He was good with things like this.

Maggie shut off the bathtub water. She wondered when the day would come that the claw-foot bathtub in the Iowa farmhouse would become too onerous to haul her body into. The bathtub was a beast. Here she was, a woman who could once run the family farm fields for hours without getting tired, cautiously easing her almost sixty-year-old keg legs over the side of the bathtub.
She didn’t need to look in the mirror. She knew what was there, how it came to be. One month away from the farm at Mayo before her husband, Everette, passed. Then there was the funeral and the second funeral: the selling of Everette’s cattle. Now, she had requested a month of solace on the farm. She didn’t want visitors. She wanted to be left alone. She even told her two daughters, Eloise and Clara, to stay away. She knew she must look a mess. Dyed hair with roots grown out. Wrinkles. Bulging varicose veins threading down her legs. Tired eyes. This is how she felt. What did it matter, then, what she really looked like?

She had been depressed before. It took her three years to get over selling the swine herd during the late ’90s, a few months when Clara went off to college, but mostly she was upbeat. Unlike the ’90s, she wasn’t going to panic about this. She would let her body ride it out. Ride out of the pain. Riding out of the pain meant thinking about others. She sensed something different about Clara, something hopeful through the turmoil. She suspected Clara was with child.

Maggie slid into the scalding bathwater (as she preferred it) with the thought of grandchildren on her mind. After a half-hour of soaking, the water became tepid. She drained the water, toweled off her skin. The lump was still red, still sore, still hot to the touch. Maggie could not be bothered with whatever festered inside it now. The last thing she wanted was to drive to town, and be seen by the local doctor. She was tired of doctors, but she also could not recall the date of her last tetanus shot.

Dressed in old jeans and a t-shirt, Maggie opened the bathroom door that led to the dining room. There the large oak table sat with one plate, a saucer, and a teacup. She picked up the teacup and rolled it around in her hands, as though if she squeezed it hard enough, it would tell her something. Holding the teacup, she realized she was hungry. She wanted black beans.
Now that Everette was gone, potatoes-and-meat Everette, the man she had cooked for since high school, she craved nothing but vegetarian food. She had been living on black beans rolled in flour tortillas for days and had not grown tired of the taste.

Maggie stockpiled canned food in one of her daughter’s empty bedrooms. To an outsider, it might look as if she was preparing for the apocalypse, but really it was the nesting of a farm wife who lived a ways from well-supplied grocery stores. She plucked another can of black beans and headed toward the kitchen.

Maggie spooned the beans onto the tortilla. When she ate anything that didn’t come from her garden or wasn’t grown locally, she felt as if she were giving her money to evil. In this case, the last few weeks, she had been eating beans not labeled organic from a supermarket can. Stomachs didn’t seem to have a social conscience.

Maggie stared out the kitchen window to the clump of Indian Grass on the hill. The grass was her project now.

It was a little before noon. There was still plenty of daylight left. Getting her hands in the soil seemed a good idea. She should call the doctor. The lump seemed agitated, but her days in the warm outdoors seemed numbered now that September was nearly over. It could wait; the weather wouldn’t. Agnes knew the drill. She seemed very pleased to follow Maggie to the grass and sit atop the hill, waiting for Maggie to lavish some attention on her belly from time to time.

Maggie had been cutting down a portion of the goldening Indian Grass she had planted years ago on the hill, digging up the roots, and transplanting them down by the house all the way up the lane. The grass was taller than her, and she liked the thought of privacy when someone drove up the farm lane. Her grasses would barricade her in, a fortress. As she worked, the dried seeds fell like confetti and stuck in her hair, burrowed into her shirt, and bra. The seeds reminded
her of lighter, smaller, and more pliable pieces of brown rice with pointed ends. Maggie cut and dug. The autumn sun’s rays had the intense concentration of morning sun all day. It put Maggie in a hypnotic mood.

