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Above All Men

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
Of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Eric Michael Shonkwiler

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I

In the dream he was afield righting fenceposts of white birch. Weeds grew long by the fence and the wind sawed their blades together. He drove the last post home and turned to survey the land as a crop of teeth rose from the gray dirt. The teeth grew up to his thigh and he ran his hand along the nearest and held it like an ear of corn. He gathered his tools wet with blood from the ground and was homeward when he first saw the storm. From horizon to horizon it came like the felling of a black wood, tree by tree toward him, like motile earth. He ran for the house along the fenceline and threw the backdoor open. Helene at the kitchen table, belly before her and hands upon it. He flew down the hall and into each room and finding nothing came out the front to see Samuel in the yard, watching the storm grind up the field across the road and collect the teeth and as David reached for Samuel’s hand the storm took the other, and he woke.

Honey. She touched his arm.

Uh. God. He was upright. He rubbed his face and stared into the dark, the sheets over them glowing blue from the moon.

You were screaming. She pulled for him to lie back down. He looked at the clock and sighed and shifted off the bed.

Go back to sleep. I’m up. Can I get you something?

Come back.

I’ll just keep you awake. He touched his hand to her stomach and found her lips in the dark and kissed her. Let me work off this head’a steam.

He stayed hovering there a moment then took his shirt and pants from the cedar chest and put them on before leaving the room, shutting the door behind him. Samuel was on the stairwell and Red was beside him leaning up against the wall with his eyebrows pinched.

What’re you guys doin’ up?
Samuel put his arms over the banister. I heard you scream.

Just had a bad dream. Go on back to bed.

Samuel didn’t move. Red was still staring at David. He was already dressed, or had never changed from the clothes he’d worn in off the road.

Everything’s okay. You want me to tuck you in?

Mm.

David went around the railing before Samuel could take a step and scooped him under his arm and took him to his bedroom. He laid Samuel down in his bed and pulled the covers up to his chest and stood looking at him.

What was the dream about?

A bad storm.

Like a tornado?

No. It doesn’t matter, it was just a dream. You want some water or anything?

No thank you.

Keep your door open?

A little.

David sat a hand on Samuel’s head. Night.

Night.

He went to the door and left it open partway. He stood beside it for a while then walked to the window at the end of the hall and looked out at the night. It was April, and Samuel’s ninth birthday had just passed. His birth had marked eight years of good rain and with the last it had begun to dry up. Well into spring and nothing. The grass below in the moonlight white-looking. Downstairs Macha walked into the kitchen, nails clicking on the hardwood. He went down and followed the old lab and sat in the kitchen a while, the dog sitting on his foot. In a few hours his
wife and son would wake again and David would have to decide whether he wanted Samuel at the funeral the next day. He was looking at nothing and thinking of Anna, the old man’s wife, thinking of her in that cold upstairs bedroom, when Red appeared in the kitchen doorway and David wondered if he’d heard him walking at all. He opened his hand toward the chair across the table and Red sat.

Did you lie to him?

About the dream?

Yeah.

No.

Red sat back in the chair. His face was dark but the line of his mouth curved. Not even a little?

It wasn’t a war dream, if that’s what you’re thinking.

His chin lifted. So you’re havin’ other kinds of dreams that scare the hell out of you?

Apparently. David glanced out the window at the black and then to the counter across the room and the half-pot of cold coffee. You gonna go back to sleep?

Nah. Tell the truth I think I was up before you even screamed.

Why’s that?

David could see a slight smile on Red’s face and then he shrugged. His head went down. It’ll sound bad, but I wish I’d of come some other time.

I do too. Or I guess I wish she just hadn’t been sick.

Yeah. Red put his arm on the table. It’s weird being here, Dave. I used to wonder why I never came back. Now I guess I know. I can’t handle it. Red tried to laugh and only managed a sharp exhale. I don’t even think I could tell you why.

There’s days still where I wake up thinking I’m in the hospital.
He turned to the hallway. You want to go stand out on the porch for a bit? I could use
the air.

David stood and waited on Macha to move and they went to the front door. He opened it
quietly and got his boots and let the dog and Red pass through. He shut the door and saw Red
had his boots on the whole time. Macha was standing beside him wagging her tail against Red’s
leg. It was cool but not as cold as it should have been. Ahead where the storm had been in his
dream the horizon was black in the sky and the woods were a gray band at the ground. Both Red
and he leaned their elbows against the porch railing and watched the yard.

