

**Háskóli Íslands**  
**Hugvísindasvið**  
**Bókmenntir, Menning og Media**

# **Headlands**

*A Short Story Collection*

**Ritgerð til MA-prófs**

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## **Abstract**

The story of the American family dairy farmer is seldom represented in modern literature. When it is, it is often through the vehicle of the “low country person” or iconographic representation that is reductive and inaccurate. My work aims to both respond to the traditional farm narrative, as well as destabilize it.

*Headlands* is a collection of four short stories that are thematically linked to each other. Each is told by the same narrator—a physically-disabled farmer’s son, and while his parents Horace and Laurel Dean are featured in every composition, their roles and characterization are different each time. The collection contains interconnected components meant to put the stories in dialogue with each other, while simultaneously standing alone as autonomous pieces. Gothic and grotesque elements persist through these stories, present to challenge the typical farm narrative while making it a more accurate vehicle to comment on the state of family farming in America.

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## The Process behind *Headlands*

By Ryan Dennis

It is an old joke among authors that the trick to writing is to “steal artfully” from other writers. Artful or not, I find that the person I most often plagiarize is myself.

The idea behind the short story collection *Headlands* traces back to 2008, to some of the first poems I have ever written. For a masters level course in poetry, I drafted “The Words of a Farmer on Monday,” “The Words of a Farmer on Tuesday,” and “The Words of a Farmer on Wednesday.” They were eventually published in *Poetry Ireland*, *Poetry NZ* (New Zealand) and *Fusion* (United States). Each of these poems explores some aspect of being a farmer, and end with the farmer dying. Elements interweaved among the poems, and there is meant to be a progression of dark, gothic undertones through each day of the week. Part of the suggestion behind the thematic core of these poems is that farming has an inescapable hold on the farmer, and although the act of farming itself gets harder, not even death can release the possessed from the possessor. Each poem is meant to be able to stand alone while simultaneously participating in a dialogue with the others.

Seven years later, *Headlands* is attempting to work with the same structure of repetition and interconnected elements, but in fiction. Each story in the collection is intended to examine some aspect of modern family farming, whether as truth or myth, and present various types of progression in moving from one narrative to the next. Much like in the poems, each story endeavors to be darker than the preceding one, both in atmosphere and action. In “The Burning Heifer” the most grotesque element may be an animal on fire (but presented majestically, not in macabre detail), while “Life Below the Silo” has strange sexual tension and “The Dazed Man” includes

cadavers and a rape scene. The connecting elements among the stories vary, from recurring fire scenes to relationships with cats, but is especially carried through in the mounting debilitation of Horace Dean's body. Each story contains a mute, physically (and suspected mentally) handicapped boy as narrator, and his parents Horace and Laurel Dean. While the narrator does not change from story to story, his parents do, occupying completely different characterization in each instance. Like the poems, every story ends with Horace Dean's presumed death—usually fulfilled by the narrator—and in each new story Horace bears the additional scars or infirmity left over from the previous causes of death. For example, "The Burning Heifer" ends with the narrator potentially shooting the father in the head with a shotgun; the Horace Dean in the "The Dazed Man" bears scars on one side of his face. The next Horace Dean has both scars on his face and a hitch in his step, the latter intertextually picked up from a house collapsing on him. The last Horace Dean in this collection has these encumbrances, as well as emphysema from supposedly dying from toxic silo gases. The increased bodily debilitation is meant to complement the progressive gothic atmosphere in the stories.

The structure of the collection is directly aimed to comment on the state of family farming in America and many other developed nations. In each story the Deans are being threatened in regards to losing the farm, which is a common experience for family farmers today, and the progression of grotesqueness that runs through the pieces is intended to be analogous to the consequences of family dairy farming and its effect on the people inside it. In "The Dazed Man" the narrator suggests that in the coyotes eating the carcasses of cows and spreading their bones across the property the dead are forced to resurrect themselves on a farm. The fact that Horace Dean reappears in each story after having seemingly died in the last is

aimed to suggest that family dairy farming is without salvation or saving grace, and is largely made up of people persisting in perverse conditions in spite of the toll it takes on them.

This collection is meant to participate in the greater tradition of the American farm narrative, with the intent of destabilizing it. The farm story has not only existed in the United States since its conception, but was also part of it. The newly founded country did not have the cultural history of London or Paris, and therefore needed a different way to define itself. As a result, it framed itself as an agrarian nation full of farmers, where the values it upheld could be found in the rural people that populated it. Although the figure of the “low country person” appeared in the late nineteenth century, it can be argued that the American psyche still reserves romantic notions about agricultural life. The last one hundred years has seen many stories, particularly films, about honest, hard-working farmers losing their farms. These narratives are largely predictable, clichéd, and have characters that more iconographic than autonomous beings. By introducing the grotesque into the farm narrative I hope to warrant it a closer and more sincere examination by avoiding such common tropes as have previously existed. I hope to de-familiarize the farm story while presenting it more accurately without undue romanticism.

When trying to address the content of my own stories and figuring out how to appropriate it, I tend to resist the temptation to see how similar issues are addressed in other writers’ published works. When someone recommends a book because it contains a parallel component to the story I am working on I never read it until I know I will not work on that story any longer. One reason is that I often feel that it is hard for me to directly learn from a good piece of work. Although Faulkner’s burning barn is notably better than mine, if I were to read it now carefully I would struggle to

isolate the successful elements that I can transpose into my own work. It likely stems from my failure of being a good reader, or failing to bridge the art of reading and writing. Instead, I find it easier to learn from writing that makes mistakes—particularly the same mistakes as I tend to make. Something that does not work tends to stick out more in a novel or short story, and from these things I can sometimes self-fashion lessons. For this reason, author’s very first stories tend to be more instructive for me. For example, in *Heartsongs and Other Stories*, Annie Proulx’s first book, one can sometimes see the danger of trying too hard to invoke characters’ “ruralness” and turning them into caricatures, which is something that does not happen in her later work.

That does not mean to say, however, that my writing of these stories has not been influenced by other writers. My attempt to create a gothic atmosphere at least obliquely, and even if I cannot put my finger on how, is heavily influenced by William Faulkner in novels such as *Sound and the Fury* and other similar work. Endeavoring to write unapologetically and with testosterone (if I may use the term) when it comes to rural subjects is likely borne from my appreciation of Cormac McCarthy and *Blood Meridian*. I also consider *Headlands* an attempt to write against and oppose other narratives about farming. While I appreciate the keen observations of Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres* and John McGarhern in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, not only do these well-established books not address modern dairy farming, but missing is some of the dark oppressive elements that I considered to be inherent in modern family farming due to the nature of the act and the economic and political conditions they occur in.

When these stories will be handed in for this project most of them will have been taken to the second draft. The overall editing process will extend into the

summer and likely into the fall, particularly as more stories are added to the collection, with the goal of the manuscript being ready for submission to an agency by Christmas. The current draft of the stories, for me, is largely about getting the language more polished and filling in major holes in the story. I find it difficult to do more yet because I still feel rather close to them—too close to be as objective as is necessary for major rewrites. The thematic focus needs to be narrowed and sharpened on each one, and in the end they may not even be about what I suspect they are. For example, when finishing “Life Below the Silo” all of a sudden Horace turns to his son and tells him that all he has to leave behind are his words, and he whispers these words to his son. I, as the writer, did not give Horace permission to do that, and I suspect his rebellious action might have changed what that story is really about. In “The Dazed Man” the son crashes the tractor into the house, collapsing it onto his father. The metaphorical weight of “the barn” impeding into the house like that is too strong to ignore in regards to the relationship between farming and non-farming aspects of life, but so far I have not been able to fully bring it to fruition yet in the story. In several more months, after gaining additional space from them, I will revisit the stories again with the intention of fully deconstructing and re-appropriating them. At the moment I view them to be in a necessary, yet unrealized prepubescent stage.

As a guide for this stage of editing, I often refer back to *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Brown and Dave King to have it remind me of the things it taught me many years ago. In high school, when I first became interested in writing, I read nearly every book there was at the time on how to write fiction. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* seemed to have the most direct and comprehensive checklist of ways to sharpen the prose. When I wrote the first draft of the stories I was not consciously thinking of breaking up longer dialogue with beats of action or avoiding filters (he

saw, I feel, etc). During the second drafts, however, I reread the end of each chapter and made the necessary changes.

Oddly enough, another writing book that I was aware of when writing the collection *Headlands* was *On Writing Horror: A Handbook by the Horror Writers Association*. The book is a collection of essays, one of which breaks down how to write an action scene. It talks about starting with a slow, steady, metronomic rhythm in the scene and gradually increasing the tempo by changing the punctuation and sentence length, as well as funneling time and narrative distance. This essay was helpful in most of the concluding scenes of the stories I wrote, especially with the tornado in the story “The Headlands,” the shooting finale in “The Burning Heifer” and the son driving the tractor into the house in “The Dazed Man.”

The point of departure from “how to write” books such as *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*—and perhaps one of the major stumbling blocks at this point in figuring out how to make the collection work—is the ambiguity of the narrator as a character. Basic convention, as any beginning writer is first told, is to ensure that the main character is rounded, active, and either changes or makes a conscious effort not to. Increasingly through the stories the unnamed narrator participates less in the plot and is less evident in scenes, other than to simply relate them. As a result, readers never get the sense that the narrator is a flesh-and-blood individual that they can connect to. In some stories, his purpose is likely unclear.

Another problematic aspect of the narrator is the fact that he is supposed to be mentally handicapped, but has an elegant and sophisticated voice for a boy his age—let alone a mentally disabled child. I wanted him to have a consistent, graceful and somewhat logical articulation throughout the stories. The first reason for this is to provide an anchor, particularly in stories such as “The Burning Heifer,” where Horace

and Laurel have very affected diction, or “The Dazed Man,” in which Horace behaves like a madman and Laurel is overly submissive. Secondly, without such a voice I was afraid that the stories might fall into the same trap as many other stories about rural people in making them “hillbillies” and only representing the “low country person.” Some of those that work most with the subject of Rural America, such as Pinckney Benedict and early Annie Proulx, only represent ignorant characters. I wanted to avoid this type of treatment on the subject.

Nonetheless, the incongruity between the suspected ability of the narrator and how he tells the stories is a major stumbling block at this point for readers. I suspect that the keystone to getting these stories to work is finding a way to bridge that gap that is convincing to both the reader and the stories themselves. I had a similar problem once in a story presented to an undergraduate fiction workshop at the University of Iowa. The instructor suggested a simple, maybe even too simple, tactic: anticipate the questions the readers are going to ask by having the narrator ask them first. In other words, the narrator in *Headlands* should probably address why he is so much more articulate to the reader than he seems capable of. I tried to avoid it in early drafts of the stories, but readers have confirmed what I had already suspected: it must be tackled.

Again, Horace may have provided a way into these stories on his own before he stepped into the silo. I realize that I might have been unconsciously thieving the final scene from the film *Lost in Translation* in which Scarlett Johansson whispers something inaudible in Bill Murray’s ears (Fine, maybe I do steal from other writers). Still, after writing the end of “Life Below the Silo” I am haunted by the idea that the farmer believes that all he has left is his story, and that it gets told to someone who cannot physically speak. It seems to suggest, to me in any case, a complex futility

that is inherent to modern family farming. On a personal level, I believe that the story of the small dairy farmer who has farmed in the last two decades is not being told, and that is what motivates me to write about it. I can imagine that theme of voicelessness tying the stories together, particularly since it is already present, in part, in a mute narrator. If the narrator chiefly recognized himself as a story teller—albeit one that ironically cannot speak—then somehow I suspect he will be able to account for having the ability to articulate his narration, whether by fate or some other force. In any case, it may give him room to address it, and therefore preempt the concerns of the reader.

I have terrible difficulty in coming up with titles. I always put a working title on top of a piece while working on it—another old schoolyard trick from past writing teachers—but that title often changes over and over, and may still never hit the mark. Yet, on the other hand, sometimes finding the right title unlocked the entire work and reshaped its direction. This happened in this case. “Headlands” was meant to be a working title for the fourth piece, but I suspect it might be a good fit for the entire collection. In farming, the headlands are the ends of the field where the tractor has to turn around while making rows. The crop planted in the headlands are put in a different direction than the rows that fill up the body of the parcel. The term “headlands” also struck me as potentially being a metaphorical place that only exists in the mind, as does much of the narration in these stories. The characters, especially the narrator, tends to live in their own heads, a part from reality. It also seems to speak to the idea of the story of farming only existing in the son’s mind, as was previously mentioned. It may sound trite, but coming up with this title has given me new focus and energy for the project, as it seems to add an additional unit of cohesiveness to it that was lacking.

Just as I tend to plagiarize myself, so are the previous things I have written in dialogue—or at least overtly conscious of one another. The first story in this collection, “The Burning Heifer,” represents a shift in writing style in my work. While I am not sure I intended it to be a reaction to a previous novel I wrote, in hindsight the connections are clear. I spent eight years, on and off, writing six drafts of a novel I called *Farming, Crescendo*. I queried all major agencies in the United States, three of which eventually asked to read the whole manuscript. Their comments were the same: while they appreciated the prose, they found them too slow, the beginning dragging, and the novel too quiet to sell for a first time author. Hence, in “The Burning Heifer,” I wrote a story that is faster, the prose slimmer, and the content darker. This collection represents an endeavor to embody a different type of voice in the story, perhaps in an attempt to address past criticism.

Still, I am haunted by some of the same struggles I have always encountered. As mentioned before, a major concern to these stories is the lack of characterization of the narrator. Although it is the most basic craft element to writing, it is something I often have difficulties with. The main reason, as I see it in any case, is my aversion to interior monologue. Aesthetically, I tend to be drawn more to stories that maintain greater narrative distance and allow as much of the piece as possible to progress without the hindrance of introspection. I love for nearly all of the story to be shown in the actions and reactions of characters and little to be told to us directly. For this reason I appreciate Cormac McCarthy and how the work is largely unbothered by interjections, but instead maintains a ruggedness for both his characters and the novels from making the reader interpret what the characters must be feeling. As is the problem for many younger writers in reverence to their masters, I do not have the craft skills of Cormac McCarthy, and therefore sometimes my stories, as I believe has

happened in *Headlands*, come across as woody and without characters becoming fully realized. (Perhaps it is worth noting that the less interior monologue a story has, the more episodic it becomes, which is much different than the highly-expositionized short stories generally published in American literary journals). In addition to the question of characterizing the narrator further, I suspect that Laurel, particularly in “The Dazed Man,” has not yet been represented as a fully autonomous being. I think she may have to be more active in scenes in exhibiting what her desires are. To avoid additional types of criticism, I have a feeling it is even more important to make her a fully-realized character, with at least some level of agency, in a story in which she gets raped.

Although it is not a matter at the forefront of my mind at this point in the process, there may be concerns over the marketability of *Headlands* as a collection. It is always more difficult for a writer to publish a collection of short stories than a novel as his first major work, but I am less bothered by that than its size. Generally, it is often said that novels require at least 80,000 words to fall within a marketable range, with 70,000 words stretching the inclusive boundaries. Short story collections, in following suit, require as many stories as it takes to fulfill a similar size. Originally I had planned to write five stories for the collection at around 10,000 words apiece. Unfortunately, this poses two problems. The first is that the collection will still fall distinctly short of the publishing baseline precedent, adding to its disadvantages of a first-time author publishing it. Secondly, short stories that long are difficult to place in literary journals, which generally cap stories at seven to eight thousand words due to limited space. Placing as many of the stories as I can in well-respected journals will be imperative in making the case of the collection’s quality and acceptability in the query letters to agents.

Although I am not yet willing to change the size of each story, believing that they should be as long as is required for them to reach full potential, I am considering extending the collection to eventually include seven stories. Although it is likely to still be under the 70,000 word threshold and maybe still too small, it may give it more of a fighting chance on the desk of publishers. I may also incorporate the “Words of a Farmer” poems that initiated the collection by writing four more of them, allowing one for each day of the week, and placing them before each story. This, hopefully, will serve several purposes: 1). It will make the collection a little longer 2). It helps justify being seven stories—the length of a week 3). It provides a legend for the thematic intent of the story by doing the same thing in distillate form. In other words, the poems will have interconnecting elements, becoming increasingly darker, and end with the death of a farmer, just as the stories do. While part of me fears that it may be hitting the reader over the head with the intention of the collection, at this point I am willing to try it out.

The risk, however, of extending *Headlands* to seven stories is that they may start to become redundant and repel the reader. With so many connecting elements (eventually the reader is going to figure out that the farmer is going to die at the end), the challenge becomes to make each story unique enough to still be engaging while staying within the rules I set for them. The boundaries of outrageousness has already been challenged with dead bodies lying in fields and farmers driving into tornados. It will be interesting to see how *Headlands* can hold together when extended to seven stories.

As a reader, the only thing that I ask from a writer is that he or she leaves all the sweat and blood they have on the page before I read it. I have no doubt that if *Headlands* is going to someday work as a project and ultimately get published that it

will take all that and more, and many rewrites besides. During the course of working on this collection I have to realize that the reason I have not attempted to see a full body of work through to submission to publication is that I was left a little shell-shocked from failing to publish the novel three years ago. I had given more than I was expected I was able to for that project, and perhaps more disappointed than I realized when none of the three agencies decided to take it on. I had unconsciously lost the confidence that carrying on a major work to the end is worth what one gives up of himself in doing so. Nonetheless, working on *Headlands* has given me a second wind and a substantial start to a body of writing that feels worth pursuing and challenging. Having deadlines and expectations at stake, I have developed better writing habits as far as how much and how frequently I write, which was my central unspoken goal for the semester. I look forward to completing *Headlands* and having it ready to be submitted to an agency or publisher by the upcoming autumn, hopefully having a collection that represents a significant growth in ability.

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## **The Burning Heifer**

By Ryan Dennis

This is how I saw my father before me: He knelt in the packed manure, dark moisture pooling around his knees. The flames of the collapsing ceiling framed him in deep light. The stained T-shirt had been partly burned off his chest, some of it hanging in rags, exposing his pale stomach and the wet hair spread across it. His features began to disappear in the blinding glare. He still reached out, having just lost the thing that he had—what he had struggled so hard to keep in his hold.

Cats stared at me over their shoulders from the corner of the barn. I heaved through its gray light like a quiet heartbeat, chaff bunching up in front of me because I don't lift my feet enough. The dust I stirred behind me swelled as a blue haze in the self-made dusk, deliberately twisting as it rose to the ceiling beams. The fan in the wall turned slowly, in even strokes that sent silhouettes in a constant flicker and made it appear that inside those shadows the walls shivered, but I realized that to be only a trick of the eye. My arms had a tendency to swing away from me as I moved, as if I were a collection of unorganized motion. Because of dust and age the sun no longer penetrated the block windows to illuminate the dead flies hanging in the grooves. Somehow they said that farming now is about doing the hard things, and that there are people that can do it and those that cannot. I don't know how I am going to turn the farm around, only that I will.

Ahead of me, my mother rushed up to my father in the milk house and said, panting, “Jesus, see what was calved.” They had reached the maternity pen first, and when I approached it they stood with their back to me, looking down at their feet.

I knew the slick bundle to be a calf, but I could not at first decipher why it garnered so much attention. Its ivory hooves were greasy and pristine. Its small tail stretched flat in the bedding. Its coat had a midnight blackness and the few white marks that were pure and clean and uninterpreted. Then it lifted its head to me, and I saw.

It didn’t have a nose.

Its bottom teeth protruded out of its mouth that seemed to want to both express longing and breathe at the same time. Its pale tongue, flattened wide, reached into the dark barn air as much as it could. Its bloated eyes lolled and floated in its head, as if it either could not focus on me, or if the things it saw hurt it. My father followed its gaze, and then noticed me behind him.

He sighed, and then his shoulders sank. “I’d much rather you didn’t see this,” he said.

My mother recoiled and twisted her face in disgust.

“Check what those cats are up to,” he said to me gently. “I seen a few slinking around here earlier.”

“He don’t know any better,” my mother burst out. Her body swung back and forth with her emphasis.

“Don’t say it.”

“He’s retarded, and—”

“He needs special!”

“—and it don’t bother him if something else is or isn’t.”

My father took a step at her and squared himself. He didn't know if he should make a fist with his hand or a finger or grab the front of her shirt with it. "You don't ever say it like that," he whispered through his teeth.

He stomped off, through the old stanchion barn, under the quiet fall of whitewash that collected in his hair. My mother chuckled and turned away towards the feed room, forcing a laugh one more time as she disappeared.

The calf laid its chin in the bedding. The straw in front of its face pulsed with condensation. Only then did I realize that it could not bawl or cry out like other calves, because staying alive used its chance to have a voice.

It was disgusting.

We watched them crawl up the driveway the same way heifers are wary of those that pass by their pen. It wasn't until then that I realized that I had never before seen a sheriff's car. It was long and polished—something belonging to a movie instead of our farm. He wore a cowboy hat, which people did not do in this area. The second car was gray and expensive. The man inside was young and had a suit that fitted well. I had the feeling that both people were used to drawing attention to themselves, each in their own way.

"Must be someone was growing pot in our fields again," Mother said. We stood by the calf hutches, milk buckets still in our hands. The calves strained towards us, lapping their tongues in the air.

The sheriff leaned on his car door, and then seemed annoyed when it was him who had to approach my father. The man in a suit followed, pulling up his pant legs as he stepped through the chaff.

“What can I do for you, Law?” My father asked. He turned over the bucket he had and sat on it. I could tell, by watching him closely, that this annoyed the sheriff too.

“More like what you can do for yourself. Or haven’t so far.”

My father stretched his legs in front of him and folded his hands in his lap.

“Take it it’s not about the coke I smuggled or the whores I cut to pieces.”

The man in the suit looked over the spilled buckets and thin calves. He walked around the pitchfork leaning from the ground.

“Look here, Horace,” the sheriff said. “The lawyer and me have paperwork that says if you don’t pay the remaining of the mortgage on the place in thirty days, we have to get you off here.”

“The result of defaulting for six months,” the lawyer said.

The sheriff was a man my father’s age. I assumed that he had a practiced response for whatever my father would say next. Instead, however, my father only stared into his hands, his head down. It looked like prayer. If it was, he ended whatever he had asked for silently by dragging out a half-chewed cigar from his back pocket and sticking it in the side of his mouth.