Maggie took a rest and looked out over the fields. She noticed a long line of Amish buggies coming down the road. The buggies went up the long lane of the Cephus Miller residence. It was a Wednesday, and Maggie instantly worried. A similar scene played out five years ago when the Miller’s son, Isaac, died at birth.

Everette told Maggie he felt as though he could identify more with his Amish neighbors than with most of today’s farmers—though the Amish were a bit crude with their table manners. They never bothered to wash their hands when she fed hired helpers, and they’d just dive their dirty hands straight into the potato chip bags, instead of pouring the chips onto their plates. They burped. Oh, gosh! How they could burp with wild vibrato.

Everette explained they just didn’t know better. When Everette called on the “English,” the Amish term for non-Amish, the non-Amish didn’t seem to want to work, or were too busy drinking or using meth to work, and there were plenty of English folks who didn’t have good table manners. Everette mostly liked the Miller kids. When he needed hired hands, he had been calling on the oldest boy.

The Amish kid told innocent and ridiculous jokes: “It’s a great day for the race, don’t you think?”

“What race?”

“The human race!”

Instead of drinking beer, the Amish kids drank Mountain Dew like it was a part of their religion, which made them easy employees to please. Everette would want Maggie to investigate.
Maggie had been out of touch with her community since Everette’s passing, and those buggies reminded her of her isolation. Everette was the one who was in touch. He loved reading the petty disagreements in the local paper. The school board minutes and city council meetings were his favorite to read aloud.

“Listen to this!” He’d laugh and read a bit about how the city mayor wanted to pay an outside firm to boost tourism, maybe by saying a science fiction character would be born in their community in the future.

Everette enjoyed going into town, sitting at the feed mill for a while, and listening to the gossip. Maggie didn’t ever have to go chasing gossip. Everette brought enough home for both of them. And, when he was home, his cell phone was constantly ringing, and Everette didn’t screen his calls. He answered almost every call by saying, “What’s up, buddy?” and then he’d laugh loudly, a laugh that would echo through the floorboards.

It aggravated Maggie, this impulse for news, living in a place with the implicit expectation that you know everything about everybody, including their lineage, and if you didn’t know, it was offensive. The practice was so ingrained that when a nephew or niece brought a partner to a family get-together, even partners from states away, people would inevitably ask, “Now what’s your last name? Gilbert, huh? Don’t say as I know any Gilberts.” And the question-asker would seem bewildered and disappointed that some connection could not be made.

Maggie stood. She placed the root clumps in the wheelbarrow, and when she felt she had enough, she wheeled the load down to the house for planting. Down by the house, Agnes sat on the stoop with another white, full-sized plate in her mouth. She hadn’t even noticed the dog leave her side.
“Agnes!” Maggie said. “What do you have now?” Triumphant, the dog trotted toward Maggie, her tail wagging. She put the plate down at Maggie’s feet. The plate was wet with Agnes’ slobber. There had been something tasty on its surface for Agnes to lick it clean. Maggie took the dish inside and cleaned it, dried it, placed it with the other large plate, saucer, and teacup on the dining room table.

She labored the rest of the day with the Millers on her mind and Agnes’ discoveries. One more day’s work, and she’d have a barricade of Indian Grass by spring. Just before dusk, the buggies started the opposite way back down the gravel road.

Maggie went into the house and showered the seeds from her body. Her arm was red and sore. In the shower she decided she’d go over to the Millers, just to check in. She hadn’t been off the farm in two weeks. She’d take some packages of hamburger. The Miller family loved getting food. The family had grown to nineteen the last she’d heard. She couldn’t imagine feeding all those hungry mouths, nor bearing all those children.

Maggie took out a Fareway grocery sack and put three pounds of frozen hamburger inside. She walked down the gravel road, then up the long lane. Only a few buggies were left in the lane. She had never talked much to Cephus. He seemed serious and quiet. She left the stoic personalities for Everette to deal with. She had talked with Cephus’ wife, Ida, a few times. The couple was pleasant enough—good neighbors. They stayed out of each other’s hair.