You decide whether you’re comin’ to the service or not?

Yeah. Red nodded. I’m not.

Macha hobbled down the porch steps and went to the fenceline, sniffing. They watched
her going up and down the yard and then she lifted her head and came back to the porch.

I gotta say I envy you. The whole bit. House and kid and a lady.

What’s stoppin’ you?

Red said nothing for a moment. I think I’ve come to terms with the whole notion.

If I thought you’d stay in it I’d build you a house next door. He paused. I remember you
sayin’ you might want it someday.

Red laughed. Maybe after a few more years.

David frowned. He patted the railing with the heel of his hand. I’m gonna take the dog
down the road a stretch.

Okay.

He started shaking in the lining of muscles over his ribs. You’re not gonna run off, are
you?

No. I’ll be here.
Alright. He stepped down off the porch. While we’re being confessional I guess I oughta say I envy you, too.

I am the handsomer one.

David smiled. It’s more than that. His chest was still shivering and he thought of Samuel. He snapped his fingers for Macha and they started toward the road. They walked together nearly a mile down the road and he thought of the funeral and Samuel and Red and when he started back he saw all of his land and wondered what life would be like if he’d never stopped fighting.

He stepped inside the house and leaned against the wall to take off his boots. The dog went into the kitchen for water. The living room was empty. David listened for a moment and he opened the bedroom door and went in. The bathroom light was a sliver at the floor. He stripped and climbed into bed and felt where she had been in the blankets. She came out of the bathroom and switched off the light.

Where did you go?

Took Macha for a walk.

I thought you might have gone down to see Phil. She slipped under the covers beside him.

Considered it.

She rolled onto her side and lay against him. Her skin and the nightgown were cool at first and then warm. Have you thought about letting Sam come?

Yeah, some. David shut his eyes. Let me sleep on it more.

She breathed in and held it. Alright.

He tilted his head to kiss her shoulder. The dream was still with him in flashes of teeth and wood. He saw Samuel grown. He saw him tall and broad shouldered and his back was
always turned. He saw him leaving the barn and walking away down the road. Doing the things
David had done years ago. David’s scars on him and then that was a new dream.

II

He woke with the bedclothes half off and Helene twisted in them. Her eyelids fluttered and he thought she might wake but she only shifted and her hair fell dark and tangled across her face. He looked out the window at the cornfields, the first shoots now aboveground, and slipped off the bed. He padded to the back of the house and opened the door to water the garden and found Red standing at the fence. The sun was rising milkwhite on the horizon and the day would warm quickly. The spigot hissed as he turned it and pulled the hose. Red had stepped off the fence and he took the hose from David and dragged it over the dry grass to the pallid staked tomato plants and the rows of spinach. It was their first year growing strawberries and potatoes. Enough in a good year to feed them through a season. When David held his hand out Red pinched the hose and went back to close the spigot.

You got more work to do this morning?

Always. The creek’s about dry so I try to get the cattle some water every so often.

By hand? Red looked across the field over the fence. Jesus. Alright. They went together to the truck beside the house and drove down behind the barn at Danvers’ and began filling a dozen buckets with water from the pump. David capped the buckets with cracking plastic lids and they loaded them onto the bed of the truck. When he pulled back onto the road the sun was dead in their eyes and he lifted a hand to shield against the glare. He stopped at the water tubs midway between houses and shut the truck off and they unloaded the buckets. The herd lay circled in the grass a few hundred yards away and their ears perked and twitched.
Here they come. Red hefted a bucket over the fence and poured it, the cattle rising and shuffling toward them. They were already drinking from the first tub when David moved on to the second and he watched Red raise a bucket high to pour it over the outstretched neck and tongue of a calf. When the buckets were empty they drove back to refill them and they emptied them into another set of tubs down the road and Red sighed against the bed of the truck as they finished stacking the buckets. I do not miss this.

You never had to water cattle.

I mean straight up work. I haven’t done any in a while.

David smiled. He hefted the long stack over the side of the truck and dropped the buckets in and they rattled along. You know if I had my way you’d never lift a finger again.

That dudn’t hardly seem fair. Which one of us was it left his wife to go back to the shit and find the other one?

David rubbed at his face. You would have.

Maybe.

You would. He went around the front of the truck and got in. He shut his door and waited on Red to shut his and he started the engine.

Have I thanked you lately for it?