The lawyer snapped a lighter and held it before my father. My father stared at him until he put the light back in his coat pocket.

He spat the grizzle into the chaff. “Can’t I just give a little and get more time?”

“Listen, this ain’t nothing to me other than because I’m wearing the badge,” the sheriff said. “Apparently the time for giving just a little is over.”

The lawyer squatted down in front of me, even though we were the same height. He reached out and touched the side of my leg.

“Do you like being a farmer?” he asked.

“He ain’t no baby,” my mother said, shifting on her feet. “No reason to talk to him like one.”

The lawyer straightened himself and turned to my parents. “You need a clear balance in thirty days. After which the value of the estate will be assessed and then sold at auction to recuperate the debt.”

My father shot off the bucket. It tipped over behind him. “Only thing you need to assess is the fact that you’re not getting this place.”

“This would go easier if you didn’t get banty cock, Horace,” the sheriff said.

“You look around and I can feel your judgment, Mr. Lawyer.” My father was in the face of the other man. His head had a way of locking in on him while the rest of his body swayed beneath it. “You believe the life I done around me is shit. And yet, you want my shit, Mr. Lawyer. I hope you know the belongings of the things you want.”

The lawyer put his hands in the pockets of his pants and spread his legs, resolute not to back up or lean away. His face rippled where he was biting the inside of his cheek. His shoulders only relaxed when my father stepped aside. He seemed to think he had won.

My father reached into the hutch of the deformed calf and scooped his hand beneath its tail. Its manure was orange and pasty as a newborn.

The lawyer could have run away or grabbed his arm, but both of those must have seemed unacceptable in the second he had to think about it, because he didn’t move. Then my father touched his own forehead, gently, brushing his fingers down to the bridge of his nose and again lengthwise across it. It smeared into his matted hair and in a falling arc across his cheek. It beaded on his unshaven chin. The lawyer

balled the fabric in his fists and did his best to keep his gaze on my father. He was holding his breath.

“Penitence, Mr. Lawyer,” my father said.

The farmer held out his soiled fingers in front of him. He turned towards the sheriff, who instinctively put his hand over his gun.

Suddenly, the lawyer exhaled in a wailing shriek that caused both men to turn. He backpedaled wildly, swinging his arms and almost lost his balance. After he disappeared around the corner there was a still silence, until a car door slammed shut and gravel sprayed beneath a speeding vehicle.

My father wiped his hands on his jeans and the sheriff turned away with his thumbs in his belt loops, cursing to himself. He was climbing into his car when he stopped, holding onto the roof, half-crouched in the air.

“Just to clear your thinking, next time I’ll be back with more men,” he said. He made a k-turn around a pile of bent fence posts and pulled away.

“Smoke!” I yelled, tapping my palm against the kitchen window. Sparrows on the front porch shattered into the twilight. My own eyes twisted back at me in the reflection of the glass.

The tea kettle howled on the stove, its flapper in a panic seizure. My mother picked it up and poured the foggy water over a bag inside the cup, lifting it up and down by its tab as the water browned. “Steam,” she said, rolling her eyes. The kettle was still in the other hand. She said it slower. “Steam.”

I lost my balance and my hand landed on the answering machine. It began to play.

“Mr. Dean, this is Irfan Mecinovic from Gmuend Feed. We need to talk about your account. Please call me back.”

“Smoke, smoke, smoke!” I yelled. I began to, without much of a conscious decision, bang my forehead against the glass. The window rattled inside the pane.

“Christssake,” my father shouted from the other room. “Get the boy away from there.”

He barreled through the chicken cages and envelopes scattered on the linoleum. By this time, my mother had both hands on my wrist, leaning against her weight. She let go just in time for him to brush her out of the way so he could put a bear hug on my shoulders. There was a purple explosion in my mind every time I hit the window. I felt the pressure of my father’s arms around me, but he didn’t pull me back. Instead, his arms melted away.

The answering machine clicked again.

“Mr. Dean, this is Felix Karman at Westend Tractor Supply. Call me back. There’s no reason to bring our lawyers into it.”

“Great fuck,” he whispered.

My father jammed his boots over his bunched pant legs. Dried manure cascaded to the floor. I followed behind him and reached for my sneakers off the washing machine. He grabbed them out of my hands and tossed them in the hamper. “Stay here,” he yelled. He shut the door and the crocheted caricature of the farm rattled on the wall. I followed him out in my socks.

“Horace,” the machine said to the empty kitchen. “This is out of hand.”

At first it seemed the heifer barn itself writhed above us, furious, but I realized it was only the way the flames twisted over its frame as they went into the darkness. Smoke coiled into the blue night and fringed the glow of the building. The light was

so great that the snaking of the flame was mirrored on the body of the old loading tractor in the driveway, the skidsteer rims in the goldenrod, and the plastic feed buckets that lay scattered around the building. The front of the barn creaked—growled, I thought, and the sliding door fell, pushing a breath of dust in front of it that resettled in the chaff. The now-opened front of the barn framed a pen of half-grown heifers darting from one corner to another with their tails in the air. My father jumped into them.

“Go,” he screamed, opening the gate. “Bitches, go.”

But they didn’t go at all. They dashed from one space to another, pivoting swiftly on their front feet, kicking their hind legs in the air. They would not jump into the darkness.

The barn cracked. The ghost in the architecture of the barn left into the night and the face of the building collapsed into the pen.

There was a gasp behind me. My mother trembled, walking into the barn’s light with her hands to her chest. I reached for her and clumsily put my arms around her shoulders, but she pushed out of my grasp without looking back.

The burning debris pinned my father and the wide-eyed heifers. A wall of fire rose from the bedding and danced like curtains in the wind. The shell of steel and wood still above him pulsed with luminescence. Some of the tops of hay that strained out of the bedding dried in the heat and now combusted with flames at their tops, sections of the pen turned into a vigil of mourning around my father. He lunged towards the side gate, but it was too heavy. The poles had already begun to steam, releasing their ancient moisture.

He raised up his hands and tried to herd them through the flames, but they bent around him in both directions, sometimes colliding into the side of the water trough or

thrashing into each other. They huddled together in the far corner and quivered, trying to push themselves further into the group like puzzle pieces forced to fit. “Christ sake,” my mother said. “Get out of there.”

He threw himself into the pile. Their lowered heads pushed him back. Curling tongues of fire fell from above him. It scorched his flannel overshirt. As if the epiphany he needed, he pulled himself out of it and plunged it in the water trough. Water shed off the fabric as he yanked it out and wrapped it around the head of the heifer next to him. The animal reeled until its hock backed into the flaming wall, but before it could spring forward my father lunged at it.

My father emerged through the fire and stood before us, heifer in his hands, flames twisting around him.

I first thought the flames could not hurt my father, that he was stronger than the fire, or made of it himself. As he appeared in front of my mother and me again, and then another time with his back arched and dazed heifers in his arms I saw how sparks buried themselves in his jeans and darkened the fabric, growing into widening circles and eventually baring his skin. The nails in the boards that had rusted to the color of wood now glistened in the heat, like jewels hidden among the barn. Again and again he pushed through the hedgerow of light, materializing before us, each time bent further towards the ground, his face wet and bronzed. He was less bothered to put out the flames that crept along the clothing that loosened itself from him, every time appearing without fail, systematically, and battered. I stood at an angle and could have watched him stumble and grab at the fleeing heifers, having to pull himself off the ground over and over, calling out after them with failing breath—but instead chose to only see how he came back to us every time, re-manifested. I had to keep stepping away and shielding my eyes—getting further and further from my

father while he struggled. It was clear that it was his battle against the barn he had built.

Rescued heifers, after heaved from the lip of the bedding, stood dazed. They drifted towards me and my mother, just to be around something familiar in the outside world. There was one heifer left, and my father had her in his arms. She tried to kick her legs and rocked inside his hold. He tottered from side to side with the last of his strength, trying to step against the gravity of his swaying. He could not exhale a breath that was not also a scream that would rise up jaded to the hissing steel above him. His eyes glowed from the ash smeared along his face. Then something happened that I never imagined was possible: my father stumbled.

The heifer's chin hit the bedding first. Her eyes lolled from the rest of her weight that followed and jostled inside itself. She thrashed her legs, her hooves scraping at the wet straw. One of them dug in and she lunged forward just as my father tried to wrap himself around her again. Her body slid through his arms. His fingers disappeared into the black hair that flowed over them. Then he held nothing. She threw herself sideways into the fire, thrashing her head. Her body sank down. She had stumbled on the burning debris. The flames shimmered when, apparently, her coat caught on fire.

“God alive,” my mother gasped.

I bit my shoulder. I squeezed my eyes shut, but I couldn't look away. I knew that I was supposed to do something. I knew that I had to do the hard thing in the right moment because that's what a farmer does, and if I couldn't figure things out like this then I might never be a farmer. But I did nothing. I sank my teeth into my flesh and whimpered.

Suddenly, the fiery shape of an animal sprung from the flames. It cleared the end of the pen, entering abruptly into the night. Its legs stretched beneath it in the air. Its features had disappeared in the flames that rose from it but within the liquid profile I saw its eyes, still burning with their own light. They looked at me. They took all of me into them and judged me. Its forefeet hit the ground of the driveway and then its hind legs, embers falling from its belly.

It shot through us—through my mother and me and the other heifers that were merely shadows that scattered out of its way. It ran as fast as it could, the flames that rose from it pulled back like a dress slipping away. It surged through the driveway—its hooves clapping against the hard ground—it dashed the length of the lawn, stamping into the earth its memory. We watched it. Me, the other heifers that stepped toward its direction with their ears perked, my mother with her hands over her head, and my father still in the pen, the fabric of his undershirt burned through in black-rimmed holes. Beneath it his purple skin glistened. His arms still reached out. The flaming heifer climbed the pasture behind the house, through the narrow creek bed, growing smaller, flickering, until she was like a star that kept us looking at the place it was last extinguished because then it was gone and there was us, standing in the darkness as the insulation of the roof fell gently over us like a Pentecostal ash.

The morning milking started in the normal way—tapping the stalls with a cane and heading the cows towards the holding area while the milkers ran through their wash cycle. We dipped the teats of the first cows in iodine, wiped them off, and got them milking. We had gone through several batches when the milk inspector appeared in the doorway—which was normal in its own way. He had glasses and

jeans, and the type of shoes that showed he was neither a farmer nor middle class.

“How are you today?” he asked.

My father ascended the steps of the pit. He no longer answered the preliminary niceties, and I understood it to be a show of strength.

“Your somatic cell is high again. Going to shut you down soon.”

My father pushed past him towards the milk house, where he always handled such matters. He would tell the man that he had to sell a lot of heifers to meet bills, and because of it everything he is milking is now stale. They’ll start freshening again soon, he would say. He would promise next month it will test lower. It was a dance they both knew well. The inspector followed behind him and eased the door to a close.

I took the dipper and paced the line of milking cows, waiting for one to be done. My body remembered these simple functions and it was easier than most things I did. From routine one could achieve a certain grace. That’s why I liked farming.

I got the sense that I was different—a stronger sort of animal. It was in the way people looked at me and seemed to make some sort of immediate decision. I only heard my father say something to that effect once, saying that of course I’m different, I’m a farmer’s son. Another breed altogether. I suspect the transition from being a farmer’s son to a farmer is a jarring moment. Still, being marked as different I try to do the right thing and embrace my destiny. Someday I will run this farm.

When my father came back we milked in silence. Pale steam rose out of the pit from the heat of the animals’ bodies, but if my father also saw the irony, he kept it to himself. We leaned against the pipeline on the side of the wall, our elbows hanging over the manure grates. The galvanized steel in the parlor had browned and cracked in the course of my father’s life. Every time the gate was shut or a cow bumped into

the wall it flaked into the drain and was carried away. If I stopped for a moment I would notice the steady pulsing of the milkers, but if I really listened I would hear the parlor crumbling around me. My father looked into the haze without blinking, and I wondered if he saw things that I didn't.

Men came the day after the heifer barn burned down and walked around the charred rafters with clipboards in their hands. My father did not like strangers on his farm and sat on a pile of old tires in the goldenrod, watching them. In actuality, there was nothing for them to contest him on, because he did not have insurance. They did not take long, because they did not like walking on ashes and manure. Without finding any logical explanation they assumed it was a short in the wiring. In the final calculation the barn set itself on fire.

"It's a shit thing," my father said. Because he didn't say anything more, I knew he was talking about farming.

He turned around and took the milker off the cow behind him. He went down the row and removed each unit, sometimes making sure the cow was done by cupping the back of the udder in his hand, gently, as if holding something that might evaporate away in the steam. When the last cow finished he opened the gate and tapped them with a cane until they wandered back to the freestalls. Their frames paled into silhouettes, and then nothing at all. As the distance between him and me became greater his features, too, began to disappear into the breath of the parlor, until he was nothing more than an apparition, his voice reaching back to me. "But we're hard to kill."

He pulled an unlit cigar out of his back pocket and wiped the moist end on his jeans. "The land speaks to us," he said, pounding his chest. "Tells us not to be weak if we want to keep it." He stuck it in his mouth and gently grinded at the end like a

pup on the teat. “Ain’t no use telling it ain’t like that when it is.” He took out the stack of paper towels and pointed it at the udders around us, but didn’t say anything about them.

He moved from one cow to the next, dipping their teats mechanically. The animals shifted on their hind legs as he passed. “People might walk away, and then there’s people who can’t.” The pace at which he moved quickened, but the rhythm of his motions stayed the same, front teats to back, the cows flinching from the coolness of the iodine. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t stop to look at me or do anything other than what was needed to finish one cow so he could move to the next. “People are going to come to take it all away from you—people already coming.” A heifer felt the tension transferred through my father’s hands and she kicked her hind leg, striking his wrist. He didn’t seem to notice. “Then you’ll have to see, is it in you, Boy?”

He dropped the dipper on the manure grate and walked towards me. The dark liquid exploded behind him. His face burned. I had trouble looking him in the eye. “Then it either is, or it isn’t.”

He balled my shirt in his fist and pulled me into his fiery breath. Spit flew from around the cigar. “Is it in you, Boy?” he shouted.

My heart pounded beneath his hand. It made me excited.

I felt like a farmer.

The wind swept through the hay, twisting the grass from its roots. It carried with it the smell of the weather about to change as it loosened the empty seed hulls on the head of the haybine and flung them around the machine. I sat on the floor of the cab, among the wrenches, empty grease cartridges, and scattered country tapes. My father sometimes reached down to tuck my legs in a way he thought more comfortable

or pull on my shirt to straighten me. Leafhoppers crawled along the glass and sometimes flung themselves into the draft.

A stone benchmark in the hedgerow claimed this field to be the highest point in Steuben County. When the haybine passed along the edge of the field I could look down and see our place. I shaped my hand against the glass and for the first time realized that a farm was something you can hold against your fingers.

My father pulled back on the throttle and slowed at the end of the windrow, not so much negotiating the great machine, I imagined, but compelled from the weight of my mother's eyes on him. She started in on the field with the old cabless 4,000—black smoke billowing around it—to scatter the hay with a rake. Why my parents cut hay in the futility of a coming storm I did not know, but I had come to reconcile that there were many things about farming I didn't understand.

My mother jolted as she slammed on the parking brake and jumped off the small tractor. The noises in the head below me unwound and the haybine came to a stop, too. "Time to stretch," my father said. He grabbed my shirt and pant legs and lifted me out of the cab.

Her arms swung as her boots crushed the bristle of cut hay below her. My father headed towards her, in his own time. The yellow hay nearly glowed against the dark gray-purple atmosphere that brooded above it. Although I knew it to be only the ghost architecture of cooling water, I felt small because of the swelling masses in the sky. For a moment I wondered if they were not actually clouds, but another place that was the reflected soul of the one of the ground. And here were the three of us, between them.

My parents met at the top of the world, the sky climbing around them.

"What are you going to do, Horace?" my mother shouted into the wind.

“I’m going to be the man I am. That means getting us through it, just like always.”

A barn swallow crossed the field, pulsing over the windrows. Its wings split the air silently.

“This ain’t like always, Horace.”

My father shook his head side to side, his hair flying over his ears.

“This is a real fuck up you got going on,” she said. “This is where it all goes. How you fixing this, Horace?”

He put his hands up. “Stop.”

A silhouette flashed in front of my face and knocked me against the haybine tire. The barn swallow swung and dipped through the air with a precision nothing human could match. Several more skimmed along the hedgerows and flared up to show their pale, creamy breasts.

“Ain’t a god damn bank in Hell’s Meadow going to give you another loan,” Mother said.

“I’m going to fix it.”

“I never signed up for this. I want out.” My mother rushed up to him and hit him in the chest. “I want out now!”

My father turned his head away and tried not to flinch.

The field grew heavy with birds. Their pointed wings flickered around my parents. Where they could have come from in this open plain I did not know, unless they rose from the land itself. The air was thick with darting shadows, crisscrossing through it in jagged flight. They were silent except for the whispers their wings made as they carved the wind.

My mother poked him with her fingers. “You ain’t no good no more. You’re soft. You gone pussy.” She ducked as a bird lunged over her head. “You ain’t even shot that retarded calf.”

“I’m not shooting the calf.”

“Sure, because it ain’t as fucked up as all else here. You gone pure pussy, Horace Dean. Now you’re a man that ain’t got a farm.”

“I ain’t shooting the calf.”

The birds swirled around them in a flush of swooping arcs. They created a shifting lattice over the grey horizon that caved in around my parents. The birds churned among themselves and dove and darted and flashed up among them. Their wings blazed and they danced like dark flames that descended from above. It was all to say that the center was not holding and that the sky was shattering over them.

“Hey!” my father yelled, chasing after her. “I ain’t shooting the calf!”

My grandmother burst into the kitchen with the smoke of her upheld cigarette trailing behind her. She snapped her gaze to each side of the room and then pulled a chair from the table to drop herself down. Her presence tended to collapse the space around her, so that Mother and I sitting with her at the table was like being dragged there like bath water pulled towards the drain. She brushed the mottled oak in front of her like a dealer about to lay her wares. Grandma, or Momo, as she named herself around me because she insisted I called her that once, pulled a pack of Pall Malls out of her front pocket and waved them at my mother. When my mother took them Momo snorted, as if she had caught her daughter in a conspiracy.

“Horace thinks you quit,” she said.

My mother pursed her lips and exhaled in my direction. “This one ain’t telling.”

“And how’s life in the Promise Land?” my grandmother asked. The end of her sentence rose in anticipation to a sinister laugh. She pushed her hands out in front of her, as if there was something tangible she could brush away.

My mother, raised by this woman, was practiced at fielding her goading. “Shit is what shit is,” she said, twisting sideways in her seat to look out the window. The smudge from my forehead was still there to blur the view.

“That fire was a hell of a thing. They get it figured what did it?”

Mother shrugged and flicked her ashes in a potted geranium on the floor.

“Do you think he might have...?” Momo nodded towards me from across the table.

“If I thought he could’ve I would have given him a box of matches to finish the job.”

“Well, in any case,” Momo said, pushing out her chair. “A farm ain’t no place for a head handicap boy.” Momo pulled a crumpled handkerchief out of her back pocket. She leaned over the table to wipe my chin, although there was nothing on it. I could feel her dried mucous scraping against my skin. “It’s hardly safe for him.”

“You don’t say head handicap boy,” my mother muttered. “And he can do things on the farm. Milk and stuff. You wouldn’t think so, but he can.” She dropped the rest of her cigarette in an empty beer bottle. The glass immediately fogged over. She pushed her chair out and crossed her legs, her stained sock bobbing off the end of her foot like a deflated lung. “Well,” she suddenly shouted, throwing up her hands. “Seems like you got more to say!”

Now my grandmother shrugged, replicating the coolness of my mother before. “Let me take him for a while. I get lonely, is all. And like I said, somebody needs to file and get the government money.”

My mother shot up from her seat. It was with such force that at first I thought she was going to drive out the old, leathery-faced woman in our kitchen. I thought that she was incensed that Momo suggested that I was a burden and that I was unwanted. I wanted to put the words in her mouth for her: He’s my son and we’re a family. That’s all there is to it.

She paced in front of the window, her arms crossed. “I don’t know. Horace...”

“Horace won’t file because he won’t call the boy mental. And hell, I’ve seen cats jump through the wall fan in the barn and all that came out was a head and a front leg. They don’t know why they’ve did it! And if a healthy cat ain’t got the sense...”

My mother grabbed the pack of cigarettes on the table and lit another one. She looked as guilty as the last time I saw her lie to my father about smoking. This time she opened up the window and tried to flick the smoke outside with the back of her hand, but it only made it circle her tighter.

“You better take him before Horace comes in,” she said.

Momo grabbed both of my shirt sleeves and tugged them toward the door. I stared at my mother. Momo thought that I did not understand so she pulled harder, leaning against my weight.

I saw my mother clearer than I ever had. She should have had the love that a human feels for a child, and if not that, then the motherly instinct that any of the animals share. Because she had neither, I knew she was created wrong. She may say

that her stained clothes and the life she married into was the hand dealt against her, but I knew it went much deeper than that. She was born handicapped.

Momo asked my mother for help, but she turned her back to both of us, her arms crossed.

“Looks like you need some learning at first, but then we’ll be alright,” Momo said, through her strained teeth.

They could try and try, but no one takes you away from your farm. That’s why I bit her.

Momo sprang back and collided into the cupboards. She grabbed her wrist and held it in the air for my mother. “He ain’t fit. He ain’t fit,” she screamed.

She stormed out of the house. Her truck door slammed shut.

I tried to grasp the bolt but it turned in my hand, which had a tendency to knuckle over it. The other latches were stiffened by dried saliva and feed dust left from calves sucking on them, but the retarded calf did not do this. The nut slid down the thread in rigid quarter turns. When it finally fell to the chaff I knocked the bolt out with the back of my hand and looked towards the kitchen window one more time to see that it was dark.

The calf lifted its head as I stumbled into its hutch. Its mouth was open, as if just about to make a meaningful sound, but it couldn’t. Its head rocked back and forth as it stared at me. “Go,” I said, motioning towards the open door with my forearm. “Go.”

I moved towards it, falling into the narrow walls with each step. When I stood over it I bent down and tried to scoop its belly into my arms. Its head stretched

between my legs, breathing into the darkness. I lifted the calf, but it did not bring its legs under it. I heaved and heaved, but its flaccid body only twitched against me.