As Maggie neared the converted pole barn the family lived in, she felt eyes upon her. Young ladies stopped bustling around the outdoor tables. Children stopped playing, peeped out of windows. They watched the English woman’s approach. The mood of the place seemed more jovial than expected. Maybe they were having a celebration. She knew this culture had one of the
lowest depression rates, and death was about God, not the deceased. She asked a dirty-faced child if Ida was around. He shook his head no and ran away. Out of the house came Cephus in black drab clothing accentuating his snowy white beard and heavy caterpillar sideburns.

“I hope you don’t mind, Cephus. I saw the buggies and thought I’d better stop by to make sure everything’s all right. I brought some beef for you and the family.”

“Thank you,” Cephus said, extending his arm to take the sack. “Anna, take this inside and put it in the freezer.” A girl, close to marrying age, took the sack from Cephus and went inside, letting the screen door slap behind her. “I’m afraid we’re both having years we’d rather not,” Cephus continued, scratching at his beard. “Ida passed away three days ago. She was helping me move some cattle in the barn when the bull turned on her, put its head down, trampled her.”

Maggie took a breath. Anna came back out of the house and stood by Cephus. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. With Everette being gone, I don’t keep up on news. She was a nice woman.”

“Yes. Well, God is good, and she’s with God now. All is in His hands.”

Maggie wished she could be this devout to believe that all was not up to her. She looked around at the children. All the children with no mother. The children didn’t seem too upset—not like her daughters at Everette’s funeral, red-cheeked and sobbing.

Maggie could feel Anna’s eyes on her arm. “You got an infection in your arm?” Anna piped up. She had the same accent her mother had.

“Yeah. I should probably go to the doctor, but I’d rather stay home. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Well, Alma’s inside. She’s real good with that stuff. She just took acare ova abscess on a goat. Goat’s lookin’ real good.”

Maggie recalled Everette doing the same procedure with a yearling bull. It had an abscess, so he took a sterile knife, cut it open to drain. Maggie thought for a moment. In truth,
she wasn’t ready to leave these people, and she felt just as easy, maybe more so, in their company than a doctor’s.

“I don’t mind if she has a look at it.”

Maggie instantly regretted saying this. She thought for a bit about making an excuse and hustling down the long lane. Her husband was dead. Ida was dead, and now she was going to let an Amish girl investigate the hot mound on her arm.

Alma, a shorter version of Anna with darker hair, strode out of the house.

“Oh, I see,” she said, putting her thumb and forefinger next to the lump. “Looks like you got some infection. I’ll tell ya how I do it. I take a sterile, sharp needle, prick the skin and drain it. If I get any shards of something, I might lance it to make sure there ain’t nothing in there that can cause infection. Then I use some salve from the country store and bandage ’er up.”

“Alma can take care of you,” Cephus said. Maggie wished she would’ve drank shots of whiskey before making her way to the Miller place. Before she could think it over much more, Alma was leading Maggie inside the house and to a wooden chair.

“Sit here. I’ll be back.”

Alma returned with a makeup bag full of medical supplies. She took a white, simple mug from the kitchen and filled it with boiling water.

“Are those your dishes?” Maggie asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“No reason. I just. I have some like them,” Maggie said. Good God, had her dog been stealing from the Miller family?

Maggie didn’t want to broach the dish subject at the moment. Alma was working confidently. Even though her nails had some dirt under them, she took careful steps to place the
needle in the boiling water, then into the flame of a candle. After she had it sterilized, she drenched a cotton ball in rubbing alcohol, and swabbed it over the bump on Maggie’s skin. Alma took up the needle. By this time three-or-so children had gathered to watch.