Have I seen you in the past nine years? David began to turn the truck in the road. He shifted gears and reversed and then put it forward. There wasn’t any choice. I had to do it.

I’m glad you think that way.

He pulled into Danvers’ drive. So am I. They pulled up beside the barn and David shut the truck off. You want to come ridin’ with me? Just real quick.

Nah. I think I’ll head into town and see ma.

Alright. Thanks for your help.
Weren’t nothin’.

They both got out. Red lifted his hand in goodbye and went back to the road and David stood by the barn. Danvers’ house was still. He went on to the equipment shed and drove the loader out and threw a few bales of hay from the loft and stacked them on the scoop. There was a little time yet to set up the ring while the cattle drank, so he drove the tractor out a few hundred yards behind the tubs and jumped out of the tractor seat. He threw the bales down and pulled the stock panels from the scoop and set them up around the backside of the bales, adjusting and kicking them flush against the hay. The cattle were already loping toward him. He drove the tractor back and went to the animal barn, opened the dry wood door top and bottom together. The two bay horses stuck their heads out of the stalls and David went to the third stall for his tack and brought it up. He opened the gate for his horse and fastened him with a hackamore to the wall. The saddleblanket dragged a trail of hair and dust behind it in the light from the door, and when he heaved the saddle onto the horse the dust was bellowed out. He waited for the horse’s breath before cinching it and he bridled the bay and it nickered and stomped. He hushed it and led it out to pasture and stepped up into the saddle. The land was bright from horseback. He rode east, passing the cattle and riding south to find the creek. It was near dry, a stain of mud in the center and thin trickle of water. He stared at it for a moment before riding along it and going back toward the fenceline, toward the house. When they were in sight of it he stopped the horse and watched over it, imagined Helene rising, the sunlight pouring in through the windows rich with dust and color. Samuel always woke on his own and would be downstairs by the time she came to get him. He thought of letting Samuel come to the funeral and what that might do. He wanted so badly to hold him back from it, to keep that knowledge back and to have time stretch on for him as something never ending. The horse turned of its own beneath him and began to graze and he pressed it forward, back to the barn. He put the bay up and gave both the horses fresh water
and feed and left the cleaning for later. When he came out of the barn he saw the kitchen light on in the house and he went up the steps to the side door and knocked. There was a shuffling from inside and the door opened and Danvers stood there in his longjohns and he began to speak but only moved aside for David to come in. They went into the kitchen from the mudroom and Danvers sat with a mug of coffee clenched in his hand. David stood by the chair across from him.

You holdin’ up?

Set your alarm just to ask me that?

I’ve been working. It’s got to be about eight o’clock by now.

Danvers shook his head. His hair was mussed and greasy and a day’s beard showed silver on his cheeks. He nudged at his eyepatch with a knuckle. You want some coffee?

I’m alright.

Sit down.

I’m alright.

They were quiet. Danvers turned his head to idle about the kitchen until he settled his gaze on the window. The house still smelled of oats and horses and faintly of tack. David rested his hands on the chairback.

You decide whether you’re lettin’ Sam come or not?

Helene wants him to go. I don’t see a reason for it.

Danvers nodded slowly. You can’t exactly keep it a secret.

No.

Well. Danvers pulled his mug closer and lifted it.

I just don’t see what good it’d do him.

I doubt it’d do any good. I sure as hell doubt that.
David sighed heavily. He pulled the chair out and sat. I saw Red comin’ down the road, when he first got in. He was walking in from the east and it was just him with his bag over his shoulder, but. David made a halted reaching motion. I went for my rifle. Just that brought the war back. I don’t want Sam to see what I’ve seen.

Danvers shrugged and then a slow hard smile built. I don’t know what to tell you, boy. But I can put you at ease about one thing.

What’s that?
You don’t have to worry about Sam seein’ what you seen. It ain’t there anymore.
David looked aside.
It’s true.
I know.
He’s gonna see bad things. He’s gonna grow up. A funeral’s the least of your concerns.

Danvers paused. What kind of man would he be you keep him locked indoors his whole life?

Yeah.

I ain’t tryin’ to convince you to bring him. Danvers peered down into his mug. His face pulled and bunched and he sucked in a breath. Well, there was about a minute where I wadn’t thinking about her.

I’m sorry.

His shoulders shook. He dropped his fist on the table and his jaw clenched through the folds of skin. Would you get out please.