“Go!” I yelled, through clenched teeth, saliva sparking into the night.

I pulled, hunched over, against the gravity that held it to the earth, my knees and back shaking. I pulled and jerked, grunting, until my body slipped in the manure and I collapsed into a bundle with the calf, my limbs splayed over it and its hot, pulsing breath on my neck.

It took me several days to figure out I had burned down the heifer barn. A mind and body not in union become distrustful of one another and tend to keep their own secrets. I now know that it was simply human nature—that a son not only wants to do the things his father does, but also the things that he cannot. My father has never, as far as I know, lit a cigar that he has bought. I took one from the filter box in the parlor and stole a lighter from the jeans of my mother, because I thought that if I put fire to it I could be closer to the thing he was waiting for.

The smoke made me cough and I had to sit down, but when I stopped and blinked away the tears I saw the barn around me. The rollers on the door had come off their track and it slumped from the frame of the building. The gates of the pen were bent and rotten, and plywood covered the only window where the glass had long broken away. It is then that I realized that the greatest struggle of a farmer is not against those trying to take something from him, but with the farm itself. It takes from you, and wears you down, and it makes you believe in it, which is worst of all. And because you fight for it you cannot fight against it. You cannot put it back into its place and make it obedient to you again. I have come to realize these things, but

what good is a witness that can't bear witness to anyone else? What good is a boy that can't say anything to the people around him?

And so I did what my father could not do. I dropped the cigar and went to the house.

Although I knew it to only be a metaphor, I couldn't help wonder if I was actually hearing it. In fact, it woke me from my sleep and I had to assume it must have been a dream. But those sounds were too pure, too mournful to be anything different. There were the cusps of words I could not yet understand. I slid through the dark kitchen and pulled on my boots. They slapped against my shins, making a lonely, resigned beat in the darkness.

The land was speaking and I had to know what it was saying.

I let the shapes of the trees I knew to be there guide my steps. The voice rose and fell before me. I did not know where it would lead me—only that if I got close enough I could dutifully listen. Sometimes I thought the sounds formed words and were human. Other times I was sure no human could make such a lonely sound.

In the darkness, the sky and earth folded into each other. I moved carefully, afraid I might bump into a horizon I couldn't see. In some indescribable way I had the sense that the burning heifer was still out there, somehow among all the things I didn't understand. I wondered if it had found peace—if that was what it meant to do, or maybe a way to extinguish itself. For all I knew, it could have become a new constellation in the sky, or instead doomed to roam the earth, always just around the corner, burning intently.

I crept around the edge of the shed, the abandoned rebar and rotting gate posts half-rising out of the earth around me. The dusk-to-dawn light buzzed overhead. I moved slowly. I did not want to startle it into silence.

I stepped into the humming light.

The legs, at first, appeared disembodied. There were work shoes, the crinkled pant legs, and then shadow. The barn towered over us: tall, rigid, silent. The tractor bucket rested on the ground, tipped up. I staggered forward. My father was inside.

The bottle tucked in his arms cast a dull glare into the weave of his shirt, stealing the synthetic flame raining silently from the shed. His head was the lowest part of himself, resting against the bottom corner of the bucket. His eyes floated as he stared at me.

“Are you the devil collecting me away?” He pulled out his hands and laced his fingers over his stomach. “I sold my soul and got naught.”

The sky rumbled above us: the fabric of the night pulled stiff. I stood over him.

He blinked, pushing moisture from the corner of his eyes, although I knew these were not tears. He lifted his head off the cold metal. Silage stuck to his hair.

“Son, you got to save yourself. Don’t follow your daddy’s feet to the mire.”

He sighed out loud, ostentatiously. The bulb of the shed sputtered, flickering its violent pink light on us.

“I look at you and try to see if the knowing is there. Sometimes, I get thinking that you got me pegged for the thing I nearly done.”

A jagged light ran the length of the horizon.

“I think about why—thinking about why all the time. If it was because that’s what you’re suppose to with an animal born unnatural, or if there’s a bad part in me that I’m unnatural.”

He sat up against the side of the bucket and pulled his knees to his chest, hugging them. I had never seen him folded so small. He laid his head on his forearm. I thought I smelled the fermentation of silage.

“I took you in the woods. Way back to the Collier Place, with the gun. I set you on the log and gone behind you.”

My hands, hanging at my sides, began to twitch on their own. My hips turned side to side, silently, even though my mind knew this to be a worthless thing to do.

“God damn it, I did it. I raised the gun.”

The wind blew and stirred the weeds in front of me. Lightning bugs had settled in the dry stalks that rubbed against each other. Their bodies pulsed against the horizon.

“Then you turned around and looked at me.”

My father clutched at his ears. The bottle, leaning on its own, slid across the worn metal, soaking into the silage packed into the bucket’s crevices.

“Sometimes I think you’re unfit because I’m unfit inside. You’re my bad soul, walking around.”

The lightning bugs, much like stars in the black sky, grew buoyant again. They drifted slowly, burning out in front of us while others appeared. They flamed and danced and filled the space between us, while my body still twisted on its own. One landed on my forearm. It pulsed gently.

“You’re my boy,” the old man said. “You’re my boy.”

I crushed it in my hand to see that it could die.

Although I did not keep track of the time that passed, I did know when it had been thirty days since the Sheriff visited. I could sense it coming. I had expected them to fight, but instead both grew quieter each day until the morning my mother sat at the kitchen table in the dark, watching my father and me dress in old jeans with iodine stains. The end of her cigarette illuminated her entire hand.

“What are you milking today for?” she asked, inhaling.

“Don’t I milk every day?” my father replied.

We passed silently across the driveway in the graying light. The dusk-to-dawn bulb flickered in its daily ritual to extinguish itself. Pebbles scattered in front of my boots, jumping out of my way. He didn’t make fun of me, and he didn’t tell me to pick up my feet.

Cows lifted themselves up from the stalls and stretched, coiling their tails behind them. He didn’t call them Beautiful Bitches or hit them on the rumps to make them move faster. Instead, he leaned on the cane, as if that was what it was really meant for, and waited at the back of the barn as the cows walked themselves to the holding area.

A country singer on the radio sang to the wet milkers in the darkness, but when the parlor filled with cows and the vacuum turned on, his voice sank into the whispering pulsation around us. My father moved from one cow to the next, dipping, wiping, pulling the milker from the hook it was suspended on and flipping it over to guide it on each cow. His eyes did not look at his hands, nor did he look at anything. Only when each cow had a milker on them and it rocked gently front to back as it pulled away milk did he stop and lean against the gate, staring down at the rubber mat on the floor. It was clear that his mind and body were also separate lives.

Once, he sat down on the steps and let his arms droop over his legs. “What do you think?” he asked me.

Cows stood behind him, chewing their cud. Occasionally, one of them flicked its tail at flies it knew were not there. I didn’t say anything, because I understood this to be a question that didn’t require an answer. His fingers twisted the hair on the top of his head. Sometimes he picked at the manure dried on his jeans. Eventually, he lifted himself off the steps and took the milker off the nearest cow, feeling her udder first. For some reason, I believe I had disappointed him.

Before long, at the usual time, the last cow ambled out of the parlor, her back end swaying. My father flipped a switch and killed the vacuum. The great force that held the breath of the parlor exhaled and the residual milk left in the vat back-flowed onto the concrete like a soul leaving a body. My father wiped his hands on his jeans, grabbed his gun off the control box, and left without looking back.

He stepped into the daylight shooting.

The first slug tore into the Sheriff’s car. Men exploded from behind it like a pile of barn cats that were kicked. A few ducked behind the fuel tank while another one, having run in a direction without cover, kept sprinting down the driveway and along the road. The second slug smashed the headlights of a police car turned towards us. There were four cars in total, although when the fire was returned it was clear the men had spread around the farm—by the calf hutches, the far side of the loading tractor, and even crouched behind the pile of tractor rims in the goldenrod. My mother stood on the porch, her hands on her hips. From that distance it was impossible to read her face.

My father never lost his stride, firing into the weeds, into the tractor he spent late nights tearing apart, into some fence posts. One shot went into the shed, where a

spark flew from the shadows and something fell to the ground. One sank into the silage pit, where the rotting forage engulfed it and continued to steam into the morning. He shot into the haybarn, although I did not see anyone around it.

He stood tall behind a round bale that was half-fed to heifers as he dug more slugs out of his front pocket and slid them into the chamber. Bullets pierced the hay in front of him, whizzing by his face like diving birds. When his weapon was full he stepped out and shot at the silo that towered above him his whole life. He shot at the hay wagon, half-torn apart for lumber. He shot where the old heifer barn was, the slug flying above the debris. Then he turned around and shot into the milk house, the bulk tank chilling the milk drained in there this morning, and one into the haymow, where he spent each summer stacking hay as he grew up. Then the sheriff came around the corner and struck him in the head.

My father sank to his knees. The gun skidded into the chaff. The sheriff held his pistol inches from his temples, rocking uncomfortably on his feet.

“God damn it, Horace Dean,” the sheriff shouted, his face red. “Sure done it this time.”

“It’s the way of things now, Sheriff. We just had to play it out.”

“It’s just a farm, you fuck!”

My father laughed. It was a long, ascending chuckle that rose from somewhere deep inside and appeared to nearly take all that was left in him, because when he finished his body swayed to the left. The officers, now crowded in the driveway, looked at each other. “I can tell you you’re wrong there,” my father said.

There were fifteen men in uniform across our driveway. Such a large entourage made me wonder how far my father and the sheriff went back. The men were young—many of them with round faces that looked all the more boyish in their

uneasiness. They were thinking that this could be the moment that divided them from someone who hasn't shot another person.

One of the officers suddenly swung his extended arms around and pointed his weapon at me. Others followed his gaze and did the same. Their faces went pale.

I had the shotgun.

"Easy Boys," the sheriff shouted. "On my call only." Then he kicked at the loose hay. "Jesus Christ, Horace Dean."

My mind did not know why my body had the gun. It would be a revelation that would take years to sort through. The important thing was, and everyone knew it, was that I had it. Seeing the way that everyone looked at me then made me think that no one had really looked at me before.

My father, his head still lowered, gazed at me from the corner of his eyes. "Boy, don't bring that gun higher than your waist, or they'll shoot you. Just come over here."

"Horace, don't let him give you that gun."

"This ain't about you, Sheriff."

"That's your god damn son, Horace."

"That is my son." My father smiled. The whites of his eyes shown bright from his weathered face. A tear beaded on his cheek, but he kept smiling as he dug the damp cigar out of his back pocket and stuck it in the side of his mouth. "Boy, you know where the trigger is, don't you? Right there by your fingers."

"Horace!"

"Point the gun at me, remember? Listen, I'm going to need you to pull the trigger, Son."

“God damn it, Horace.” The sheriff flapped his arm at his men. They gladly let their pistols fall to their sides.

“Pull that trigger now, Son.”

I didn’t move.

“Is it in you, Boy?” he suddenly roared. Spit flew from his mouth. He looked at me in the eyes with the passion I knew him for. “Is it in you, Boy?”

I lifted the gun and pointed it at him.

It was when the heifer looked at me, on fire, that haunted me the most. I knew that something burning could not stay that way because eventually it would have no more to give. At first, when it happened, I thought that I could have done something to save it, but now I am no longer sure that this is true. It was something greater than me. I know that the burning heifer is gone, that it couldn’t have done anything but dissipate away into a body of twisting heat that rose over the farm and then joined the widening entropy of the earth. Still, sometimes when I least expect it I see those eyes—just outside my field of vision—full of passion, and I know that it is still burning.

## The Dazed Man

By Ryan Dennis

“We’re God’s people,” my father said, high stepping over a dead body like the leader of an exaggerated march. Song birds exploded from the bushes in front of him.

“We are,” my mother said. When my father first came back from the hospital and had these eager bursts we were excited too, because we thought there was good news behind them. It was when we realized that there wasn’t that my mother went quiet.

“No more than we can bear,” he shouted up the side hill. He held his fist in the air. He wore a collared shirt to milk cows, and even though it had manure stains on it, insisted on tucking it in.

The multiflora rose pulled at my jeans as I labored after my parents. Cat followed behind us like he always does when we get the cows, gingerly weaving through the brush. My bent foot creased the grass I dragged myself through, hissing beneath me. The undergrowth had swelled in the six months since the pasture went feral.

“Through the trying fires we will emerge!”

My mother pulled a burdock from her denim dress and let it fall to her side.

“That’s true, Horace.”

Unable to help himself, my father grabbed a fallen stick and swung it wildly at the demons in front of him. He eyes were wild and bright as the tops of goldenrod shattered in the air. He inadvertently struck the leg of Face-In-the-Dirt Girl, and that’s when he finally dropped it. “We’re the backbone of the country. Salt of the

God damn earth! Nothing stands without a backbone. But we will stand!” The last light of the day hit the marred side of his face and was pulled into the shadows of his scars.

“I bought the red potatoes this time,” my mother said.

All of a sudden my father grabbed my mother’s hand and forcefully twirled her through the goldenrod. Cat jumped out of the way and dived headlong into the brush. The stalks of weeds enveloped her as she spun. She slipped out of his grasp and he lunged at her, bunching the front of her faded dress in his fist and pulling her into him. “You can’t kill the Deans,” he breathed into her ear.

The three of us climbed the hill until we reached the edge of the pasture, where a small herd of cows had already started to drift towards the barn.

I could see it go. One day it was still there and the next day it was not—the thoughts that were in their heads when they died—or maybe even it’s their soul. It was still behind their eyes for a while, pooled in the vessel of their body that’s shifting into the earth, and then at some point gone. Released into the wide world. The thing that made them human, perhaps one could say. Sometimes I wondered if it gets caught in the heads of timothy that bend around them, or on the underside of the leaves above. I wondered if we turn it to fragments as we wade through the goldenrod of the side hill when we get the cows every morning.

Like the names of fields, the things we called them explain themselves. Slumped-On-A-Log. Twisted-Back-Guy. Face-In-The-Dirt. I didn’t know how the one man died, but he didn’t see it coming. For that reason, we called him The Dazed Man. If you stand high enough on our land, you can see most of them at once, or at least so I imagined because I knew where most of them were. Even though I knew

better, I also wondered if the land wasn't producing them itself. Even so, the rotting detritus emitted a glow around their bodies as their flesh slipped into the earth that was angelic in its own way of worldly angels.

"It's turning the farm into a source of depravity," my mother once said in a rare candid moment, when she thought no one who knew better could understand her.

The banks and lawyers could not foreclose the farm while my father was in the hospital, and after the discharge he was granted six months of additional forbearance, much to the annoyance of the lawyers, I suspected. Because none of us knew of the particular law the leniency fell under, my father took it as a reward of grace.

In fairness to my mother, it was the depravity that the scientists were paying for. It wasn't much—not enough to change anything, anyway. An institute wanted to record how bodies decompose in the Northeast countryside, for purposes of identifying time of death—although I had never heard of anyone getting killed around here that I knew of. They promised to remove the remains after several months, but what they didn't seem to know was that the coyotes tended to take their feed quite early on in things like that. That was evident in the bones scattered through the hedgerows from the cows we had buried, proof that around here the dead must resurrect themselves.

We were sitting at the kitchen table when the pickup truck rolled to a stop in the driveway. It was white and new. Apparently my father had already known who it was because he sprang from the chair so fast it almost knocked his coffee cup onto the *Progressive Dairyman* in front of him.

On the porch Cat lifted his tail to see him and curled around his upright boot. He jammed it on his foot, and then as an afterthought kicked Cat, sending him

twisting into the air. When he landed he scurried across the lawn and towards the pasture above the house.

I stood swaying in the doorway, grabbing the handle of the open door for support.

“Stay here,” my father said slowly, but because my mind had already set me in motion I followed him out in my socks.

Boyd Huston got out of the truck. He had a thousand-cow dairy that neighbored our farm. My father took long strides over the lawn, as if to claim as much of his property as he could and keep Boyd from the house.

The two men met at the edge of the driveway. Boyd put his hands on his hips and kicked at a stone with his work shoe.

“Any coffee in that house there?” he asked. He had a shy smile that began to wilt under my father’s unflinching stare.

My father folded his arms over his chest and spread his feet, as if he were fastened to the earth.

“How’s Laurel doing?” Boyd asked.

Because his shirt was tucked in, the full rise and collapse of my father’s breathing was apparent and heinous in the silence. Although it was subtle, I saw him tilt the scarred side of his face towards Boyd. Boyd tried not to recoil, eventually clearing his throat.

“Look, I want to tell you that I respect your determinism and all, and—”

“Don’t insult yourself.”

Boyd looked to the ground and eventually fell to nodding his head. Without a proper filter from the insinuation, my head began to bob as well, like a buoy pulled in

the wind. Above us, Cat stalked a butterfly behind a pricker bush, apparently no longer cognizant of his recent abuse.

“I’m glad to see you out of the hospital after everything.” Boyd glanced in my direction without meaning to.

“There’s no price you can say.”

Boyd turned to me again. I started twitching from the sudden attention. “Do you like fishing? I love fishing. I could use the company some time.”

“You’re not taking my boy anywhere.” My father’s voice began to rise.

“Christ, Horace. You have dead bodies on the farm. Did you ever think what that might be doing to your kid? Is he even in a special school?”

My father took a step back. It appeared as if he was going to raise a finger, but instead it wavered uncertainly around his waist. “What are you worried about my son?”

Boyd threw up his hands and headed towards his truck. “I’d like you to think about things being easier, Horace,” he called over his shoulder.

“I’d like a lightning bolt to strike you now.”

Boyd slammed the door and turned the key.

“Some neighbor,” my father shouted over the engine. “Just show up when you want what I have.”

“Well, you’re not very neighborly, Horace.” Boyd pulled around the pile of old fence posts in the driveway and turned onto the dirt road leading out of the valley.

My father slouched towards the house with his head down in a swinging, contemplative gait. I followed behind, the cool moisture of the earth collecting on the bottom of my socks. When he hit the concrete of the porch he stopped suddenly.

“That cat,” he whispered. His head jerked back and forth as his eyes scanned the hill in front of us and finally settled on Cat pawing a grasshopper next to him. My father grunted, threw his fist in the air and stomped into the dark shadows of the mudroom.

My knees started twitching, rocking me from side to side. My body knew what was going to happen before my mind did. Had my mind known, I don't know if it could have found the perfect thing to say as my father reemerged in the doorway with a shotgun. He raised it in his arms as he walked towards me, and for the briefest moment I thought he was taking aim at me. He stopped when we were shoulder to shoulder, lifted the gun, and put the sights on Cat.

The grass around the animal shivered as the beast was pulled into the air. The animal twisted in suspended motion, its limbs splayed in nonsensical directions before it fell silently to the earth.

My father plucked the shell from the chamber and went back to the house.

My father and mother walked into the old part of the barn, a five-gallon pail with iodine and dehorner's swinging between them. I followed behind, slowly. The concrete was covered with chaff that slipped away from pitchforks that had dragged across it. There was an old feed cart in the corner whose plastic was cracked and that had distillers left in it hardening, mined by black beetles that seldom came to the surface.

This part of the barn was no longer used, except for weaned heifers tied to its pole with baling twine. What was left was in shadows all day because the sun could no longer penetrate the block-glass windows and illuminate the dead flies hanging in the grooves. My parents stopped in front of a heifer. She jerked at the end of her

lead. My father pulled a bottle of penicillin and coagulating powder out of his back pockets and dropped them in the hay next to him.

“How does all of this get to me?” he asked, motioning to the barn around him with the dehorner in his hand, flinging iodine in the air.

My mother extended her arms around the body of the calf and pressed it against the dusty wall. It was one of the few times I saw her wear jeans and one of my father’s old shirts. The heifer tried to lunge, but my mother absorbed it into her chest and pressed harder.

My father fit the animal’s small horn into the tool. “You’re strong to be here.”

“I was a farmer’s daughter too.”

My father extended the shafts and pressed down. The calf bawled and tried to twist its head. It fell to its front feet while my father still shook, trying to bring the metal edges together through the animal’s cartilage. Finally, there was a hollow pop and the horn fell to the hay, lifeless.

“I can’t do it.” Blood sprung from the heifer’s head and left wet, bright streaks against the peeling whitewash. He dusted the hole with the coagulating powder until the stream lessened and then became thick drops that beaded down the side of her face. “I can’t quit. I can’t make that leap.”

My father dipped the dehorner in the bucket and lifted them again. The heifer began thrashing and throwing its sore head side to side. It kicked its rear legs out and struck my mother in the leg. My mother lifted beneath its barrel enough to unbalance it and then threw it in the straw. She pinned it down under her knee as it squirmed.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” she said. “Maybe not everyone does. But I do.”

“You’re so loyal.”

My father cupped the dehorner over the exposed horn, and leaning over the animal, took it from its head. He dusted it while my mother reached back and pulled a needle and syringe from her hair. My father gave the calf a shot of antibiotics while blood spread over his chest and sides, soaking into his clothing.

“I’m not old fashion and I’m not necessarily scared of change, I think. It’s just that this is who I am and if it’s not here then I’m nothing. Am I crazy?”

My mother reached over the wide-eyed animal and took my father’s face in her hands. She gently kissed his good cheek, while her fingers ran over the striations in the other.

“Sit at the table,” my father said. Before I could react he grabbed me by the shoulders and guided me to a chair.

My mother opened a window and then wafted some of the fresh air into her face. “You’re using him as a prop,” she said, without turning around. She pushed her weight into a rag, trying to will the stains out of the corner.

“Wipe the drool off his face” my father said, even though my chin was dry. My mother feigned at me with the dirty cloth, winked, and then went back scrubbing.

My father sat behind the box of donuts and pot of coffee placed at the center of the table. He was wearing a collared shirt, as he always did, but this time it was clean. He straightened himself and mouthed silently as he rehearsed something in his head. When there was a knock at the door he motioned to my mother to answer it.

A man in a suit walked into the mudroom uneasily, holding a binder in front of him as if it were meant to shield him from the manure-covered jeans hanging on nails

or the faded crochet of a farm that shivered on the wall when the door was closed. He unlaced his shoes, sat them next to the row of barn boots stacked on a fraying rug, and then thought again and pulled them further away.

My father leapt out of his seat and came at the man with an open hand and spread fingers. The man took it gingerly and pulled the binder closer to his chest. He was about to lower himself in a chair next to my father's scarred side when my mother guided him into a seat at the other end of the table.