“This may hurt a bit,” Alma said, pressing her tongue between her lips. She quickly pricked the surface of the wound. Maggie looked to the ceiling, jumped a bit when the needle pierced skin. “Ahh. There we go,” Alma said talking to the wound rather than Maggie. Maggie looked down to see yellow pus ooze from the skin. At first, she thought it looked like a yellow worm crawling from her arm. Alma swabbed at the pus with a Kleenex and put a bit of pressure on the wound to release more pus and now blood. Maggie closed her eyes. When she opened them and looked around her, she had a whole crowd of children watching.

“I hate to tell you, Maggie, but we got some evidence of something stuck up there. You see these bits?” Alma placed Kleenex smeared with yellow pus and a bit of blood under Maggie’s nose. Sure enough, there were dark pieces, splintered pieces. “I think I’m going to have to lance it. Be sure to get all of it out, or else it will just get infected again, then fill again with pus, give you fever, possibly.”

Maggie nodded. She understood. Alma moved to a kitchen drawer and retrieved a castration knife still in the packaging. Some bold children peered at the wound and the bits.

“This one is brand new,” Alma said, waving the castration knife in the air. She repeated the same sterilization process she had done with the needle, then repeated the pattern again with a pair of tweezers she took from the makeup bag. “Okay, I’m a’gonna make an incision.”

Maggie took in a long, deep breath. She might be slow at getting into her large bathtub these days, but she was no wimp. As Alma sliced her skin, Maggie released her breath in one steady stream.
“Well, a’ll be. It’s good we did this.”

Alma probed with the tweezers and brought out a seed. The children, who seemed mostly mute, oohed and ahhed. Alma put the seed in front of Maggie’s nose. Indian Grass seed.

“That’s it. Happens all the time with cattle. They get a seed or something that pierces the skin, gets imbedded, and then an infection.”

Alma swabbed more alcohol on the wound. Maggie grit her teeth at the sharp sting.

“I’m gonna bandage ya up for your walk home, but take it off when you get home so more stuff can drain.” Alma paused and stood back. “Well! We released a seed. Could’a had grass growing out your head come winter. Or a nasty infection. Body don’t like storing all that stuff on its own.”

When Alma was turned away, Maggie pretended to dab at her arm with the Kleenex on which the seed had been placed. She put the Kleenex and seed in her pocket, hoping her audience wouldn’t think anything of it. She didn’t know why she had a preoccupation with what had inserted itself into her body, but she wanted to look at it closer in good light.

Alma had Maggie bandaged and ready to go within minutes. This had been much better than being in a doctor’s office, waiting half the day away. Maggie thanked Alma and got up from the chair. She felt light-headed, but she was strong and sturdy.

She found Cephus on the porch on her way out. The sun was setting. The days were getting shorter. “Alma did a good job,” she said, trying to smile the pain away. “She found a seed.”

“Good,” Cephus stoically answered.
Maggie got closer to Cephus, lowered her voice and said, “This sounds weird, but I think my dog has been getting a hold of some of your dishware. The past few days she’s been bringing dishes into the yard. They look just like the ones in your kitchen.”

Cephus squirted laughter from his mouth, his pores, his whole body. “You don’t say?” Maggie tried to smile, as if she were in on this joke. “I’ll tell you what. One of our youngest, Virgil, thinks his Momma’s been eating on the porch. He’s been fixing her a plate and things, and leaving it out there. He’s excited when the dishes are gone. Says ‘Momma liked the food so much she took the cup!’ I had no idea in the world where those dishes was going to.” Cephus paused. “Do me a favor. Just keep the dishes. Bury ‘em deep underground, if you have to.” “Maybe they’ll grow into a full set of China,” she said and smiled.

Cephus barely smiled. He was back to his stoic self. He nodded, and unceremoniously walked back inside the house.

She turned down the long gravel lane toward home. Agnes trotted beside her, tail wagging. She put her hand over her pocket, the pocket that held the seed. Maggie could not wait to get home, pull the hitchhiker from her pocket, examine its angles in good light, feel the sharp point that had burrowed itself under her skin. She had to tell Clara about this. They would laugh at the absurdity—the absurdity of it all.
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