David stood. He went to the mudroom and stopped at the door and went out. He walked home. On the porch he heard footsteps from inside the house, the resonance of old wood. He went in and saw Helene midway to the kitchen and she turned.

I just got a call from Jacob Miller. He wants you to call him back.
What for?

He didn’t say.

David went to the phone. Delivery’s probably gonna be late. He dialed the number and it rang twice. It’s Parrish. He listened. After a moment he hung up the phone and walked highfooted to the bedroom and got his keys and billfold and checkbook. When he came out he yelled from the door. I gotta go. Miller says there’s some business going on about no more gas.

Oh, what now?

I know. I’ll be back. He went out and ran down the road for the truck and drove the half-mile into town. He stopped at the square under the dead stoplight. The bank and post office stood at opposite corners of the square, a brick apartment building and a laundromat at the others. Richard Spangler was in his truck at the intersection and pulled around after David. They passed the old gas station, the price ticker all nines, and went out of Dixon the ten miles to Banning. He pulled into the station with Spangler behind him and there were already a few other trucks in the lot. He got out and went into the store and held the door for Spangler. The other farmers were at the desk reclining against newspaper racks and shelves and drinking coffee from styrofoam cups. He tipped his hat back when he saw Carl Brown. Miller was behind the counter when they came in and he waved them all into the back. They filed into the disused garage where tubes hung from the ceiling that used to be full of oil and windshield fluid. Now the doors were shut and the room dark. There were two dozen oil drums that stood around the pneumatic car lift in the center of the room. Miller put up a hand.

I wanted to let you all know about this first. I got a call four o’clock this morning sayin’ a storm wrecked all the refineries off the coast. What we’ve got in the tank is all we’re getting for I don’t know how long. In about half an hour there’s gonna be lines of people out there wantin’ what they can get. We’ll be dried up by noon.
What about our deliveries?

There won’t be any. You’re all decent folks and without you we’d probably starve.

These barrels here and the ones behind the building are full of diesel. Seventy-five a barrel. You take as many as you can load up and come back for seconds, if there’s any left. That’s all we got.

The farmers were silent for a moment. David came forward. Take a check?

Sure.

He stared at the barrels. He took the checkbook from his back pocket. Eight.

You sure you can fit eight?

Yeah. He heard the hands reaching into pockets behind him, felt the nerves. How’re we gonna load ‘em up?

You just back your truck in here. We’ll roll them up a ramp.

David wrote out the check and gave it to Miller. He shouldered by the farmers and stopped beside Spangler. You get in there quick.

I don’t have the money but for one or two barrels.

David breathed in. See me after. He went out through the front of the store and when he’d gotten in his truck the garage door had been slung open. He backed in with the driver’s side door hanging open and he heard Miller and Brown talking.

Will you take it on credit?

No, I can’t.

David grimaced and got out as he saw Miller carry a metal ramp toward the truck. He and Miller rolled each barrel into the truck and when they finished David got a tow rope from the floorboard and looped it around the endmost barrels on the tailgate and stuck the hooks into the eyelets on either side of the bed. He looked at the tires, at the stance of the truck. Then he got in and drove out of the station and out of Banning.
He took the curves and stops carefully and when coming to Danvers’ drive David felt the bob and slow of the fuel in the bed. He turned the truck around at the tractor garage and backed it in. There was a stack of old lumber lined up against the back wall and he pulled a couple two by fours up to the bed and rolled the barrels out. He left them on their sides and drove back. There were already cars lined up and people with gascans standing by when he pulled up to the station. He parked beside the building and worked through the line of people at the counter. A clerk was manning it and David raised his hand. Where’s Jake?

The clerk leaned around the first customer. He’s in the other side. You’re one of those farmers?

Yeah.

Go on back.

Thanks. He went through the door to the garage. The barrels were cleared out and Miller was sitting at a desk in the corner with a small lamp on. Hey.

Dave, you’re shit out of luck. It’s all gone. Someone got word to Skillman.

You’re not his only damn supplier. There’s no way.

He got them too. He’s gotta make money, Dave. And you know another few barrels wasn’t gonna make that much difference.

Yeah. David stomped the floor and spun on his bootheel. Hell.

Sorry.

No. I oughta thank you. I mean, you’re the one in trouble.

Ah, I knew it was comin’. I got a deal worked out, maybe. Be alright.

Well. Good. I do appreciate this. He glanced to the door. You recall how many barrels Spangler got?