"Goliath Bank would—"

My father pushed the donuts and coffee at him. The man gave a flat smile and picked out a donut covered in sprinkles.

"First," my father said, "I would like to say how much I appreciate Goliath Bank standing by us during our times of trial. Good and natural people are a rare blessing, let alone an institution of them. Righteous people to stand behind family agriculture are even fewer."

The bank representative tentatively held the donut away from himself.

"Some lesser-steadfast folk would think that acting inside a body would absolve them from their personal Christian obligations. I am glad to see that is not the case at Goliath."

"Mr. Dean—"

"Some would say it's the natural order of things now, honest hardworking family farms going out of business. I myself say that every decision about man comes from man. People behind the desk are making it this way, and it doesn't have to be so."

My father pushed back his chair and crossed his legs. He looked the loan officer over, studying him.

“What no one is saying,” he continued, “is that it’s a morality concern, losing small farms, and--”

“Mr. Dean. I regret to in—”

“In addition to social capital and rural development—”

“Mr. Dean, we’ve carefully reviewed—”

“Frankly, we’re the salt of the earth.” My father’s voice raised. “Family farms were once the backbone—”

“I’m sorry that—”

“The country will suffer—”

“The numbers don’t work.”

“Shame on you!” My father shouted. His elbows were planted on the table and his finger extended at the other man. It shook in the silence.

My mother looked between the two men, and not sure what to do, pulled a crumpled tissue out of the pocket of her dress and ran it across my face. I wanted to push her hand away, but only twitched and jerked my head to the side. The glass on the coffee pot fogged as it cooled. My father shifted in his chair and turned the scarred side of his face to the other man as he listened.

The loan officer hesitated, and then laid the donut on the bare table. “This is the part of my job I like the least. I’m afraid—”

A screeching wail erupted from the porch outside. It filled the space of the small kitchen, loud and deafening, coming through the open window. It rose and fell with irregular rhythm and pressed in on the nerves.

I pulled myself out of the chair and slumped to the window. My mother did the same, and finally the two men looked at each other and rose as well.

Cat lay spread between a pair of toppled barn boots, his head twisted and looking into the sky. His throat had an open wound and showed the soft flesh of his esophagus. His coat was torn in shreds over the muscle of his hind leg, which he dragged across the pocked concrete in heaves as he slid off the porch. He pulsed across the lawn, towards the goldenrod, his head still turned towards the sky.

The Dazed Man was a good person, the best I could tell. He died wearing jeans and work shoes, and although that didn't necessarily mean that he was a hard worker and loved his family and always did what was right, he very well may have. His knuckles were swollen and his hands large in death. I did not know if the earth was kind to him in life, but it was not afterwards. The turkey buzzards took first his eye and then the soft flesh of his cheek, leaving an open wound without the faculty to heal it. When people died they were supposed to disappear. It was out of the natural order of things to die and still exist, fading away slowly and horribly.

I often walked among those lying on our hills, but it was The Dazed Man I sat next to for hours. Even though the scientists would be upset, I brushed away a few dried walnuts that a red squirrel had slid underneath his shoulder. In the coolness of the early evening the insects lounged, stilled in the folds of his jeans. I lay down next to him, sending lazy blow flies into flight before they, too, settled again. I lifted up his swollen arm and tucked myself beneath it. When I let go it fell crisply over me.

I was sitting in the feed room when the van pulled off the edge of the road. The window creaked as the glass retracted on the passenger side and a video camera appeared in its stead.

The door outside of the feed room slouched against the wall, one corner leaning in the ground because it was missing a hinge. The space inside was mostly shadows, the abandoned equipment giving it a texture in the darkness. The shaft of light coming in was quickly extinguished and the gray dust that fell over everything was the only illumination there was. A vestigial organ of old barns, it had been long since the feed room was in use. An auger suspended on rotting chains stretched the length of the wall like a prehistoric animal. Above me were bladder bags once meant to take the gas of the empty silo that towered over everything, without a purpose since the first time farming had changed and everyone went to trench bunkers to be able to feed more cows. The room collected other misfit parts of the barn shed from itself. Worn plowshares and bent fence posts leaned against the wall. I sat on a five-gallon pail of mismatched nuts and bolts, as well as hinges and sparkplugs and other things small and unassigned. I liked to run my fingers over their coldness and imagine the purpose they once had.

A white van pulled up to the mailbox and idled in front of it. My father appeared within the frame of the open door, sauntering up to it in large strides.

“You have nowhere to go but straight,” he shouted as he re-tucked his shirt into his jeans. “Canaseraga is four miles the way you’re pointing and Bishopville is three miles behind you. There’s not much in either town, but even less in between.”

The window rolled down. A video camera appeared in the open space.

“Is this the Horace Dean farm?”

The camera started at the mailbox, and although I could only see it in my mind, it first scanned the postal code and the word “Deans” on the other side. It widened to take in the drooping walnut tree in the front lawn and moved left, to the broken down wagon, a hay bale rotting in the grass, and then the porch itself littered

with worn out boots, the paint-chipped front door, and my father's beat-up Ford in the driveway. It shifted to the electric pole, the back shed with a torn apart skidsteer, and then suddenly blurred, for a heartbeat, until my father's features snapped into focus, his shoulders hunched and his hands at his sides.

“You can't be on my land. This is trespassing.”

“I'm in the road,” the man said. He dropped to one knee and adjusted the lens. “No one owns the road, Mr. Dean.” The view moved along the potholes in the driveway, past the old silo and parallel to the dry cow fence, where several cows looked back without blinking. It ran through the bars of a heifer pen, the front gate leaning away from the heifers because of the packed manure and straw pushing against it, taking in their heads rubbing on an empty hay ring.

“You can't do this,” My father said. His voice was high pitched. My mother came out and stood behind him at a distance. She leaned on one leg, her arms crossed.

The door between the parlor and the calf barn had slipped off its track as well, revealing a dark hallway that disappeared into shadows. These things could be seen: an empty penicillin bottle, an old set of lifters for down cows, and a garbage can with baling twine falling over its edges. The walls of the calf barn received direct sunlight the second half of the day and had faded yellow, except for the few inches below each window, which nearly maintained the original off-white color.

“I'll give you something to put in your movie.” My father unbuckled his belt and allowed his jeans to slide to his knees in a heap. He stepped out of his boots, leaving them upright in the road, and then pinned the frayed paint legs to pull his feet out of them. His eyes were bright in his red face. He threw the pants on the pavement where they collapsed flat, shook each knee in front of him, and then bent

over. The camera found the old tree behind the calf barn, dead and bleached gray. A pile of manure was pushed against it on either side of it. The camera swept back, behind the barn to the manure storage and the tall grass around it, a field of timothy that needed to be cut, an empty silage pit, a pile of tires next to it, the rack of a broken hay wagon and then Horace Dean, the dark bristles on his thin legs and the purple veins running through them, his fingers grabbing the back of his thighs, and the stillness of everything around him.

My father was standing like this, his head tilted and fists clenched at his waist like pale orbs, when the white pickup truck pulled behind the van and rocked to a stop. Boyd Huston jumped out with his hands up and walked carefully to my father as if on ice about to give. He stepped in between the camera and my father, bending down to grab the wilted belt line of his jeans. He swiveled them back and forth to get them over my father's thighs.

"How's the cows milking, Horace? Got all your corn in?" he asked, even though it was only July. My father did not seem to get the joke, but only stared ahead with vacant eyes. When it appeared his pants would stay up without buckling them Boyd slapped my father tenderly on the shoulder and took a step back.

"How are you doing, Laurel?" Boyd gave a wink. My mother smiled and turned away shyly. He looked her over for a second and then returned to my father, who stood there prostate and void of any expression on his face.

"A stiff drink, Horace."

Boyd stopped at the van to push on the camera and send its operator recoiling backwards. "Get a real job," he said, and then clapped loudly in the open window until it was shut and the van drove away.

"A stiff drink," he yelled again, before getting back in his truck.

In the silence that did not have the respiration of vehicles or shouting voices my mother put her arm around my father and turned him towards the barn. His boots, now on again, scraped against the gravel of the driveway. He nodded slowly, but for what reason it was hard to tell, because he didn't seem to see the things he looked at. They came towards the feed room, because it was a short cut to the milking parlor.

As soon as they entered the doorway the light dissolved around them and their features fell into shadows. Only the striations on my father's face seemed to grow stronger in definition, becoming bolder in the gray air. I sat in the corner between a splintered work bench and manure spreader gate, slowly twisting a nut up a rusted bolt.

My mother stopped and turned to my father. "I still believe in all of this. I really do."

My father looked at her blankly, his eyes exceptionally moist in the darkness. Then he turned her around by her shoulders, grabbed the back of her hair in his fist, and pushed her against a broken fan.

His pants still unbuttoned, he pulled them down with one hand. He glanced in my direction and then balled up her dress in his free hand, eventually pulling it up to the small of her back. Her flesh glowed palely in the internal dusk and stirred every time he thrust. Her head was pulled back and I could see that her eyes were closed. She was silent, except for the small sounds that escaped her every time she heaved forward.

When my father was gone she remained leaning on the fan in silence. When she finally straightened she bent down to pick at the loose chaff on her panties before pulling them under her dress again.

“Wasn’t always like this,” she said out loud, whether she was addressing me or not.

I often walked among them. The creatures of the woods made a path through the tall weeds as they traveled from one body to another, like veins in the side hill. I followed them as well, arriving at each person spread like a canvas over the ground, separating and breaking apart into entropy. The skin and tissue slouched off their frames, and slowly the architecture of their bodies was pulled away by the opossums and coons. I stood with them, gave them a moment of company, if such things were possible. I noted the way in which they changed, and that was something. In the silence we shared there was something like kindness. I knew they were visited by scientists and the things they recorded about them still gave them meaning. I walked among them anyway. Because of it, in some ways they are mine and in my care.

I tended to them. It made me feel like a farmer.

Behind a glaring sun in the open front of the barn he first appeared like an apparition coming towards me. As the dimness inside the structure took over, his features, too, took shape, and I saw that it was my father. The heads of the calves strained towards him as he walked down the alley, their tongues lapping at his overshirt. He put his palm on the forehead of each one and pushed them back, telling them that they were blessed and that their sins had been forgiven.

When he came up to me he rocked back and forth on his heels and tucked his thumbs in his belt loops. “It seems that I haven’t taught you to drive a tractor. What kind of farmer’s son can you be without driving a tractor?”

He guided my hands to the grab bar and when I had a grasp on it boosted me up the steps. He stood on the highest one and looked over the tractor as he waited for me to tuck myself into the driver's seat. He pulled down the armrest and then sat on it, crumpled in the narrow space as small as I had ever seen him. He guided my hands over the controls while he explained their functions. He put it in first gear and held down the clutch until I could put my foot there as well.

“Now you're good.”

I lifted my foot as carefully as I could, but the rubber bottom of my work shoe was clumsy on the pedal's grooves. It slipped off and the tractor leapt forward.

“Easy, Cowboy,” My father said.

I made a wide turn out of the driveway, not quick enough to turn the steering wheel sharply. My elbow accidentally hit the throttle. The smoke stack exhaled and its black breath swelled and twisted above us. A car turned down the hill and I steered to the shoulder to avoid it, generating the loud sound of gravel pressed under the tires. My father took the wheel and brought the tractor back on the road.

As we climbed the hill that led out of our valley I glanced at my father out of the corner of my eye. His hands were folded in his lap and his shoulders sagged. His nose was a little long and had a few hairs coming out of it, perhaps the first sign of his coming age. His feet were crossed in front of him like a child, his laces dangling in the dust on the floor. He leaned his head against the glass. From what I saw of him there, he may have well been a good man.

My father stopped short when he saw me. He sighed out loud. “You're a Dean,” he said. “Might as well come too.” The window behind him framed him in profile.

I followed after him, heaving in the darkness.

He held the door of his old Ford open and leaned his body outside as he backed up to the trailer. He kept the lights of the vehicle off, occasionally glancing towards the kitchen window. Only when the trailer rocked from the hitch hitting it did he get out and check behind him. When it was securely fastened we pulled away slowly, the back end creaking over the ruts.

“In the end, gnashing of teeth, brother against brother,” he said, hanging his arm out of the open window and waving his hand in the draft. Insects collided on the windscreen and were flung headlong into the night. “The government, banks, farm organizations, magazines—no one left for people like us. Just waiting for us to die off.”

The air inside the cab was heavy with the dust that rose from the seat every time someone sat down. The radio system was broken and its small monitor flickered unintelligible green light like a distant constellation. I had never been riding with my father before.

“They take from us. We’ve got to be strong. Are we strong? We’ve got to take it back.”

We hit a pot hole and the weight of the trailer rocked the pickup back and forth. My father and I tottered together in unison.

“Didn’t always use to be this way,” he said. He leaned his elbow on the steering wheel. “Not always.”

And then, although I didn’t know why, my father put his head out the window and screamed into the night.

He turned off the headlights again as we pulled onto a dirt road and eventually slowed to a stop. The dusk-to-dawn bulb of Boyd Huston's barn flickered through the small patch of woods that stood between the road, the open field, and the farm. My father lowered the tailgate and eased the gates out of the bed, careful not to make any sounds that might echo in the dark. He opened the back of the truck and set the gates leading to it. He walked slowly through the woods, and then the field, so I could keep up with him. The young oats brushed against our jeans and hissed in the dark.

We crouched by the manure lagoon at the back of the free stall barn. Slurry semis and pit mixers loomed around us like giants asleep. The grass around the lagoon was rich green from the spillage and came to our waists. The barn itself glowed like a ceiling lamp and stretched on forever. I don't know if my father was quiet out of tactic, or from the things he was thinking. He grabbed me by the front of the shirt and guided me with him.

We walked into the open alleyway in the back of the building, the transition into the blinding fluorescent lighting stunning us at first. My father blinked and for a moment shielded his eyes. It was a thousand-cow barn, as far as I could tell, and the cows looked at us dully before chewing their cud again or laying their heads back on their stomachs. Each barn has a personal smell. It was off-putting in a way that was hard to describe, like smelling another man's cologne. Something clicked at the other end and my father jumped. The sounds of motion grew louder as the apparition came nearer and took mechanical form. It was an automatic TMR feeder, drifting over the bunks and dropping silage before the cows. We watched it draw near without it paying us any mind, turn on its track, and start down the length of the barn again.

"Well," my father said. He started unlatching the back gate, looking around warily. The cows near him lifted their heads and shifted on their rear legs. "I think

we can fit seven,” he said, swinging the gates into the darkness. “Mr. Big Shot will hardly miss them.”

He walked along the stalls, tapping the rumps of a few Holsteins lying down. They twitched under his fingers, as if his touch transferred electricity. He found one that he liked and squatted down next to her to nudge her ribs with his knees. She immediately sprang to her feet. He tried to guide her towards the opening. Instead, she frantically looked in both directions and then put her head down and pushed through him. It carried him back a few steps, as if he was walking into a wave. “Fine then,” he said.

The large bulbs that hung from the ceiling bleached everything below them. Although I could not explain how, I felt bare. We were out of place, but it might have been more. In the overwhelming light I could not push away the feeling that there was something very wrong with us.

My father got behind several cows near the open gate. “Come on, Girls,” he said gently, knocking his fists on their tailbones. The sound echoed among the aluminum walls. The black one closest to him froze, while the others buried their heads in her neck, as if reverse magnetization repelled them from the way out, or they thought it to be a trick. The black one kicked her legs out behind her and charged past my father, knocking him against the railing, while the others scampered underneath the nearest stall. “Damn cows not used to people,” he said, flicking a piece of manure from Boyd Huston’s barn off his arm.

I started rocking back and forth, anxious to be back heading towards the truck. My father walked further into the freestalls, turned around, and threw his hands up. He darted back and forth the width of the alley, slapping the muzzle of any cow that tried to get past him, turning them in the right direction. There may have been fifteen

or so that backed out of their stalls, crowded together, and dashed forward with their feet in the air. He waved his arms and yelled heeya, heeya, out of habit. It resounded loudly in the barn.

Still, the front cows would not pass the point where they knew should be a gate. They held steadfast and planted their feet and leaned back as others pushed against them. They crowded together like pieces of a puzzle forced to fit and no matter how much my father prodded and struck the back cows, the coercion to move forward was absorbed into the mass of animal before it could reach the front heifers and compel them into the night.

And then they began to turn.

The first heads to swing around were in the middle, the cows taking small, staccato steps to rotate. My father leaned over the backs of the cattle in front of him to slap at their muzzles and call them derogatory things. After one cow turned the next one did as well, and the momentum swelled until Boyd Huston's cattle burst at my father and knocked him to the ground.

I saw my father then as an image flickering before me between the legs of cows and their tails that swung between them. He was a holographic projection of a man writhing and covering his face and whose source of light had a faulty bulb. His face and clothes took on shapes of manure like a sudden disease. Although the chaos that swirled among him only lasted a moment I knew for him it felt like much longer. He remained tucked into himself, hands over his head, even after the last heifer jogged past him.

One cow remained in front of him. She was old and dandruff flaked from their topline. Her udder swung low around her hocks and her teats strutted outwards. She favored her hind leg in the way that she stood. She slowly turned herself towards

the opening and walked out of the barn. My father lifted himself up and limped after her.

Under a bright moon the three of us heaved through the oat field, silent except for the parts of us we dragged over the earth.

My father and I milked silently that evening. Our cattle stood in the holding area, gaunt and hollow-eyed, flicking their tails at flies that weren't always there. He guided them into the parlor with an old cane, tapping on their rumps. The milkers throbbed in rhythm and the vacuum pump pulsated whispers that surrounded us. Cobwebs stretched among the corners and beneath the angles of the parlor, catching the rusting architecture as it quietly crumbled. Only two bulbs overhead worked, throwing everything below it into shadow. The scarred-side of his face would be illuminated as he worked down the line of cows on one side of the parlor, and the pristine half of his face when he turned around and went down the other, taking the milkers off and dipping their teats. Sometimes after he removed a unit he held the udder in his hand, as if to measure how much less substantial it was than only minutes before.

He called to them as he walked into the holding area again, beckoning them in. The last cow was the old hobbling animal from Boyd Huston's. She listed slowly along the rotting tin wall towards the final brisket bar. As she passed him my father's face burst into a storm of anger and burned red. He raised the end of the cane and tilted his head, his teeth clenched. He drew a deep, unsteady breath as his elbow shook.

But he didn't hit her.

She continued to limp past him as he remained with the staff raised. She positioned herself next to the milker, swinging her back end slowly. He lowered his arm. Then he descended the steps of the parlor, hung the wooden stick on a nail, and began dipping her teats.

There were many times for a while that the three of us would be sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast or putting on our barn clothes to go milking when the grating howl would rise from the edge of the lawn. I often walked the goldenrod, looking for Cat. I would trudge through the overgrowth, batting the weeds out of my face as they bent around me and shot upright in my stead. I did not believe I could save him, because that did not seem like something that could happen around here. I did not know if I could put him out of his misery. Although I knew it to be an act of love, or at least the form it took on a farm, I did not know if it was in me. I pushed through the ragweed and knocked on the base of shrubs, not sure if I wanted something to run out or not. After not finding him I would always think that he was gone, and every time the vexing wail would start again while we watched TV or ate supper. Eventually I was not sure if he was still screaming, or if it was only in my head.

Coming in from the morning milking I slid out of my boots, leaving them flat on the porch, and went into the kitchen.

Boyd Huston was sitting there with my mother.

He immediately rose and held out his hand. When I did not take it he cradled my fist gently and shook it up and down. He pulled out the seat next to my mother—

where he had been sitting—and offered it to me. He grabbed his coffee cup and sat across from us.

She reached under the sink and pulled a gin bottle from among the cleaning supplies. She held it over Boyd's coffee cup and allowed him to utter a sound of uncertainty before she poured it in. She did the same to her own and replaced the bottle.

“And what does he say?” Boyd asked.

The cup drooped in her hand as she brought it to her mouth. “Not much of a man left to talk to. So I don't say anything.”

Boyd looked at me out of alarm, conscious I was hearing my father being spoken about. My mother flicked her wrist in the air, and it could have been one of the innumerable things she was brushing off.

“When it comes down to it,” she said. “It's my fault, really. I knew. I did.”

“About the man you m—”

“About when it was time to get out.” She pulled on her dress to straighten it over her chest. “I could have talked him into it, somehow. Probably.”

“It's ridiculous to blame yourself,” Boyd said.

“I just got caught up in thinking that farming as it was then meant something. That farming transcends life or death.”

“Laurel.”

“Or was those things!” she said, throwing up her hands.

Boyd started as if he was going to reach for her, but retracted and stared into the table instead, running his finger along the length of a spoon in front of him. He seemed torn between staring at her and purposely avoiding her eyes.

“Horace is the keeper of the farm's sins. I am the keeper of his.”

“Jesus, Laurel.”

The door opened and my father came in. He saw Boyd and approached the table gingerly, standing over the empty seat next to him. He looked over my mother, but if he thought there was something different about her, he didn't show it.

“You're persistent,” he said to Boyd.

Boyd put his hands up. “Just visiting.”

“Being neighborly,” my father said.

The two men measured each other, neither revealing what they were thinking. My father gripped the headrest of the chair. Steam danced out of the cups on the table. The room suddenly seemed too narrow for the both of them.

Boyd broke the silence first. “Actually, I was seeing if I could take the boy fishing. The weather's going to be good the next few days.”

My father turned and went back into the mudroom. He began slipping on his barn jeans again, the manure stains on them still moist.

“If you really want to,” he said, and left the house.

I watched him out the kitchen window, his retreating back. His gait still had a hitch in it, throwing his body to the side each step. Eventually the distance between us became greater, and I could not properly see the man that gave me away.

The grass around The Dazed Man was matted down from the animal traffic his body drew at night. The fabric that separated him and the earth that he was meant to dissolve into created a tension that pooled dark moisture around him. The exposed skin bronzed and tucked in around the shape of his body. The flesh of his lips was torn away, revealing the skeleton base of the words he could not say.

I slowly lowered myself next to him. The smell of putrefied fat left an acid feeling on my tongue. The air was heavy with insects and vibrated like a sustained organ chord. I pulled the trowel out of my back pocket and stabbed at the terrain between my legs. It made a small dent in the earth. I poured the dirt over The Dazed Man's face. Some of it pooled in the open wound on his cheek, and some of it fell around him. I thrust the tool into the ground again. The scientist might think that he had been dragged off into the wild. Maybe they are believers too, and would think that a miracle had occurred on our side hill and their subject had, in their absence, been enveloped in a great swell of light and transfigured into the heavens. Never having seen an occurrence like that on our farm, however, I knew it to be up to me to give him peace.

The dirt started to mound around the features of his face. It evened itself over the parts of him that were missing or deformed, except for the open mouth still gaping with darkness. It would take a long time, but it had suddenly become important to me that no one could see him like that anymore. If he could not lower himself into the earth like the others were granted, I would put the earth on top of him.

He was in there again. I could see his silhouette through the glass of the kitchen window. I did not see my mother, but she may have very well been there, just out of view. Although I could not tell Boyd's expression I could imagine him sitting at the table and looking out at the farm, already believing that everything he saw was his. But none of this was Boyd Huston's, because he was not my father.

I hooked my wrist in the grab bar of the tractor and pulled myself onto the first step. I swung back and forth as I climbed the machine until I could put my twisted foot on the next level and grasp the door.

Through the window of the tractor it appeared as if everything outside it was on a television screen. The barn, the pasture, and the cows all looked very different. From the tall position of the seat everything seemed settled and in place. The glass was speckled with mud and dust, but looking through it only cast a grainy, familiar feel on the buildings and machinery, like an old movie. Somehow I felt like I had memories of the sagging calf hutches and rusty hay rake that predated my birth. I wondered if my father saw these things in the same way.

I slid my work shoe over the clutch and steadied my leg enough for it to take my weight. Wrenches and sockets cluttered the floor around the pedals. A few times my knee buckled, flopping me on the steering wheel. When I finally had the clutch depressed I turned the key and the machine came to life. The windshield now rattled violently and cast everything in opaque vision. Still leaning forward, I put the tractor in low gear and lifted my foot.

The cab lurched ahead and threw me back in the seat, and then settled in a steady forward crawl across the driveway. I put my forearm over the steering column to steady both myself and the old machine. The electric crunch of gravel sounded beneath me and then the tires hit the lawn and there was no sound at all.

The great wheels of the tractor rolled over the tender earth and passed the electric pole that connected the house to the barn. The dusk-to-dawn bulb on it flickered indecisively in the gray daylight. The tractor went past half-buried Netwrap from a rotting bale that had sometime before been uncovered and fed to the cattle. It went by a bare patch in the lawn where my mother tried to grow flowers, until she eventually gave up. There was a running gear at the edge of the grass, dry weeds swaying around it, and a broken axe handle leaning against the old walnut tree that hung over the lawn. As the tractor neared the house Boyd Huston was now standing

in the kitchen window behind the shade of glass, his hands on his hips, watching the machine approach. The tractor passed a cow that was limping and watching the machine coming nearer without concern. It went by a cat dying in the bushes. It passed Boyd Huston's farm, radiant, and its length without end. The tractor passed dead bodies strewn along the ground, making a patient and silent transition into something else. When the tires were almost at the front porch the tractor passed my mother standing there in a faded denim dress, her arms crossed and without expression on her face. The moment before the front of the tractor hit the bay window the man inside waved his arms frantically and shouted mutely behind the glass, as if he could stop what had already been put into motion.

The old boards outside the house bent, resigned for the slightest moment before leaping into the air with a thunderous clap. The glass of the window shattered in a hard precipitation that tore at the air around it. The roof folded around the top of the tractor, shingles sliding across the windscreen, until the ceiling, too, cracked and came down. The roar of the tractor filled the space of the walls. The wheels turned slow against the wreckage building against them, sinking into the linoleum that rutted around them. The tread caught the edge of the kitchen table and flipped it frontwards, a cup of coffee flung into the chaos. Dust spread over the splintering room in a haze, and then mushroomed as the refrigerator fell. The tires sank into a great whine and lowered in pitch, and then eventually stalled. Insolation settled over the debris in the ringing silence.

My mother ran into the open house, her dress pulled tight against her knees at every stride. She pushed her way through the fallen plaster and mangled boards, calling out my father's name. I pushed the door open and clutched the grab bar in my hand, swinging as I tried to descend, and eventually falling to the ground on the last

step. I could not balance on the uneven lay of the ruins nor tread my way through them, and so slouched against the front tire of the tractor, my arms dangling. My mother cried and pulled splintered boards from the largest pile. When I saw the ends of a collared shirt I realized Boyd Huston was not under there.

My father did not stir when the ceiling tiles were taken off his head. His eyes were closed. His face was covered in a fine layer of asbestos, making one side appear as smooth and porcelain as the other. His mouth was open an—it seemed to me—tucked into an almost indiscernible smile. My mother threw her weight into a fallen rafter beam that lay over his chest and screamed again until she lifted it enough to push it off him. The exhaust of the tractor settled over the contents of the house like incense. A breeze began to spread the insulation around the jagged edges of the wall and onto the porch and front lawn. We leaned over my father, waiting for him to take a breath.

## Life Below the Silo

By Ryan Dennis

The morning that the sickly kitten stumbled into the parlor was the day that I realized my father was going to die. In that way, even then it was their story.

It was one of the days that we could hear the big trucks bounce up the hill next to us, despite the loud pulsations of the milkers. They belonged to the large operation that bought out all the other small farms in the valley. Although I was inside the milking pit with cows on either side and cobwebs in the corner, I clearly saw the haylage fly out of the back of their dump trucks as they raced down the dirt roads by our house in the way that one tends to think of other things in the parlor than milking cows. My father leaned against the pipeline with his arms folded under the flickering light of the single fluorescent bulb still lit overhead. I had heard my father speak before of milkers that record what each cow makes, that take the inflations off, of barns that scrape themselves, and even machinery navigated by GPS, but in a crumbling parlor and a radio signal half-obscured in static, one takes in these things the same as tales of distant lands. In any case, that was not farming as my father knew it.

The kitten stopped at the edge of the pit to tuck his feet under him and curl his tail around his thin frame. He sneezed violently and his rib cage convulsed as it flung mucous onto the concrete. My father lifted up the water hose. The kitten had violated the sanctity of the milking parlor where cats were not allowed for reasons of biosecurity. Sometimes, near the end of the milking they strutted back and forth in front of the doorway with their tails up, aware that they might soon be fed the milk of

a treated cow, but knew better than to cross the threshold onto the concrete floor.

This emaciated kitten, however, showed no regard for the natural order of things.

Like seeing something the moment before it gets shot, I braced myself for the kitten's rebuke. While I pitied it, I also knew it necessary in the grander scheme of things. It was a mistake it would only make once. My father, however, didn't squeeze the handle. He held it suspended and allowed unseen thoughts to pass through his mind before dropping it and letting the hose swing back and forth from the waterline.

The kitten came up to my father as he neared it. My father, in spite of himself, scratched the back of its neck. The cat lifted his head and looked up to him. He followed the trajectory of my father's hand with blank eyes as it slipped back into the pocket of his jeans.

"That's one messed up cat," my father said.

My father and I trudged up the driveway after the morning milking. I moved with the rhythm of a hay wagon with a flat tire, my body a house of mangled motion. My father walked patiently beside me and with a similar gait. I did not know if for him it came from the soreness of climbing in and out of the tractor cab all day or from having unconsciously imitated my movements all these years. Sometimes in the extra time he had and as his mind wandered, he traced a finger along the scars on his face and arms, as if reaffirming they were still there. He didn't look at the shiny Buick we passed in the driveway.

In the house, my father dug into his pocket to pull out a jack knife, Chap Stick, and a few stripped screws to place them on the dryer. He undid my belt buckle for

me, and then his own, stepping out of his jeans and hanging them on a nail. The hair on his legs laid exceptionally dark against his pale skin.

The door to my parents' bedroom swung open. Barry Johnson swaggered out of it shirtless, his right hand clutching the front of his waistline. He stood in front of my father and leaned back with an over-exaggerated smile.

Barry and my father stood face to face, both mostly naked. The ways in which neither of them were ideal men were somehow evident in the manner they stood. Barry's chest was toned, with defined breasts that had tattoos stretched across them. His head was shaved, and the way he shifted back and forth and was too eager to look my father in the eye suggested that he was young and that there were things he didn't understand. My father, on the other hand, slouched. His stomach was soft and his upper body was lost in a tangle of chest hair. When he came to rest the skin sucked around the bone at his elbows and knees, like a body disappearing. He showed no expression when Barry slowly started swaying his hips and patting the air with an open palm.

My mother emerged from the bedroom with my father's work clothes drooping off her. "Boys, play nice," she said.

My father sat down and poured himself a bowl of Rice Crispies. He grabbed the *Progressive Dairyman* from the center of the table and re-creased the page it was on.

Barry followed, and then stood over him. "Mr. Henderson wants you to grow corn on the side hill this year. He liked the way it covered up the plants."

My father shook his head. "It was corn the last three years. I need to rotate it."

Barry placed his palm on the page of the magazine and leaned close to my father's ear.

"Mr. Henderson wants corn there."

"It'll grow shit corn."

Barry sat on the kitchen table and held my father's face in one hand, the other hand still grasping the belt buckle. My father turned his head away. The white in the corner of his eyes showed, and the veins that ran through them.

"It's not really about you," Barry said, exaggerating each word, "growing any corn. Is it, Horace?"

"Well fuck Mr. Henderson."

"Horace!" my mother shouted, storming into the kitchen. She placed her hands on Barry and gently pushed him towards the door. "It'll be in corn," she said.

Barry stopped halfway to the door. He dug into his pocket and tossed a joint at my father. It rolled across the farm journal and stopped in front of him. As a second thought Barry threw him a book of matches as well.

"Might do you some good," Barry said. "The pride of your farm."

He slapped at my mother's ass. She dipped out of the way and gave a laugh that was falsely girlish. He bowed before closing the door behind him.

My mother stomped over to my father and tore the spoon from his hand. She pointed it at him, the milk beading and falling to the ground. "You don't interfere with my shit," she said, tossing the spoon on the floor and returning to the bedroom.

My mother began business with Mr. Henderson the summer the hogweed came. We first saw it appear in the hedgerows and weeds along the lawn, a tall boisterous plant that outgrew everything around it and cast its white flowers

downward. It was rumored to have come from Russia, but that seemed like a long way to travel to find our farm. The first year there were only a few towering plants standing out like solitary mercenaries among the local vegetation. The next summer it had multiplied rapidly. Being larger and better able to compete for native ground, every untouched piece of land was now heavy with it. It swelled from every hedgerow, corner of pasture and side bank, leaving a prohibitive patchwork across the landscape.

My parents fought among themselves for several years when the bill collectors started coming. Companies sent them in well-kept middle class cars from which they stepped out of in jeans and work shoes that had never been dirtied. My mother eventually refused to answer the door. Farming had changed, she said. You had to get bigger to still make it. My father said that he was a farmer, and he did not call having Mexicans milk a thousand cows an act of farming. Every time the answering machine clicked on with another anonymous man asking for Horace Dean it would start the argument again, or force my mother out of the room.

My father persisted in being a farmer, until a week before the land was to be seized on back taxes. That night my father sat quietly at the table with a bottle of gin while my mother disappeared with the truck. Two days later my mother asked us to leave the house before Mr. Henderson arrived. The taxes were taken care of, with the understanding he would get to grow his crop as well.

I stabbed the pitchfork into the chaff on the ground and leaned away from the bale. I carried the small patches of hay slowly in the air at the end of the fork and dumped them on the backs of calves in the hutches. My father would loosen the hay from the bale at the start of the day. It was my task to bed down the heifers. The fork

was always there, leaning against the bale. The calves often reached for the hay and knocked it off the tines before I had a chance to turn the fork over.

My father sat high above me on the blue silo that towered over the entire farm. At that distance his features were indistinct and intelligible, like an ornament too small to have a face. He often climbed there to be alone. I think it offered him a feeling of safety, knowing the rest of the world was not brave enough to follow him up there.

It took me several trips to each hutch before the heifers had enough hay beneath them. I didn't mind that it was slow. Sometimes the calves started bawling when they saw me, anxious for their hay. I secretly enjoyed it.

I turned to find my mother next to me, a pitchfork in her hand. It was seldom that she came out to the barn anymore. She thrust into the chaff and carried a large bundle away.

"You know that I love you, right?" she said, glancing at me from the corner of her eye.

She grunted as she heaved the hay into a stall—much more than I could lift. Not seeing her do farmwork anymore, I had forgotten how strong she was. I knew she was aware that my father was on the silo because she didn't look up.

She stabbed the fork into the ground and leaned on it. "There's just some things that are bigger than all this," she said.

The compressor of the milk house kicked on and added a faint ringing sound in the distance. It fell in with the cattle shifting by the bunk, a radio playing in the parlor and other natural sounds on a farm that had become another form of silence. Feeding hay to the hutches is the thing I do every day. My mother should know that I hate her helping.

“I just need to be able to think that you’re still ok with me being your mother.”

The first time I saw my father on top of the silo I was afraid he was going to jump off it. I suppose part of being up there is the way it looked down here. You couldn’t see the thin calves, the spilled buckets or the broken skidsteer. Everything might have seemed to have a place. If he did jump I’m not sure instead of crashing to the ground he wouldn’t float straight up, through the jet haze, and keep climbing.

My father used to tell me about his day as it was happening, saying what was broken and the ideas he had to fix it. That was back before he became used to long silences between us. Sometimes he would ask me questions and then answer them himself. Sometimes I could sense that he was frustrated that I did not reply. Once, he said, “You’re quite the storyteller, aren’t you?” We were sifting through feed buckets filled with old nuts and bolts, looking for the right size washer for the haybine tire. It appeared that he had found one, but after turning it over in his hand he threw it against the wall and had me sit on the bucket.

“Well, I’m not as good at telling about things myself, but I suppose there’s a few stories I can give.”

He told me about a dirt road that had run through our land called the Turkey Path, washed out now, but the old stagecoach used to go down it. In the fifties there was a pile of lime at the end of one of our fields that the county put there. There wasn’t much of a story attached to it, other than that’s why it’s called the Lime Pile Field. Then he described the Hairy Women of Klipnocky—a legend that began on our property, how he had tipped over a wagon in the Beehive Field, and other misadventures he remembered. I began to understand that day that he was determined to give me the farm, one way or another.

It wasn't until the sun was lowering behind the distant woodline that my father began descending the silo. The last glare of the day caught the structure and cast it in red hue. My father moved slowly, only using one hand and taking each step with deliberation. He seemed to be talking to himself, but at that distance the words were unintelligible. I waited at the bottom for him, leaning on the pitchfork.

When he neared the ground it became apparent that he was taking his time because he held Ti-ti in one hand. The kitten's thin legs hung over my father's fingers, but the animal seemed content, even as he was jolted when my father jumped the last few feet to the dirt. The middle-aged man pulled a piece of dog food from his shirt pocket and gave it to Ti-ti, who took it in his back teeth and squinted as he chewed.

“What?” my father said. “He's not going to make it anyway.”

I followed after him, as I always did when he fed milk to the calves.

He often kept his head down when he walked through the old part of the barn. The angles of the rafters fell into shadows under the cobwebs that grew powdery with the dust they collected. The whitewash flaked off the stone walls and fell into the faded hay on the ground. The stalls from when it was a stanchion barn stood out like a bare skeleton, rusting. And still, it may have been the things that he saw that I did not that bothered him the most.

Before he entered the milk house he tossed the kitten on the ground, as if surprised it was in his hand. Ti-ti landed silently in the hay and ambled away. My father opened the door to the office to retrieve the feeding bottles. Terry Duluth, the hired hand, sat in the chair at the desk. He was carefully applying black polish to his nails.

“Seventy three and one forty six milk in the bucket tonight,” my father said.

Terry placed the brush in the bottle. He grabbed a brown paper towel from a pile on the desk and delicately wrote the numbers on it with the tips of his fingers. Terry was in high school and had spiked hair. Sometimes he wore a metal collar around his neck.

My father watched him hold his small finger next to his face and dab at it.

“I can do yours next,” Terry said.

“I’d punch you if you tried.”

Terry giggled.

Washers, used semen straws, the caps of teat dip drums and other refuse of the barn littered the desk in front of Terry, decaying silently. The water pressure tank stood in the corner and clicked absently. The overflow that ran out of its bottom had channeled away the concrete over the years.

“School?” asked my father.

“Art school, where I just sent my application?”

“Real school.”

“It sucks. That’s why I’m here,” Terry said, blowing his fingers.

My father grabbed the feeding bottle off the shelf and a corresponding nipple. He squeezed the dark rubber in his hand, watching the opening change shape. “Why do you come to this shithole?” he asked the teenager.

The chair groaned as Terry leaned back. “Must be the thirty dollars a day you give me,” he said, smiling. My father stared at the bottle in his hands and tapped it idly on his chest. It made a hollow sound that reverberated in the small room. He turned to go.

“There’s art around here,” Terry said. “People addicted to computers, Facebook. Living in concrete. Somehow,” Terry said, gesturing around him, “this all means something.”

“Art? Like in a museum?”

Terry waved him off. My father was about to leave again, but stopped short, gripping the door frame. “So what’s the deal?” he said, nodding towards the nail polish. “Do you like the fellas?”

Terry nearly jumped out of his seat. “No, no, no!” He held his fingers in front of him. “This is expression.”

My father nodded slowly. With nothing else to say, he left quietly.

The kitten was named Ti-ti. Possibly, it was a degeneration of the sound “kitty-kitty,” or perhaps some other typical instantaneous reasoning that lends to barn cats being named in a way that isn’t very reflective or thought out. Ti-ti was an outcast among the other cats and was seldom let near the milk dish. His small frame trembled as he walked up and down the grates between dirty hooves. Once in a while my father stroked Ti-ti’s back when the cat tiptoed by. Sometimes Ti-ti was stepped on and would let out a howl, but instead of running out of the parlor he walked to the end of the pit, tucked his legs under him, and pinned his ears back. His feet were always wet and matted because, unlike other cats, he was not bothered by treading through manure. He didn’t show any reaction to a piece of straw dragged across his feet, nor any other poking or rough play. His face carried on it a dull expression that, if he were a human, could suggest the absence of thought.

Ti-ti was often kicked by the cows in the parlor and more times than not his coat was tangled with burdocks, but he persisted against the odds. He usually sat on

top of the metal steps, staring into space for no apparent reason. Sometimes, when my father put the milkers on each cow in line he would stop at the end and linger enough to scratch Ti-ti's neck and allow him to raise his head to the hand. The kitten would up lift its tail and purr.

The hogweed grew so tall that not only did it claim the ground around a man, but if he stood close enough, the horizon as well. It lined the lawn like the burden of a forbidden forest no one had returned from. Fence posts lay at the base of the plants a few feet in, drying grass twined over them. My father, not having his gloves with him, started to snake his bare hand between the stalks but then recoiled as a breeze swayed the leaves. Instead, he put his foot in there and tried to drag it out with his heel. He leaned further and further back as the posts bent the plants towards him.

The door to the house slammed. Barry Johnson took long strides off the porch towards us. "John Boy Walton," he shouted, saluting. He chewed a piece of gum violently. "Boss sent me out to say hi."

My father straightened himself and sighed. Then he spread his legs and crossed his arms. "Had to leave when the adults started talking."

"Your wife and Mr. Henderson are busy. But not with business anymore." Barry looked over his shoulder at the house, as if he could see what was happening inside. His lips pulled tight across his face.

"She's a hell of a woman, in her own way," my father said.

"Fuck!" Barry shifted on his feet and stared at my father, as if he received an insult but didn't know how to respond to it. He spat into the hogweed. "Bitches are bitches."

"How many bitches do you get, Barry?"

Barry still rocked side to side, but looked at my father more out of confusion, like a bully who never had intentions to act. “Listen,” he said. “Plant the damn corn.”

My father glanced at the fence posts, ready to be back to work but not wanting Barry to see him struggle retrieving them. The tall plants knocked into each other and made scratching sounds over the heads of the men.

Barry turned to go, but stopped suddenly. “So what’s the deal anyway?” he asked. “You could have sold this place, lived somewhere nice. Happily ever after and shit.” Barry spit again. “Didn’t you love her?”

My father jolted forward and stopped just before Barry’s face. The scars on his cheeks seemed to swell with the rush of blood behind them. It was the first time I realized he was taller than the teenager. Now my father’s body swayed beneath his eyes, which were locked on Barry.

“And what are you doing?” My father asked.

“Being somebody. The way I know how.”

“You little shit, grow up.”

“You my dad or something?”

My father punched the teenager in the testicles. Barry wheeled backwards with a groan, both hands on his crotch. The skin on his head turned red and his mouth hung open. He appeared genuinely shocked, and maybe a little hurt. My father punched him again.

Barry reeled backwards and then lunged at my father. Too slow to avoid him, my father embraced the teenager at the moment of contact. They both landed on the ground, the older man on bottom. Barry tried to slip his arm free, which was pinned against my father’s chest. My father’s teeth clenched and his head shook

violently. Barry's hand was almost out of his hold. The teenager's face took on a heinous smile. My father twisted his head and without hesitation snapped the stalk of a hogweed plant next to him. Barry jerked free and was about to deliver a heavy blow when the flower of the plant was shoved in his face.

Barry lurched back. My father pressed in on him with it while Barry tried to slap it away. He jumped up and took a few steps back, dumbfounded, eyeing my father.

“Fuck! Crazy old man!”

Barry stood there and tried to calculate what had just happened. He might have thought it was a joke at his expense that he did not understand or that maybe my father was actually senile. He looked like a child that did not know why he was disciplined. Whatever his findings, he concluded them by whispering “Jesus.” Then he walked away.

My mother sat across the table, staring at me. She had on her black dancing dress, which she sometimes put on when she made a full meal. Once in a while she would point out that it was her only chance to wear it anymore.

“I've missed talking to you,” she said, and then corrected herself by saying “with you.” She had cooked pork chops because she had believed they were something I liked. She refused to eat anything slaughtered on our farm, not out of sympathy for the animals, but because of where they came from.

Half of my peas lay spread around my placemat. She guided them together with the back of her hand and put them back on my plate. Once my parents found me sitting in front of the old desktop computer in the hallway, pressing the keys. My mother clutched my father's hand as they waited to see what I would spell, but my

fingers could not hit any of the letters I had meant it to. They eventually pulled me away and told me it was not a toy.