I believe one.
David winced. You couldn’t cut him any deals? He’s only been farmin’ a year or so.

‘fraid not. I couldn’t favor anyone, you know.

Yeah.

Remember what I said, though. We’re gonna have to stick together. Times are changin’.

I know.

You’re a good man, Dave. I respect you for servin’.

Thank you. Good luck with all this. He turned and went out. He drove back to town and went to Danvers’ to right the barrels and cover them with a tarp. When he finished he walked home rubbing his back and when he reached the porch he just stood with his hands on the railing, leaning over. The sun was coming high and there was a hot breeze starting from the southwest. The house sheltered him but he could feel the pull of the air and see it in the trees. He left the porch and went in, smelled something baking. Helene was taking a pan of zucchini bread from the oven. There were jars arrayed on the counters and a pot of water boiled on the range and a basket of things from the garden on the floor.

How many loaves is that?

Four. She lifted a fresh zucchini from the counter, a little bigger than her hand. This is the last for now. I thought I’d freeze some, give some away. I put chocolate in the last one.

He went to look out the back door. So we’re doing this canning thing, huh?

We are. Better to get the hang of it now.

Can I do anything?

You can watch. She checked the water, dialed the burner down. What happened with Miller?

He groaned. I bought eight barrels of diesel.

David!
That ain’t nothin’. Eight’ll just about fill the combine.

The radio didn’t make it seem so bad.

Miller said there’s nothing left. I had to get what I could. He turned. I’ll talk things over with Danvers soon. There’s really nothing we can do but wait it out for now. He pointed toward the hall. Sam upstairs?

Reading.

David pushed off the counter and reached for the refrigerator door and peeked in. It’s just occurred to me I’ve yet to eat this morning.

Have some of this bread to tide you over. She gestured with an elbow at the pan. David took the knife from her and cut and lifted a wedge up into his hand. He gave her the knife and got a glass of milk and sat at the table. Do you want to talk about Sam now?

David pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. Yeah, I guess we better.

Does Phil want him to come?

I think so. He didn’t say one way or the other.

Well.

I don’t want him to. I really don’t, babe.

We could let him decide for himself.

He’ll want to go.

I know he will. She turned from the counter to look at him and she was smiling softly. Her eyes were warm and he wanted to stand up and touch her cheek. I promise it won’t kill him, David. He’ll be alright.

Yeah.

Okay?
He nodded. I’ll ask him. He stood and went upstairs. Samuel was sitting against the wall under his window, reading, already dressed for the day. When David appeared in the doorway he set the book on the floor.

Mornin’ kiddo.

Hey Dad.

He leaned against the doorframe while Samuel stood up. He picked up the book and set it on his bed. You know Aunt Anna’s funeral is tomorrow.

Yeah.

David watched his face. Do you want to come? It’s up to you. You can stay with grandma if you like.

Samuel paused. I’ll go.

Alright. He stayed in the doorway while Samuel stood still and then went to his closet to take out his dress clothes. He passed David by to hang a longsleeve shirt on the back of the door and he set a pair of khaki pants over the arms of a small wooden rocking chair.

Is that okay?

David forced a smile. Yeah. That’s fine.

III

He rose at dawn to Helene turning on the shower. It was just light in the room and there was no sound but for the water running. He got up and peeked in the living room at the pile of blankets on the couch and he climbed the stairs to wake Samuel. The door was already open and the light was on. Samuel was putting his pillows back on the bed.

Hey, bud.
Hey dad. Is it time to get ready?

Yeah. Go on and get a shower. I’ll make us some breakfast.

Okay.

He patted Samuel’s shoulder as he passed. The shower came on across the hall. He took the shirt off the back of the door and laid it and the pants out on the bed and smoothed them. Macha followed him into the kitchen and lay down on the floor watching him crack eggs. He took a slice of ham from a package and tossed it to her and she licked it up. Helene walked in with her hair black from the water and she put her back to him.

Would you zip me up?

He lifted her hair and pulled the zipper on her dress, her neck thin and sunless and smooth. He let her hair back and she turned.

Is Sam getting ready?

Yeah.

She passed around him and stood before the stove. She stirred the pan of eggs. Do you want to shower real quick?

Sure.

I’ll keep a plate warm for you.