“I haven’t spent much time with you. You’re always out there,” she said. She motioned to the window behind her that framed the barn, the silo and some of the valley behind it.

“I’m your mother,” she said, whether as much to me as herself.

The door opened and my father came in. He kicked off his boots on the ledge of the door and then slid out of his jeans. He walked into the kitchen in his underwear, his knees cracking as he moved. He poured himself a bowl of Rice Crispies and sat down next to me. The cereal crunched between his teeth resounded in the silence.

In ways I can’t explain the space of the table held the things in the distance between my parents. They never avoided nor acknowledged each other, suggesting they were well acquainted with the history brought into every moment they were together. They were both a married couple and strangers, in some ways the difference being slight. In the end it was my father who spoke, which was rare for either of them to do.

“I need money for milker parts.”

My mother wiped her mouth and grunted. “Some things never change.”

My father shrugged his shoulders. “Some people do.”

“But God bless you, not you Horace Dean.”

Outside it had darkened and the windows of the room threw back the reflections of what was inside it. With windows on each wall every person could see only themselves looking back. My father wiped the milk dripping off his chin and set the bowl back down.

“If I don’t farm, you and your boyfriends can’t do what you do.”

“If you didn’t farm we would be a normal family in a nice house.”

My father stood up and threw his chair against the wall. Two of its legs shattered and rolled across the linoleum.

He leaned halfway across the table on a swollen fist. “It’s what I do. You knew that.”

My mother shot out of her seat. “You were the farmer. I was always the farmer’s wife. Things are different now.” She walked around the table and stood face to face with him.

Witnessing the violence of my parents struck me as both childish and horrifying at the same time. I had never seen them push each other, although it seemed possible now. Sometimes I looked for clues in the things they said or did to help me piece together who they used to be when I was too young to remember them. Sometimes I would think that I had gotten close and could look beyond the people in front of me to see a happy couple, but moments like this would wash out the attempt. The lip my father had been biting in fury now began to quiver. Although he would not look away he swallowed. When he spoke, it was in a horse whisper.

“What did I do to you?”

“I never wanted to change you,” my mother said. “I just wanted to be me. It took so much from me too, and it wasn’t my thing.” She beat on his chest with her fist, each strike with less momentum than the last. Eventually, she balled up the front of his shirt in her hand and let it droop.

“I wanted things, Horace. My things.”

His collar was pulled by the weight of her arm and made him look like a small child in an oversized shirt. Moisture pooled in his eyes. He dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Why do you hate me so much? I’m begging for mercy, Laurel! Mercy!”

Things had been getting progressively worse before my mother contacted Mr. Henderson. Machinery fell apart more frequently, the cows grew thinner, and the milk check got smaller. If each day was a little harder than the last than it was a normal day of farming. Still, it was only when my father stopped telling stories that I knew how bad it had gotten. After forking hay to the hutches the rest of the time after milking I would silently follow him around the barn. He would often absently acknowledge that I was there, perhaps pat me on the head as he passed by, but no longer told me about the fields and the things that happened on them. I knew then that it was my turn to be the storyteller.

My father shoveled the silage back in front of the cows, leaning on the fork each stroke. Every heave he left behind thin lines of forage that overflowed from the tines. The cows stretched their necks towards him and pushed against each other for position. I walked next to him. When he reached the end of one side of the alley and started down the other, I did the same. Halfway through he suddenly straightened himself and dug into his pocket. He pulled out a joint, turned it over in his hand, and then ripped the paper. He unraveled it and dropped the marijuana into the silage.

“You’re welcome,” he told the cows.

Suddenly, a click echoed between the tin walls. Barry stood behind my father, pointing a revolver at his neck.

Barry wore a straw hat that fell loosely over his forehead. His face was dark red and puckered with lesions that gave it a rough geography. One of his eyelids was half swollen and made him blink profusely. A few of the blisters were especially dark where they had been broken open several times. They bunched in on themselves as he grinned.

“Planting time,” he said.

Barry sat on an old tire rim in the shop with his hands on his knees and the gun hanging between them as my father carried out bags of seed to the planter.

I stood at the bottom of the steps. My father, leaning from the top of the cab, grabbed my shirt and hoisted me up. He slid me between the steering column and far window, which was snug enough to mostly hold me in place while the tractor moved. I slumped against the glass. While it was awkward, it was no more disjointed than any other way I stood on the earth.

“You’re going to bring a kid when there’s a gun?”

“You’re holding the gun,” my father said.

Barry slapped the tire of the tractor as if he was thinking and then climbed into the cab with us. “Where am I going to sit?” he asked, hunched over in the door frame.

My father patted the armrest next to him.

“Nope.”

“You going to drive then?”

Barry looked small, folded up with his knees together, pressed against the legs of my father. His hat sank over his eyes. He couldn’t straighten his back and had to keep his hands in his pockets, looking like a child riding with his dad.

The planter shifted back and forth as we descended the steep driveway to the side hill. The springs above the disk creaked. The plates were rusted from sitting over the winter, but would soon be rubbed bright and clean by the difficulty of the ground.

“I didn’t have the chance to put any lime on it,” my father said, turning into the field. “It’s only been disked once.” Because Barry didn’t understand these things, I knew my father mostly said them for himself, as if to state out loud to the field, the farm, and the greater world around them that he was at least a good enough farmer to know the reason why the corn would not grow well.

He pulled a lever and the planter slowly lowered itself into the ground. The marking arm fell into the middle of the field. He put the tractor into a central gear, eased off the clutch, and began planting the side hill.

Barry twisted himself sideways and grabbed his knees, watching with fascination the plastic boxes ducking up and down as the equipment rolled over the soil. Every once in a while a bright pink seed would not get covered and lay on the dirt like a lost jewel. The discs left faint lines in the dirt behind them.

As soon as the planter was lowered my father did not look away from the ground in front of him. He no longer eyed the gun to see what direction it was pointed or if its safety was on, nor did he keep a free hand ready to catch me if I lost my balance. It was understood that this was a time that every man must stand for himself. He didn’t scratch his nose nor turn the radio on nor make conversation. He stared straight ahead and kept the same distance from the front wheel to the edge of the field as the planter clamored behind him.

Barry, who was first rapt in attention, closed his eyes. Thin layers of dust slid down the window in front of us as the glass rattled. The tractor heaved and jerked

over rough clumps of sod. Barry put his hand to his forehead and then finally whispered “bathroom.”

The wheels turned steadily. The marker left a faint, but even line next to the rows.

“Bathroom!” Barry shouted, cocking the pistol and pointing it at my father’s scarred cheek.

“When we get to the end of the row,” my father replied, as if to a child he wasn’t paying mind to. He never took his eyes off the soil in front of him.

When the tractor came to the end of the field it stopped and the planter lifted off the ground. My father opened the door in front of Barry.

“There’s a handkerchief tied to a branch in the hedgerow. Haven’t used it yet this spring, so it should be fine.”

Barry burst towards the weeds, one hand on his stomach and the other swinging the gun back and forth.

“Wasn’t that much of a farmer after all,” my father said.

What happened next did not surprise me. My father could have attacked Barry in his compromised state and taken the gun from him. He could have at least gone home and made Barry walk back—I don’t think my father was afraid of the consequences in either case. But he did neither of those things. Once a field had been started to be put into corn it had to be finished. He shut the door and shifted the tractor into gear.

When Barry came back his face, already red with blisters, had taken on a darker complexion. He stopped at the edge of the field to rub dirt on his hands and waited for the tractor to reach the headlands again. Most of the ground had already

been covered by then, and when my father had completed the short rows made by the uneven shape of the field he pulled into the driveway.

“Woah,” Barry said. The pistol clicked again.

My father put the tractor in park and turned to him with a forced smile.

“I want to keep going,” Barry said.

“You can’t plant a field twice.”

“There’s a field with hay cut.”

My father depressed the clutch and grabbed for the gear. “This is a corn planter.”

Barry put the butte in my father’s ear. “There were machines and shit to make hay.”

“Hay that was just cut. It’s way too green.” Barry pushed the end of the gun up my father’s nostrils. My father batted it away. “It’ll rot, Asshole,” my father said. “Or worse.”

“It’s not really about you making hay, is it Horace?”

My father’s glaring eyes were reflected on the glass and transposed over the landscape in front of us. He was about to commit his second bad act of farming for the day.

Farming is a repetitious act and when it doesn’t occur it means something. In that way, it’s often easy to know important parts of the story when you’re in them. The cows bawled from behind the tin walls of the barn after several hours had passed and they had not been milked. No one questioned my father, nor did he say anything. I realized then that there would be no tears or outbursts, nor any type of emotional scene. My mother had already disappeared with the truck. Sitting there, drinking gin

silently out of a coffee cup was the image of my father broken. He would idly turn the page of a magazine in front of him, but I was sure he was not reading what the words said. Somehow, the silence made it more heinous. I recognized that it was a defining moment, even if I didn't yet realize what my role was.

My father often fed bucket calves before he fed bottle babies. He poured milk in front of them and they drank by themselves, while the latter were less than a couple of weeks old and still sucked on a nipple. We knew Terry was there in the next room when we filled the five gallon pails with water and stirred in the milk replacer, and he would surely hear us to know that we were in the milk house, on the other side of the thin walls. We could have poked our heads in to say hello when we first entered that part of the barn, but my father waited until he needed to grab the bottle and nipple off the shelf in the office, because every part of work has a natural rhythm.

By the time he walked into the office the bottom of my father's sleeves were wet from stirring the milk replacer. "Hello, Kid," he said, opening the door.

He stopped suddenly in the door frame.

Terry was hunched over the desk. He fussed over an object like a bird picking at something to determine if it can eat it. He turned around to reveal an artifact in the shape of a man.

Its legs were modeled from rusted bolts, the knees where the tops joined together. The head was a cap from a teat dip barrel, the rubber seal cracking with age, but without a face on it. There were broken semen straws for hair. It was formed from spark plug without ignition left in them, clips, pipe elbows and other things that were old and decaying and whose original purpose was hard to distinguish. It stood awkwardly on the table with its arms raised.

“Don’t say you need anything here,” Terry said, “because I’ve been around for two years and it’s all just been sitting here.” He leaned back in the chair and grinned.

My father picked it up. Terry instinctively put his hands under it, signifying its fragility.

“I call it Disjointed Man,” he said.

My father held it in front of him and slowly turned it over. It looked smaller in his palm. He studied it closely, running his finger along its shapes.

“I wanted you to see it first,” Terry said, although he half-held his hands out, ready to take it back. “You see, all the parts aren’t supposed to fit or do anything anymore. But somehow they still form a man.”

My father stood it upright in his palm, his other hand behind its head. His fingers slowly curled around the cap and squeezed until it snapped off in a metallic crunch muffled in his grasp. Terry put his wrist over his mouth. My father twisted the waist with both hands. Steel parts fell to the ground as it writhed. Then he clutched it and rammed it against the concrete walls.

He tossed it at Terry’s feet. It lay there mangled and indistinguishable, in no way resembling a person.

“Stay away from my shit,” my father said. He grabbed the bottle and nipple, and then closed the door behind him.

My father and I returned to the hay bales the next day. I knew he hated to, but it was like having to see a dead body for yourself, despite how grotesque it was. The hay would ferment and be ruined, remaining scabs across the landscape until they were eventually pushed into the hedgerow.

The bristle of the cut grass snapped beneath our boots. The field was at a slant, part of the valley's greater slope that pushed gravity towards our farm. My father circled the round bale, as if looking over the other fighter. He slid his hand into the packed hay and quickly withdrew it.

"Jesus," he said. Steam curled out of the crevice left behind.

My father grabbed me by the front of the shirt and hoisted me onto the bale. My legs dangled over the edge. He folded his arms and leaned against its side.

The valley around us was a collage of hedgerows. Wild flowers shifted the hue of the land in different stages of being worked. The hogweed could not grow in the fields we farmed, but only lean greedily from the edges. Our place lay at the bottom of it all, the barn and tractors small parts of the resistance.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" my father asked. "A man once offered me two thousand dollars for the steel, and I wouldn't do it."

Because I knew my father I understood that he was talking about the silo. Its tall blue frame rose over the ground and made everything below it smaller and restrained. From this distance it had no rust circling its rivets or weeds along its base.

"You can see them for miles away and know that some man has made his stand there. There's nothing iconic like that left anymore."

He laid in front of the bale, groaning as he lowered himself to the ground. He eventually laced his hands and closed his eyes. "People used to die in them all the time," he said. "Methane from the silage. Can't imagine what's inside ours after all these years."

He fell silent, and after a while I could not account for what he might have been seeing.

The bottle babies stuck their heads through the gates, yearning for my father's attention. There were three of them, but their necks twined around each other as they feverishly crowded among themselves. My father always prepared two bottles at once, dropping one into the chaff and guiding the nipple of the other into the nearest mouth that strained towards him. I held my hands over them as if in benediction, allowing them to suck my fingers and leaving the other calf to drink freely.

Barry Johnson stood in the opening of the front door, his head bobbing back and forth as he looked into the shadows of the barn and tried to decide what we were doing. He eventually sauntered up to the pen and leaned on it in the same way as my father. He gave the older man a nod.

“Dinner time, huh?” Barry said, watching the calves.

He wore his straw hat again. The redness in his face had mostly receded, although a few large blisters had remained and were caked with foundation. I could imagine someone, perhaps my mother, convincing him that one couldn't tell.

The two calves spread their hooves apart and thrust into my hands, their ropey tails swinging gaily. Barry raised the back of his hand gingerly next to a calf's mouth and recoiled when the wet tongue reached for him.

“He's a hungry fucker, aint he?” Barry said to my father, fascinated. He grimaced childishly as the calf sucked and pulled on his fingers. He looked to my father for confirmation, but the older man only stared vacantly into the cobwebs of the rafters.

It was not apparent if Barry was sent out of the house by Mr. Henderson or came here on his own accord. I had never actually seen Mr. Henderson, and I'm not sure my father has either because the few times he was here my mother usually kept us out of the house. I pictured him as a businessman, which because I had never

actually seen one of those before either, I only knew as someone who got others to do his work for him.

Barry suddenly grabbed the bottle off the ground and held it at my father.

“Well, show me!” he said.

My father smiled to himself and pulled the nipple from the calf in front of him. The heifer’s mouth gaped at the figure of the farmer. He got behind Barry and tilted the bottle at a forty-five degree angle. He guided the rubber into the calf’s mouth and pushed away the other two with his hand.

“Keep it tilted so it doesn’t suck air.”

Barry held the bottle rigidly, focusing on it with intention as my father took his hand away.

“I’m doing good, aint I?” Barry asked.

My father put his workshoe on the lowest rung of the gate and continued to gaze through the walls of the barn. Barry waited a moment, and put his foot up there too. He would look away from the bottle only to glance at me from the corner of his eye.

“Your son doesn’t say much.”

“He doesn’t say anything,” my father said.

Barry leaned towards me and scrunched his eyes as he looked me over, as if trying to see through a foggy window. My body started twitching under the scrutiny.

“Is he alright in the head?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

Barry appeared to be deciding whether he was supposed to or not, eventually deciding it was a joke.

“He’s a good boy, though,” my father said.

A frown swept over Barry's face, which shifted to an angry gaze he held over me.

"Done," Barry said, pulling the bottle away and dropping it in the chaff. Milk sloshed around inside it. Barry pushed the calf's head away before stomping the length of the barn.

My father flicked the switch and shadows fell over the milkers and wet concrete in the parlor. The national anthem came on the radio and still followed us, muffled, as he closed the door and walked the length of the barn. He slapped the switches along the wall as he passed them without slowing. The cobwebs, dust, and stray baling twine on the floor disappeared behind him, engulfed in memory and time. From where I stood, at the end of the barn, it seemed that the darkness chased my father, and he was in no hurry to escape it.

He rinsed off our boots in the milk house and then pushed some stray chaff closer to the drain with the force of the water before turning off the lights in the milk house and closing the door behind him.

The spring air was abrupt in the way it didn't have the heaviness of inside the barn. My father's boots dragged along the gravel of the driveway and then stopped. The Buick was in the driveway and there was a light in my parents' bedroom. My father turned around and went back into the barn.

When he came back he had Ti-ti in his hand. When he set him down he ran to a mud puddle and drank where the milk man had spilled some of the load when he took the hose out. The water was cloudy and cast blue in the night. "Naw, that's nasty," my father said, scooping up the kitten again. The farmer sank against the outside wall and spread his legs. He giggled as the kitten climbed up his chest with a

blank expression and tried to rub his cheek along the man's chin. My father stroked it in his big hand, the cat each time bending down from the weight.

I first thought it was a star low on the horizon, flickering brightly. It was alone in the darkness, separate from any constellation. It danced with passion, obstinate against the night. It seemed to grow larger and twist within itself at the same time. When the second one erupted next to it I knew it was not a star.

I lifted my arm up in its direction, my fingers curled towards it. I tried to speak, but only made a sound that rose in pitch.

"I know. It bothers me too."

I tried to stomp, but when it translated to my body I only rocked side to side. My father sat the kitten down and put his hands on my shoulders to still me.

I could feel him stiffen behind me.

He raced to the truck, leaving me behind, heaving after him. In another minute the pickup tore over the lawn and came to a stop next to me. He pulled me in and the old Ford climbed the hill. By the time we reached the field several more bales had caught on fire. In some, a small glow shone inside the hay while bleached smoke rolled from it in bundles and rose into the night. Others were fully engulfed, the shape of the bale overwhelmed in undulating fire. The pickup rocked slowly by the flaming effigies.

He pulled to a stop in the middle of the field. As soon as we opened the door the heat pressed in on us and took our breath. Images of the flames danced along the body of the pickup, reflected on its dull metal, as if it too had ignited. The brightness was blinding and turned all silhouettes outside of the field into solid darkness.

My father stumbled around, his eyes wide in awe. He chuckled quietly, nearly tripping over himself as he went to the next bale, and then to another. His face started to glisten.

Shadows began to flicker in the great columns of smoke that climbed into the sky. At first I thought it might be ashes carried away from us, but then a pale moth landed on my shirt. Its wings pulsed like a heartbeat. I went to touch it, but it flung itself into the draft with the others drawn there too and became another dipping apparition.

My father stood in front of a bale with his arms crossed. He was close to the fire—sometimes it would reach out and graze his pant legs, but he didn't flinch. His collar was heavy with sweat and stuck to his neckline. From where we stood it seemed the whole world was on fire, shrinking smaller in the flames and carried away on the updraft. And for all we knew, it was.

Then my father disappeared into the night.

Black rings circled the bales where the heat had dried the grass and then eaten it away. If the ground had been drier the plot would have turned into a sea of fire, the liquid churning shape of the field evident from above to any god that looked down on us. New growth had started just days after it had been cut and although the old stalks were hollow and crisp, the new buds beneath them held enough moisture to resist combustion.

My father returned with two five gallon pails in his hands. At first I thought he had filled them in the creek and was going to extinguish the flames, but when he set them next to the bales, inside the fire, I realized they were Mr. Henderson's marijuana plants.

He turned around and walked into the night again. The plastic in the buckets began to coil, the lips curling over. The edges of the leaves glowed red and the rest of the plant began to darken. My father returned, two buckets in hand, and placed them in the fire.

The air grew heavy and the image of the man reappearing again with more pails bent and curved in the heat. A dark, earthen smell swelled into the circle of light I stood in. At first it was unnamable until I remembered something similar lingering in our kitchen before. The odor grew denser and surrounded me. A warm feeling swept over my body, this time coming from the inside, and seemed to push through me to meet the blazing world outside. My breathing grew soft and deepened. My limbs grew light, as if they were pieces of ash, ready to be lifted away. My father, too, had slowed in bringing the marijuana. When he threw the last couple of buckets against the bale he stumbled backwards and then stood with his arms folded, staring into the flame.

The moths descended upon us heavier and flowed through the sky above, and yet at the same time I doubted they were even there. Even though they were a dancing silhouette with no color at all I imagined them in pastels, and then as thoughts that were released into the greater world. Suddenly, I realized I had no idea how long I had been smiling.

My father, however, began pacing back and forth. He kicked at a burning bale and sparks flew up around him. A second later he was pacing again.

I stepped towards him with my arms out. I knew that if I could embrace him it would change everything. I had taken a few steps before I realized that I was walking—actually picking up my feet and moving them in a logical rhythm. My legs

travelled so easily over the earth. It was the first time I realized that a human body was meant to be in balance.

“Hello!” my father shouted into the night. He swung his fists at the bales in the fire and threw up his arms before pacing again. “Hello!” he shouted with a horrified look. “But do I even exist?”

“Dad!” I yelled. My hands shot to my mouth. I had just spoken. I had never heard my voice before. The word echoed into the darkness and then was gone. “Dad!” I yelled, and though I had so much more to say, I ran towards him.

He pulled at his collar and twisted his head back frantically. He saw me coming and turned towards me. “I’m part of someone else’s head and I’m being forgotten!” he screamed.

I took him in my arms and eased him to the ground. He sobbed into my shoulder. I held him there as the flames danced around us.

I did not hear my father clearing his throat as he poured a cup of coffee in the dark or his chair shift as he sat down in front of *Progressive Dairyman* at the kitchen table. I lay in bed, listening for someone stirring downstairs. When the silence held I slowly pulled on the jeans left crumpled on the floor and went to the barn.

I heaved over the driveway in the morning darkness, my body slinging itself back and forth and my boots scraping heinously over the dirt. The smell of smoke lingered in my clothes and rose as the erratic motions of my body shook it out.

I flipped the light switch. My father sat in the alley, slumped against the wall. His eyes were open. What he stared at, however, I could not tell.

I stood over him for a moment before he turned his head towards me. The scars on his face glowed red against the pale skin around them. Chaff clung to his hair.

“Time to milk?” he asked softly.

The rhythm of farming took over his body and moved him from milking to feeding calves to shoveling up silage in the bunks. He was silent, however. He looked vacantly at the things around him while his hands worked automatically with a consciousness of their own. His head hung low and the soreness in his joints was evident in the way he moved, but he still went from scraping the freestall barn to bedding the stalls to spreading manure. I wanted to tell him that it would be alright, but I couldn't. I wasn't sure that it would be.

It was in the middle of the day when Barry Johnson came out to the barn. It appeared my father had been expecting him, because he didn't look up as the Buick came to a screeching halt over the mud puddle by the milk house. When Barry turned off the key a dripping sound could be heard, but didn't distinguish itself from the rest of the noises that a cooling engine makes. He made an angry face in the rearview mirror and then examined it before opening the door. He cursed having to step into the mud puddle with his Converse sneakers.

“You fucked the pooch now, Horace,” Barry said, striding towards my father. “You really done it this time.”

The door to the milk house cracked open. Terry Duluth stuck his head out to see where the yelling was coming from. My father waved him back inside.

“Mr. Henderson has a message for you in the house. You're not going to like it.”

My father held the pitchfork upside down by the tines and leaned on it. There were dark circles under his eyes. He put most of his weight on one leg, probably because the other knee was hurt.

“Fuck you,” my father said, without commitment. I knew he just wanted to be back to the familiarity of the day’s routine.

Barry looked my father over. He ran his tongue over the front of his lips. The dents in his bald head flexed. Then he threw his hands and stomped his foot.

“God damn it, Horace. Why would you mess this up?”

“Are you going to tell me how hard you fucked my wife?” Are you going to tell me that she was glad to finally have a real man?”

Barry recoiled. “No,” he said, as if something taboo was spoken. “Listen, man. We had such a good thing going here. I liked it, is what I’m saying.”

“She said she didn’t marry much of a man, didn’t she? She said that right after you fucked her hard.”

Barry scraped at a pebble with the toe of his sneaker. He shook his head back and forth, making the gold chain on his neck slide down his chest. “I just don’t know how you could let someone take all this, Pops.” He motioned to the things around him without looking up.

My father lifted his shirt and pressed it into his face. He wiped at his cheeks with his blistered palm. He breathed deeply, trying to still his shaking abdomen. The air was loud and abrasive flowing through his mouth.

A cat slinked along the weeds by the wall of the barn. It kept its head down, looking warily around, and then scampered up to the puddle beneath Barry’s car. Its head throbbed as it drank from it. I knew that if my father could just return to farming then everything would be alright. His body could take over and his mind could break

itself free and disappear, with all of its heaviness. He would not have to address anything directly and the day would be figured out for him, like every day before, and all the problems that existed would be the same ones that were always on the verge of getting him but somehow never had.

Terry came out of the milk house. He glanced at me and then walked gingerly towards my father. “Are you ok, Horace?”

My father put his hand up, but kept his head turned away. A few more cats brushed by his feet and joined the other one at the puddle. They made small waves in the water in front of their faces.

“Mr. Dean, we care about you.” Terry put his hands on my father’s shoulders. “We want you to know that.”

My father put his hands on Terry’s face and kissed him.

The teenager froze. His eyes grew wide. His hands went up, but he did not put them on my father. When my father stepped away Terry stood rigid, like something crumpled, and did not speak.

Barry stood with his hands on his head. When he took them off the shapes of his fingers were colored on his skull. He paced back and forth, whispering to himself “This aint right,” and when he took a step at them it was unclear whether it was for violence or embrace. He didn’t appear to know either, and instead raced back to his car. “Horace?” he said, standing halfway out of the driver’s side. Then he turned the key and floored the vehicle backwards, leaving a drip pattern across the driveway.

More cats circled the puddle in a ring and dashed around the feet of Terry and my father. They rubbed against their pant legs and then darted back to the puddle with their tails in the air to drink the murky water where the milk had been spilled.

Their tongues lapping at the puddle sounded like a light precipitation had fallen over the farm.

Terry's first motion was to shake his head, lightly, but because he trembled his whole body shifted side to side with him. He didn't look away from my father. He took one step back, doubling the distance between them, and then another. Then he disappeared into the milk house and left me and my father and the cats standing outside it.

My father stood there, ashen. There was no expression on his face. Suddenly, he turned and walked away.

"Please do not follow me," he said.

I started after him regardless. Like a moon pulled by the gravity of the greater body, I trudged after my father. It might have been the first time I disobeyed him.

He splashed through the mud puddle. Cats exploded around him. As soon as he was gone they raced back to the edge of the water and lapped at it again. He moved with a lurching hitch, his body worn and beaten from the things done to it on the farm. He dragged himself across the driveway like a slouching beast fulfilling its destiny. I followed behind him, moving in a similar manner, because I was made here too.

He pulled himself across the lawn, the grass bent and slicked over in his path. The hogweed stirred and swayed around us, observing spectators. They gently knocked into each other, the rustling like whispers passed among themselves.

My father swung open the door and walked in without taking off his boots. My mother kneeled on the kitchen floor, sobbing. Mr. Henderson leaned back in a chair, his fedora in his lap.

“Hello Horace,” he said. Mr. Henderson had a dark complexion and round cheeks. He was about the same age as my father, but the skin on his hands and face was smooth and unwrinkled. He wore a suit coat over a t-shirt and jeans, a casualty I suspect he only indulged in when he came to the country. He sat there as the embodiment of everything that was wrong with the way that we lived. It was startling to see him as a person.

“Did he hurt you?” my father asked, kneeling by my mother.

She shook her head, her entire face wet. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know, I swear.” She reached for my father, who remained still, looking her over. She grabbed at his shirt. “I’m so sorry,” she said,

Mr. Henderson cleared his throat to draw attention to himself. “I can offer the situation some clarity, Horace, if you’ll allow me.”

“Laurel?” My father stood up.

“We’re different people, you and I, Horace,” Mr. Henderson said. “From the way your wife has described you throughout the course of our association, I know that you’re a man of passion, Horace. I respect that. I, on the other hand, am a man of business.”

“Honey,” my mother begged, reaching towards my father.

“Perhaps I’m using too many words,” Mr. Henderson said. He pulled a briefcase from under the chair, unlatched it, and handed my father a document.

My father took it gingerly, as if something that could bite him.

“I only make good investments. And never, never take chances.”

“Listen Horace, this doesn’t have to be the end. We can come back from this.” My mother grabbed a fold in his stained jeans and clutched it.

My father dropped the papers. They sprang from the paperclip and scattered over the kitchen floor.

“I’ve been paying the taxes, but I made sure the deed was in my name first. I’m sorry, Horace, but this is my farm.”

My mother’s breath caught again and she started crying once more.

I heard the words from somewhere outside of myself. They came with a ringing silence that drowned out my mother weeping and Mr. Henderson shifting in his chair or the sound of calves bawling outside. My skin grew hot and clammy, and nothing around me seemed real any longer.

“If you turn your aggression towards me now, Mr. Dean,” Mr. Henderson said, “your wife will be hurt in reciprocation.”

My father, however, did not move. He stared at the linoleum below him.

My mother jumped to her feet and threw her arms around his shoulder. “We can start again,” she said. “You and me. The three of us.” She frantically motioned me over.

She turned my father’s head towards her, but he looked only with vacant, unblinking eyes. She put her arms around my father and me, connecting us. “We’re a family. That’s everything.” She squeezed tighter and pulled us awkwardly towards her.

My father turned around and walked away. The door closed behind him.

I followed him through the lawn again. “Come.” He motioned with his hand without looking back. I was already close behind, my gait falling into the same rhythm as his.

He was heading towards the barn. I did not know what he would do there, and perhaps he didn’t either, only that he was doing the closest thing that made sense. His

legs seemed to grow heavier, because his body swung side to side. We made a staggering path across the lawn, one after another.

When he turned the corner of the barn he stopped again.

A half dozen cats convulsed madly around the edges of the mud puddle. They flopped in the driveway, dust billowing from their coats, screaming in a high pitch howl. One collided into my father's leg and fell back. A chorus of deep throaty moans droned among them.

The drip pattern leading from the puddle had not dried. My father traced it with the toe of his boot. "Antifreeze," he said.

The cats flung themselves in front of the milk house door as creatures possessed. Their bodies contorted and their mouths were open, showing their gnashing teeth. We walked among them. They rose and fell like marionettes attached to a hand above us. "Jesus Christ," my father said.

Then he gasped.

Ti-ti stood at the far end of the puddle, lapping up the water.

My father shot through the bouncing cats. He knocked one out of the air in front of him and then stepped on another, nearly losing his balance. He scooped up the kitten who jolted from the sudden grip on it. My father held it against his chest and put his face into its fur. "No, no, no, no," he repeated. "No."

The kitten lifted its tail and rubbed along my father's stomach. He playfully bit his finger with the back of his teeth.

It was a sunny day. I had once believed that nothing bad could happen on a sunny day. The hogweed was in bloom and the valley was covered in white lace that filled the ditches and hedgerows and banks along the woods. The sky was blue, except for a train of crows lifting themselves from one strand of trees to another

across the horizon. I had a feeling that what I saw now I would always remember. I had already realized this when my father laid Ti-ti in my hands and said, “Come on, Son.”

My father took the five gallon pails he used to feed calves and filled them with diesel at the fuel tank. Ti-ti lay stretched in my hands. He looked straight ahead, in obvious discomfort. The diesel spilled over the sides and stained my father’s jeans as he carried them into the barn.

He went into the parlor, where he started every day, and poured a thin stream of diesel in the pit. It splashed on the rubber mat on the floor and left red beads along the walls. He backed into the holding area, keeping the flow going along where the cows waited to be milked twice a day, and into the freestalls. He ran the bucket along the foundation of the walls where he walked to the center alley to shovel the silage back in front of the cows. Instead of picking up the pitchfork this time he splashed it in diesel fuel as it hung on the nail. The cows standing near it recoiled. He dropped a little petrol at the base of each pole as he worked along the length of the barn and then down the other side. It soaked into the old silage littering the bunks. Before he left the freestalls he opened the gates on each side. A cow poked her head out, looked around, and then stepped into the driveway. My father tossed the bucket behind him because it was empty.

After shoveling silage my father always fed calves next, and so the second bucket left a moist path to the milk house. He threw it along the walls and vacuum controls and over the bulk tank, even though it was made of metal. He kicked open the aluminum door to the office and flung the bucket around indiscriminately, soaking the desk, the chair, and all of the old clutter inside. A cloud of acidic vapor hung over him. He tossed the liquid along the old stanchion barn where he used to milk when

farming was better, along the flaking walls and collapsing cobwebs, and left it in the old chaff that had gathered over the years. He had just enough remaining to make it through the old feed room and to the foot of the silo. He threw the bucket into a patch of hogweed that leaned from the barn wall.

My father took a deep breath and turned towards me. He put his hands on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. It was the first time I had seen him smile in years.

“I’m sorry that I failed. When this turned to shit, everything else did too. This was me,” he said, gesturing to the dilapidated farm around him. “This was us, and somehow I lost it.”

He dug into his pocket and pulled out a book of matches. He tore off the cover and lit them all at once. Then he tossed them into an open window of the barn. In a few seconds the tops of flames brushed along the bottom panes. He held his hands out to take Ti-ti from me.

The kitten had its eyes closed, stretched in my palms. It twitched lightly. Its slow heart beat reached my fingers through its thin rib cage. I handed him to my father.

He took the cat in one hand and with the other struck at the latch at the bottom door of the silo. It took him several times before the rusted pin came free. An overwhelming rancid odor came from the small opening, taking away my breath and stinging my eyes. My father immediately closed it again. Behind us the flames grew and old chaff floated in the smoke.

“I’m going to need you to close this after me,” he said, knocking on the metal door. “Did you see how the pin worked?”

I nodded my head.

“Listen. All that’s left of me is my words. And you’ll keep them for me, alright?”

The tin roof began to steam. A cow jogged past us, her neck chain bouncing off her chest. A great roaring sound echoed within the block walls of the building. My father leaned in and whispered into my ear. Then he kissed my forehead.

“This is your world now,” he said over his shoulder, as he climbed into the opening of the silo with the kitten in his hand. Then he shut the door. The metal flexed as he pulled it tight from the inside, waiting for me to lock it.

The rusted pin swung back and forth over the latch.

## The Headlands

By Ryan Dennis

My father opened the milk house door in the morning darkness. The sink dripped like a time piece. Each bead slid along the metal basin and wore away the concrete on its course to the floor drain.

I followed behind my father as he flipped on the lights and set the milking system to wash, manipulating the dials around him without looking. He pushed the adjacent door open wide enough to allow the time for me to go through it as well before it snapped shut and rocked on its hinges. We heaved along the alley of the old tie stall barn, our motions in a slow lurching gait that stirred chaff around our boots. I, like a shadow, listed with the same disjointed movement of my father, but while mine came from the way in which I had been formed, his scars and broken walk was a product of farming. In the mornings his emphysema often exaggerated these tendencies. The wash water pulsed inside the pipeline along the wall, like a metronome to our movement.

My father flicked the light switch to the parlor. The florescent bulbs hummed and resisted before it finally came on. When the wash cycle was completed my father turned the units to the milking setting. In another fifteen minutes the holding area would be filled with cows gazing lazily in random directions as he dipped the teats of those in the parlor with iodine, wiped them, and put the milkers on. Pulsation from the vacuum throbbed around us, as if the heartbeat of the entire farm. While waiting for the first group of cows to milk out he took the hose and idly washed the end of the

parlor. The water swirled violently around the drain, pulling pieces of hay with it into the dark abyss.

My father ate Rice Crispies for dinner, as he did most nights. The bowl sat at a precarious angle over the mound of envelopes on the kitchen table. Most of them were unopened bills and fliers from tractor dealers or one of the many agricultural magazines that came automatically but no one was ever heard reading from. The habit had originated from his attempt in kindness so my mother wouldn't have to cook at night after coming from the barn too, and persisted through my mother offering that she didn't mind, and then her later saying that she wanted to cook sometimes. The scope of whether my father eating cereal at night was an act of consideration or betrayal had long been lost and instead fell into unquestionable normalcy. A radio played by the bay window, the same program as in the barn.

There was a knock on the door. My mother appeared from another room to answer it. She opened the door and a hand extended through it with a manila envelope.

"Is that Horace Dean sitting at the table, then?" the voice asked.

"One and only," said my father, still chewing.

"He's been served, Mam. There is now a lien against the property."

"Horace?"

"Although it is not my place to do so," the voice said, "I'd advise you to seek legal counsel."

Too dark to see his features, the man exited like a ball of shadows rolling across the lawn. My mother stood in the doorway long after he was gone, the envelope in her hand.

“Can we afford a lawyer?” she asked, handing the documents to my father.

My father took the envelope from her and tossed it into the pile in front of him. “I don’t pay liens,” he said.

He scraped heinously against the sides of his bowl, guiding the Rice Crispies back into the milk. Then he set the wet spoon on the envelope and drank from the bowl with both hands.

“Jesus, Horace.”

“It’s the easiest way to eat cereal.”

“Aren’t you worried about that?” My mother pointed at the manila envelope, as if a creature that could lunge at them.

My father shrugged and grabbed the cereal box.

“Come on Horace. Don’t make me have to be scared for the both of us.”

My father looked up. “Been like this for years. And we’re still here. We’re always still going to be here.” Milk beaded on his chin.

The windows in the kitchen reflected everything back onto itself, forever collapsing the space of the small room, but outside the shapes of the night drifted around us. There was a barn, and fields, and a valley and woods all in darkness and drawn towards us, the Deans a small spark of light in the center of it all. The weight of those things pressed in from all sides.

The radio began playing a country ballad that had gone pop after a while. My mother, who had been standing over my father silently, now offered her hand. He was too slow to realize he was meant to take it, so she pulled him to his feet and put her arms around him.

She led, compelling him side to side in slow rhythm. His knees cracked. He didn’t lift his feet so much as slide them in quarter turns as she rotated around him.

“Not bad, Mr. Dean,” my mother said.

He grunted. He stood stiffly and stared ahead, awkwardness seizing his body.

She laid her head on his shoulder.

“This isn’t really my thing,” he said.

Her hand reached up and traced the scars on his cheek, knowing where they were without looking. After a while she straightened again. “Now, either you dip me or I’ll dip you.”

A jolt ran through my father’s body. His hands hovered behind her, landing gingerly before he took them off again.

“I don’t know if I can,” he said.

“Of course you can, Doll. Like tossing a hay bale.”

“I can’t,” he said, shaking his head.

My mother took a step back and stopped dancing. She grew taller over my father. “Try. Will you just show some life? Get upset or get excited about something. Just care!”

The last imperative was like an electric prod to my father’s ribs. He lunged forward and seized my mother. They rocked back and forth like an animated pendulum. His face fell into a sneer, his nose scrunched and front teeth showing, as they always do when he’s trying to concentrate on something. Then, with the mounting pressure visible on his body, he tipped my mother over on the offbeat.

She free-fell for the briefest moment—her eyes widening, clutching at his shirt—and when he caught her the full weight pulled him down and a groan escaped him. She fell to the floor with a crash, although most of the sound came from the back of his knuckles slapping against the linoleum.

The chorus of the song faded away.

He hunched over her, motionless. She lay bright-eyed among the boot prints on the floor.

The radio deejay came on. “The next handful of days will see a convergence of fronts in Steuben and Allegany County. Believe it or not, Folks, we’ll be experiencing conditions that can produce a tornado.”

My father pulled his hands from under my mother and walked over to the radio. “No shit, a tornado?”

The old pickup heaved as it climbed the hill with the three of us in the cab. Several buckets of grain slid against the tailgate. The three of us rocked in unison as my father shifted. We were on our way to feed the heifers, as we did every morning.

“A tornado,” he said. The dust on the dashboard shook as the truck strained up the incline. “That’s unlikely, isn’t it?”

My knees were packed between the stick shift and the legs of my mother. I was tilted towards her, and as the machine vibrated, silently pulled into contact.

“Have you thought about getting a lawyer to look at the lien?” she asked.

My father shrugged his shoulders. Gravel pressed underneath the tires in an electric crunch. He always drove on the shoulder in case the truck quit. “It’s way too hilly here. That’s why we never had one before.”

My mother turned and looked out the dirty window. Being next to her I could feel the heat of her frustration swell from her body. It encompassed me as well, touching the parts of me next to her. It was acidic and clammy on my skin.

“We could take lessons in dancing,” she said. “That would be different.”

My father pressed all the preset radio buttons. Musical tones shifted quickly in front of us. Not finding a song that suited him, he turned it off again.

“I don’t know what you would do with a tornado,” my father said.

“We need to mix things up.”

“Yeah.”

Her anger, not shown, and unseen by my father, pulsed from her and swelled into the space of the cab. It mixed with the dust that rose from the seat and choked out the breathable air, until I was taking it into me too. All the things she wanted and didn’t get and the ways that she was disappointed and scared swelled around us. My heart beat faster; it filled the shape of my organs. It squeezed in and suffocated me and was too, too much.

So I flipped over the truck.

At first the front wheels slipped and then the back tires, and my father, not expecting it, slapped at the wheel frantically in one direction and then the other, which further put the truck in a headlong spin. The colors of everything around us bled into one another, my mother grabbing me tightly, and then the truck was thrown into the ditch and tipped on its side. Goldenrod pressed in against the closed window. We remained still in the deadening silence, the three of us piled onto each other.

My father eventually pushed the driver’s side door open against the weight of gravity and crawled out, reaching back into the cab to pull me up next by the front of my shirt. My mother refused his hand and climbed out on her own.

My father took one step onto the road and his foot slid from him, nearly taking his balance. The pavement beneath him shimmered and writhed. He bent down.

A thick band of fall armyworms spread from bank to bank. Millions of pale larvae contracted and stretched themselves in steady, reduced rhythms, slowly pulsing over the ground. The protoplasmic tracks made by the tires soon disappeared under the bristled stomachs of more armyworms moving forward.

“Unbelievable,” my mother said, picking one up and watching it curl in her hand.

My father stood silently with his hands on his hips. Eventually he lifted his gaze towards the cornfield where they were heading.

After several groups of cows had been milked I closed the gate behind the last one and followed my father out of the pit and through the parlor door. The muffled beat of the vacuum system followed after us and then along the walls where milk throbbed unseen on its way to the bulk tank. My father always checked that he inserted the flow pipe into the tank. I suspect that after so many years he had no worry of seeing milk spilling on the floor, but checked anyway out of simple ritual.

The milk man sat hunched on the steps of the milk house. He saluted the blank air without lifting his head from the *Sports Illustrated* in his lap.

“We’re not dead yet?” he asked.

My father tapped the flow pipe and turned towards the door. “Looking forward to the time off.”

“You look like shit,” the milk man said.

“You look worse.”

The milk man was the same age as my father, but with white hair and hunched over so his nose always pointed to the ground. He had a habit of dipping a ladle into farmers’ bulk tanks to drink and eventually contracted Crohne’s Disease, which shriveled and aged him quickly.

“I’ll be done in an hour,” my father said.

“Same as always,” the milk man replied, turning another page.

In the parlor, my father moved stiffly from one cow to the next, his weight thrown in odd directions as he took a step the width of the udders that were turned towards him. His hands worked automatically and in time, dipping the teats and then pulling a brown paper towel out of his back pocket to wipe them. His face held no expression, and like the rest of his body, was cleaved from the thoughts that he had. From the consistency of the things he did every day his mind and body had grown to be separate, and only connected in awkward and tangential association.

When all the milkers were on he leaned against the edge of the pit and crossed his arms as the inflations contracted and released around him in a steady, ceaseless beat. He was standing like this when the bill collector appeared in the frame of the door. He waited for my father to sigh and ascend the steps of the parlor.

“What do you know today?” my father asked.

“Not much, for sure. How are they milking?”

My father pushed his hands in front of himself.

“How’s Laurel?” the man continued.

“Oh, she’s a good woman.”

The bill collector rocked on his heels, grasping a clipboard.

“When the milk check comes I can send you something then.”

“Alright.”

Both men nodded at the concrete below them. The bill collector was about to turn to go.

“When does this stop?” my father asked, shouting after him.

The bill collector paused for a moment, and then came back. “Sorry?”

“Isn’t this absurd? We say the same things every time. Isn’t it a bit ridiculous?”

The man was probably in his thirties. He suddenly looked uncomfortable and out of place, trying to find a clean spot on the parlor floor to stand. “You can settle your bills, Horace.”

“But of course I can’t, and you know that. So we do the same exact thing every time.”

“It will become a legal matter soon enough. We’ll get paid from your equity here one way or another.”

“But you won’t,” my father said, throwing up his hands in an animated gesture. “We’ll do the same damn dance every time, and nothing will change.”

“Horace, I—”

“We’re stuck! Everything here is stuck!”

The bill collector stared at him blankly. The pulsation of the vacuum pump beat loudly between them. Eventually he dug into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. He talked into it, even though it did not appear to ring. Then he nodded to my father and ducked away.

My father descended the steps of the pit, rust falling silently beneath his boots. He reached out and felt the udder next to him, and deciding that the cow had given all that she could, took the milker off. He went down the row of animals and did the same. I followed behind him with the iodine dipper, wetting each teat, moving with the same rhythms as he did, one cow to the next.

When he reached the end of the parlor his fingers dipped below his collar line, rummaging through his chest hair. He pulled out a brown-yellow larvae and held it writhing under the florescent bulb. He took a sip of his coffee that was resting on the pipeline and threw the rest of it against the wall. The dark liquid shattered over the manure and concrete. Then he dropped the armyworm in the mug.

I stood next to him to watch the insect slowly and systematically crawl around the bottom groove in the cup. It was no longer in panic nor tried to climb out, but inched along the track. My father held the cup upside down above us. Although the ceiling bulb blazed around it, we could see a small shadow pulsating steadily along its defined path.

“Come sit with me,” my mother said.

The words froze my father. He was hunched over in the doorway, grabbing for his boots.

My mother and I sat on the front porch swing, the chains grating against themselves the moments she lifted up her feet and allowed us to oscillate.

“It won’t kill you,” she said.

It was after breakfast. My father would have shaved, put on a clean pair of jeans, and then gone out to feed the cows. He would have whistled as we walked through the lawn, which would be less of a tune than a mono-melodic rhythm, and continued to whistle as he disappeared into the shadows of the face of the barn.

“I really got to get going,” he said.

My mother grabbed his sleeve and pulled him towards us. I shoved over and pressed myself against her to allow him space. She reached over me to pull him onto the bench.

“Fifteen minutes and the world won’t end.”

“It might,” my father said, chuckling nervously.

He looked around him with a polite smile, but his gaze inevitably settled on the cornfield at the top of the hill. The rows along the headlands had withered and then browned under the hunger of the armyworms, who were like unseen atoms that

one could not witness but still calculate their effect. I had a feeling that my father, however, could not only see them, but feel them as if the leaves of corn were his own skin.

My mother flicked his ear to get his attention. “Dylan’s getting married. I don’t know if you saw the invitation. We met the girl once. She was nice.”

My father nodded. He rubbed his fingers along the bleach spot in his jeans.

“I talked to Margie. She said you’re supposed to have a designated storm center, in case the tornado did come. I guess that would be our cellar.”

On the other side hill was the pasture. All of the cows were in the freestalls, crowding anxiously around the bunks and waiting for my father, except for the old cow. She lay along the top of the fence line as she always did, absently lifting her switch and letting it fall against the earth again.

“So how are they milking?”

“What?” my father asked.

“Sorry!” My mother threw up her arms. “I tried. I’m just trying.” The swing shook with her motions, but she dampened it with her planted feet.

“I better get going,” my father said. “I’m late.” He jumped off the swing and hurried across the lawn.

“For what?” my mother yelled after his retreating back.

My father shouted at the cows in the growing dusk. The darkness fell in around us and what was most visible on them was their eyes and the white parts of their bodies. He didn’t use words, except “Come on, Girls,” and even that was mostly couched in inarticulate sounds that fell into measure. He wasn’t conscious of the

things he yelled, because they came from somewhere primal and automatic within him.

We walked the top of the fence line, our small herd swinging their heads side to side as they labored towards the barn. He stopped at the old cow laying in the prickly bushes, chewing her cud absently. The branches of a young walnut tree grew over her from the hedgerow, but the shadows they cast had all but faded.

“That old cow moves so slow. Eventually I said let her be. She’s done her part.”

My father pulled two buckets from the goldenrod behind the fence and turned them over. Before he sat down he grabbed a half-chewed cigar wedged between two branches and stuck it in his mouth.

“I should send her in and get something to pay the electric bill, but I don’t.” He reached over and rubbed her poll with his fist. “I’m not into playing God or nothing. It just feels good to be kind to something.”

The sun was below the distant woodline and its last red light suggested that the world was burning somewhere. The cows continued to make their way to the freestalls, becoming heaving silhouettes and then nothing at all. This was the fifteen minutes my father took for himself every day, when he had to justify to himself what he had done and what he had not done, which was to say who he was.

“You know what you taught me? That most things you don’t need to say.” He chewed on the cigar. It became grit that he would spit out the rest of the night. “See,” he said. “You’re smart for your age.”

He leaned forward on the bucket, his knotted hands hanging in front of him. In the silence the slow, rasping pulsation of his breathing could be heard. It was a rhythm inside that continued on, even when he didn’t notice it.

In a few minutes my father rose, stretched, and stuck the cigar back in the tree. With darkness falling and the world burning away he turned towards the barn to start milking.

The milk man turned over a five gallon pail and sat on it. My father took a mug off the shelf, wiped the inside of it with the bottom of his shirt, and handed it to the milk man with a thermos of coffee. I slumped in the corner, as I always did when the three of us were in the barn office.

“I had one of those dirty calendars at my desk at the plant,” the milk man said. “The ones the feed companies used to send out.”

“Jesus. I had forgotten about those.” My father looked at the rusted clutter that crowded the room for something that would hold his coffee. Finally, he tore open a new bag of calfnip and took out the plastic measuring cup from inside. “What year?” he asked.

“1982.”

My father nodded his head.

“One of the young guys took it from me for a second, and you know what he says? Says they don’t have hair like that anymore.” The milk man pulled an Old Crow handle from his back pocket and poured it in his coffee. “Took me a while to figure out what he even meant.”

“It’s a different world, Hal.” My father took the bottle and tipped it into his drink.

“You able to milk those bitches after that?” the milk man asked, nodding to the plastic cup.

“Been doing it so long, some days I can’t even remember milking. When I die my corpse will rise up to get the cows just the same.”

“I was trying to talk about titty pictures and you’re being morbid.”

“Nothing changes.”

“Just more bills,” the milk man said. “More people asking for money.”

“Can’t get water from a stone. Anyway, eventually you figure out that even they can’t really do anything to you in the end. Everything just keeps on the way it was, maybe a little harder is all.”

The milk man pulled out the bottle again and took a swig from it.

“How do you drive like that?” my father asked.

The milk man turned to me and winked.

“Hello,” a voice called out behind the walls in the milk house. Because the two men were talking about bill collectors I had accidentally made one appear. I squeezed my eyes tight, trying to get better control of my mind.

“I thought I heard people here,” the man said, after opening the door to the office and leaning in. “Hi Horace.”

The bill collector’s collared shirt was tucked into his jeans, which were clean. He wore Wolverines, perhaps to fit in with those he must see during his work, but because they were unsullied it made them stand out all the much more.

“Taking a break after milking?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure if he smelled the whisky or not.

He stood in the doorway, his hands over his clipboard, waiting for my father to guide him to another part of the barn to speak privately. Instead, my father didn’t move.

This time, however, my father leaned back in his chair. He was trying to suppress a smile, like a student who thought it was funny that his teacher was yelling at him. The milk man seemed to have noticed it too, and grew bolder because of it.

“Kid,” the milk man said, turning to the bill collector. “Does your mom have hair,” he motioned to his crotch, “down here.”

“Jesus, Hal!” my father said, rocking forward.

“What? You said he can’t do nothing.”

“I mean—” my father rubbed his face. He was smiling in spite of himself.

“Try it. You’ll like it,” the milk man said.

“Bastard.”

The bill collector recoiled. “Mr. Dean?”

“Something stronger,” the milk man said.

“Cunt.”

“But you’re just saying words. Put it into a context.”

My father turned to the bill collector. “Your mother is a cunt.”

The milk man slapped his hands together and nearly fell off the bucket. “A little harsh, but alright.”

“God, he’s a twat,” my father said.

“I’m standing right here,” said the bill collector.

“Yee-haw,” my father yelled, throwing the empty cup against the wall.

The milk man clapped his hands again. “Look at you, Horace!”

My father was giddy, stomping his feet like a little kid. He grabbed the bottle from the hand of the milk man and took a swig.

“Jesus Christ,” the bill collector said. He walked away and let the door close behind him.

“I think my interest rate just went up,” my father said, sending the milk man into another giggling fit.

When the laughter finally died down both men exhaled a long, pleasant sigh and stared vacantly into corners of the room with moist eyes. The water heater clicked absently, and the plate cooler of the bulk tank switched on, as it always did. Suddenly, my father turned to the milk man again.

“So they don’t have hair anymore?”

Water dripped in the morning darkness of the milk house until my father flipped the light on. The moisture cast a plastic veneer over the weathering concrete. He initiated the wash cycle without looking at the dials he turned. The milk house door rattled behind us as we walked through the old stanchion barn. Throbbing water shot past our heads inside the cobwebbed pipes along the wall. Chaff bunched in front of our feet that would be resettled by our same lurching motions when we came back through after the milking. The pulsation grew louder as we neared the parlor, and our steps fell in line with it. My father peaked his head into the sick pen without slowing, as he always did, and picked up a brown paper towel that had fallen from his pocket yesterday. He was about to open the parlor door when he suddenly stopped.

My mother stood next to it, naked except for a feed bag.

The bottom of the plastic burlap had been cut out and the top of her breasts were tucked into the sack. Stray fibers splayed over her cleavage. The Farrar Feeds logo was partially displayed on her ass. Her pale legs were thick and strong, and featured boldly in the dusky shadows of the barn.

“Hey there, Farmer,” she said.

She stood as a stark contrast to the block windows behind her with dead flies hanging in the grooves or the rafters with flaking whitewash. In the audacity with which she presented her feminine features one couldn't help but to see her as beautiful.

“This is different,” my father said.

“Yes, it is.”

“I didn't see this coming.”

“No you didn't.”

Because he couldn't look her in the eyes and didn't dare look at her breasts, he mostly stared at her knees as he addressed her. He had one hand on the parlor door and leaned uneasily towards it. The throbbing of the wash cycle pounded through the thin walls.

“So Mr. Dean. Are you going to empty this sack out?”

The door handle took the majority of my father's weight. His arms were a thin fulcrum that his body swayed over. As my parents stood there silently the barn swelled and grew around them. The walls flexed and shifted, like a beast respiring. The three of us sunk further into the shadows of its internal void. Inside it, we were surrounded by its machinations and lost to the outside world.

“Shouldn't we wait until after milking?”

My mother's face went blank. “Are you fucking kidding me, Horace? Are you trying to make a joke?”

“I just think—”

“I came out here five a.m. to strip down, put on a feed bag, and stand in the dark until you got here. What is wrong with you?”

My father looked at the door and nearly started to open it. My mother saw that and threw her arms up.

“This is me trying, Horace! Harder than anyone should have to. You’re letting me stand here like an idiot.” She grabbed the front of his shirt. Even though the wash cycle had finished the vacuum still clicked in rhythm, as it did until someone turned it off.

“I can’t save you,” she said. She grabbed her clothes from the corner and left through the side door.

My father stood there silently for a moment as the building giddily writhed around him. The rafters oscillated as if about to swallow him whole in a moment of peristalsis. Before that happened he entered the parlor and got the milkers ready for the morning.

I sat with my mother on the porch as the sun was growing dark and low. I was waiting for my father to emerge for the evening milking to follow him out. My mother hadn’t spoken with him for a while, but did not want to appear to be avoiding him, whether out of love or obstinacy. I rested my head on her shoulder and felt her stiffen. She leaned further on the armrest of the swing.

My father appeared in the doorway with a diesel can and a bag of marshmallows.

“Come on,” he said. “Time to face this thing.”

We followed after him as he loaded several five-gallon pails filled with fuel in the back of the truck and then lifted me in there as well.

The buckets slid back and forth in the pickup as my father drove over the rutted ground. The bed dipped back and forth like a slow pendulum. The back of my

parents' heads were shadows behind the dusty glass. I did not know the things he was saying to her, nor her response. I leaned closer to the back window, but could not make out anything.

The truck eased to a halt at the bottom of the cornfield. At first glance it appeared to be normal and not anything different than what would soon mature to be chopped and then fed to the cows. When you stared at it long enough, however, you saw how it cringed—millions of units of steady motion infecting the entire field. The broad leaves withered and turned in on themselves. It was like seeing a disease work through a human body, magnified to the extent of seeing it manifested and eating away at the host.

“I’ve got a job for you,” my father said, opening the tailgate and lifting me out. “You got to drive.”

After placing me behind the wheel he bent down to press the clutch with one hand and work the gear shaft with the other. He lifted his palm off the floorboard while walking beside the truck. Then he placed my hands on the wheel before drifting back and jumping on the tailgate.

The truck entered at the headlands. Corn stalks fell away in front of the bumpers like great buildings collapsing. Others brushed along the windows like hands reaching out. Pale moths erupted in front of me as if candy thrown from a parade. The hood of the pickup grew heavy with the striped larvae that crawled on top of themselves. In the back, my father stood on the tailgate, flinging diesel on the swaying plants. When we reached the edge of the field he hopped off and steered the vehicle back around to make another pass into the corn.

Later, the three of us sat on the tailgate and watched the flames creep along the path of the truck and eventually rise high enough to darken and then enflame the corn

still standing. Holes in the stalks bled the larva that escaped from them and fell to the dirt. The husks on the young ears flaked away, and the small, fleshy kernels turned skeletal in the heat. The silk smoked deeply into the dusk like a thousand swinging effigies in the coming night.

My father did not say anything.

There is a relief that comes when the worst thing that could happen has occurred, but I could not say if it was that or shock or a feeling of loss. There were many times when my father's silence was held against him, but this time I chose to see it as a sign of strength.

"You're late for milking," my mother said. She spoke without reproach, as if instead stating a fact.

"I'm not milking tonight," my father said.

The moisture in the ears hissed in the flames and staccato cracking noises erupted intermittently and carried into the woods behind them. The entire field was separating into the ash that collected over the soil and the great black haze that swelled above it.

My mother, at first, thought he was joking. After a while she turned to him and said, "But the cows, Horace."

"They can take their turn at being pissed at me too," he said. "I'm with you guys tonight."

The bag of marshmallows still lay in the back seat. I suspect it was because it somehow felt indecent to roast one next to a burning plant, much like laughing at a funeral. My mother laid her head on my father's shoulder.

A cow bawled from inside the freestall barn. The farm was across the road, and the pulsing bellow could have been overlooked in the same way as the call from a

bird passing overhead. And then the others joined with it until there was a malady of deep, throaty cries that sprang out from the tin walls.

“Horace,” my mother said, smiling.

“They’re fine.”

Moths circled above the swirling smoke, climbing higher and mixing with ash that floated on the heat. Many of the leaves on the plants had been burned away, leaving the stalks behind, naked and cowering. Cinders glowed from the ash on the ground, as if the larvae had taken iridescent form.

“Horace, they’re out. The cows have gotten out.”

We turned in tandem. Bulky shadows sprang through the back gate. Several of them flailed their heads back and forth and kicked their rear legs in the air. They ran into the night like spilled water spreading over the floor.

“Nope!” my father yelled, throwing up his arms. The bed of the truck rocked on the tires. “It’s not getting me this time.”

The three of us watched as an ebullient cow ran into the manure lagoon. She tried to thrash her way out, but only sank deeper in the dark liquid. Soon it was just her head sticking up, looking around her.

My mother took my father’s face in her hands. “Honey.”

In a few minutes the pickup tore around the corner of the barn, scattering the cows in front of it. “God damn this place,” my father yelled, flicking off the building. “God damn it all!”

The bill collector appeared in the doorway. My father shook his head and then chuckled to himself. It was the first time I remembered seeing him laugh.

My father pushed past the other men and lowered himself on a sack of feed against the wall. Sweating down the side of his face still, he let his hands sink in his lap and looked up to the young man with the clipboard.

“What can I do for you today?”

“It looks like it’s your day, Horace.” The bill collector handed him the clipboard and then then pen. “You were right. Nothing changes.”

My father flipped though the papers, scribbling his name wherever there was an “X” made in blue ink. It was apparent that he didn’t read any of it.

“Despite my protests, you’re getting an extension on all monies owed. Slightly higher interest, but still.” He took the clipboard from my father. “And of course, the lien we put against you is now void.”

“That was you guys?”

“You didn’t open it?”

“I don’t even know who you work for,” my father said. “I’m popular that way.”

The bill collector seemed to think about that for a second. Then he looked around him, at the chipped walls and dusty hay on the ground. “You’re a lucky man, Mr. Dean. Nothing changes.” He nodded cordially before disappearing into the shadows, clipboard in hand.

My father went back to the parlor and turned on the milking units.

The clouds had swelled and thickened nearly immediately, until it was impossible to know how high they rose into the universe from the slate flat bottom that pressed in on our heads. Although it was afternoon, all daylight had been extinguished and preternatural darkness fell over the valley, as if the laws of nature,

the last holdout, had, too, formally been broken. At first there was nothing above the tree line: a blank space between the edge of the woods and the bottom of the heavens. And then it was there.

The twisted sky narrowed as it reached towards the earth. At first, from that distance, it didn't appear to move. Just something that manifested in a jump cut in front of us. Then its bottom began to swing, undulating. It seductively swayed back and forth as it began to make its way towards us.

“Holy shit,” my father said.

“Holy shit,” said my mother.

They turned towards each other.

I saw their thoughts as they passed between them. They regarded who they were when they first met and who they were now and the things that inhabited the space between them, which was the farm and the things the farm had done to them. They went back to the beginning, the way one can only when there's a sort of ending present, and they remembered something that was like love, and when things seemed right, and the shadows had not yet descended and the barn was only a building and not something that heaved and swelled and consumed them every time they walked into it.

“Laurel,” my father said, touching her cheek.

I beckoned the tornado closer.

It descended the rim of the valley and crept along the edge of the woods. The branches of the great maples and oaks of the forest bent towards it, pulled in soundless gravity. The golden hue of the head fields was deeply radiant against the purple skies. The dried grass in front of the tornado went into flux, the entire shape of

the plot as defined by the hedgerow shaking violently around it as it drifted along the earth.

My mother touched my father's arm. "We need to get into the storm center," she said.

My father didn't move. I knew what he was thinking. Wandering through the blistered acres it drew in the land's sickness. The turning wind was now heavy with the eggs and moth bodies of the armyworm, spinning in its twisting atmosphere. The wings of the moth would be torn apart and turned to powder. In my father's mind the turning wind took on an iridescent glow. I saw it too.

"Look!" my mother shouted. She pointed at the old cow at the top of the pasture that stood between the tornado and the barn.

"Shit," my father said.

"She'll get out of the way," my mother said. She pulled on his arm. "We need to get in the storm center."

A whisper grew in the distance that was the sounds of the rushing wind coming towards us. It passed over a round bale and in an instant the funnel was dark brown as the Netwrap tore apart and the hay shattered into the gust. Then the air was clean again, pure, in the great cleansing power of its force.

My father started running.

"Horace," my mother yelled. "Horace, get your ass in the storm center!"

My father lurched as he ran, his body swinging back and forth in the awkward gait that developed inside him through the years. The soreness in his joints and the wear of farming gave him a creature hitch that was only the more exasperated as his pace quickened. Suddenly, hail fell against us and bounced off the earth with the sound of snapping bones.

“Horace,” my mother said, quietly, because he could not have heard her anyway. She turned to me. “We need to go.”

I didn’t move. She didn’t realize what I did, which is what the tornado was. She couldn’t have known that I created it and, because she didn’t know me, how I did it either. She did not realize that I moved it, and moved along with it, as it tore through our landscape.

My father stopped in front of the tractor, bent over. He wheezed from the emphysema. His lungs gasped for air even as the great breath rushed towards him. Then he reached for the handle bar and pulled himself into the seat.

He turned the key and the machine came to life, but the forced resurrection was stifled in the manic weather. The wind pulled back his hair, revealing the balding hairline and making his face naked to the scars on them. The geography of his cheeks seemed to darken and match the clouds above us. Slate bounced off the hood in front of him. With the land alive and angry around him, he put the tractor into gear and jerked forward.

“Jesus Christ,” my mother said, pulling on the bottom of my shirt. She leaned against me with all her weight, but I was too big, too centered. “Please,” she said, and then knew she had a moral choice. She watched the tornado explode through a hedgerow and throw branches around it, and then she looked at me.

The cow shook her head, slapping her tail against the ground. She didn’t get up, however. And then the hail stopped. An immediate hush fell over the valley, except for the growing tunnel of whispers and the sound of my father’s tractor heading towards it.

He shifted, and the machine sprang forward faster. My father slumped in the seat without expression, rocking up and down as the wheels skipped over the earth.

He came up to the pasture without slowing down. Instead of getting off and opening the gate he drove through it without hesitating. An electric gleam shot across the hill as the barbed wire pulled tight for an instant and then snapped, the new ends flying by the seat of the tractor. Mud spun out beneath the tread, but the machine still climbed at a torrid pace.

The cow had risen to her feet, stretched, but—whether because of the tornado or my father rushing at her—sensed the escalation of something and began jogging towards the wooded ravine of the pasture. Overwhelmed by the excitement she thrashed her head and kicked her rear legs out behind her.

The old cow was safe, but my father did not slow nor change his course. He sped over the matted grass where the animal had been laying, and then over the flaccid fence line laying in the prickler bushes. The engine growled as he jumped the ditch. Then he was in the charred corn stubble, where he would meet the tornado, the entirety of his farm behind him.

Although it had not happened yet, I could see the barn shiver before the natural phenomenon and then collapse as the affinity between board and nail dissolved. I could see the heifer pen in front pulled apart, the tin roof lifted into the heavens. The calf buckets would drift from the hutches and swirl above our heads. The parlor where my father had spent the majority of his life would rise into the sky and shatter, and the throb of the vacuum pump that beat within it would spread into the greater entropy of the world and disappear.

My father's flannel overshirt beat rapidly against his chest like a flag. The grass of the field oscillated wildly in front of him. His eyes narrowed against the tearing wind, and although I could not see for the distance between us, I do not

believe he blinked. He stood up straight, his hands at his side. His body rocked gently from the bumps in the land. He did not lean against the wind, but stood firm.

My mother put her arm around me. She watched as I pulled the tornado over my father like a wedding dress.