It seemed a longer walk with his dress clothes on, and he had to resist the urge to roll up his sleeves. Helene held Samuel’s hand and they were all listening to the birds and the wind in the midmorning quiet. There was a stand of hay that was ready for its first cut, already drying. They passed Danvers’ house with the truck still in the drive. A nameless farmcat patrolled the barn and stopped to watch them go. Sunlight fell in patches through the trees. He gazed up at the sky out of habit, dry pale blue. Coming into town Samuel pulled on David’s hand and David slung him up onto his shoulders before thinking of his collar and the wrinkles. He let him stay
until he began to sweat and stooped over in the middle of the street and Samuel hopped off his back. Two boys ran out from the yard of an empty house and ran into another. Helene came around behind David and straightened out his shirt. They turned north at the square and David opened the wood gate to his mother’s house and they went in. His mother came out the front door to meet them.

    Am I watching my grandson here or what?

    No. He’s coming along.

    Hm. Her bottom lip rose. She bent to Samuel’s level. You sure? I got two channels working on the TV. There’s not much chance of cartoons without satellites and whatnot, but we can make do.

    He doesn’t need them anyway. Helene put a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. He’s off in his own world as it is.

    David’s mother shrugged. I guess we should get goin’, then. She shut the front door and they went together to the street. The funeral home was a few blocks away and when they arrived there were already several cars assembled out front and the hearse was at the side of the building. Danvers had driven in from a sideroad and had parked the truck on the street and he sat still in the cab.

    You think we ought to get him? David jerked his thumb.

    Helene shook her head. He’ll come when he’s ready.

    Yeah. He tightened his hand on Helene and Samuel’s and they mounted the stairs and stood outside the doors with the others already gathered. It was warm and bright and the sky was cloudless. Mostly farmers there, Spangler and Carl Brown, others with shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal dark forearms and weathered hands. Clothes oddly clean and smooth for them all, tight fitting. David looked down at himself, at his own hands and arms. He hadn’t worn longsleeves
since the war, in uniform. Samuel was staring up at him and David smiled weakly. A man approached them wearing a full suit of gray and when he neared he removed his gray Stetson.

David, Mrs. Parrish. He bent to Samuel’s level and stuck out his hand. Sam.

Samuel shook. Hello, Mr. Skillman.

Skillman stood up and met eyes with Helene and David. I’m sorry for your loss. How are you all?

Good as can be. David looked again at Samuel, hoping to gauge him. How’s the coal mine?

Goin’ pretty well. About to start in on a new shaft.

Where at?

Henderson’s old place, buttin’ up on your south end. Title just came through.

David exchanged a glance with Helene. Skillman leaned toward David slightly.

How long was Anna sick for? I didn’t realize she’d gotten so bad.

Helene grasped David’s arm for a moment and took Samuel and his grandmother inside. He turned back to Skillman. She was laid up with pneumonia through winter. Old as she was, sitting around like that ain’t good. She got a clot in her leg that went to her lungs, and things just got so that she wasn’t gonna get better. Too weak.

Damn. He shook his head and patted his leg with his hat. You seem kinda knowledgeable about that.

Passing interest.

How’s that?

I was a combat medic. David pointed to the street and saw Danvers coming. Better go.

Like to talk to you about something, when you get the chance.
David had already started away. Not the place. He met Danvers at the steps. At their approach most of the others began to file through the doors. Danvers stopped and faced the street.

Hard to see the point in all this.

How do you mean?

She wouldn’a cared to have such a show. He sighed deeply. Let’s go get my money’s worth.

They went in. He found everyone in the lobby and they went to their seats in the front. A preacher went behind the podium and spoke and he bade Danvers to come forward but Danvers only shook his head, and there was no one else.

Through the ceremony David watched Samuel for some reaction but it seemed lost on him until it was over and they all stood to file by the body. The casket was high so that Samuel could just see in and David wanted badly to hold him back from it but he watched as Samuel put his hands on the edge of the wood and rose on his toes and he peered in and dropped and David was wasted by his son’s face. His eyes were vacant but deeper in David saw it hitting him and he saw something like grace fleeing in the fall of his shoulders. Helene took him aside and the four of them went into the lobby and Samuel sat with Helene kneeling in front of him with his cheeks cupped in her hands. David stood off to the side taking single steps toward Danvers and back to Samuel and he could move no further. After a while Danvers came out and his lips had been pinched away and he saw Samuel and just shook his head and went out the doors. They followed him and Samuel and his grandmother left for her house while David and Helene went with Danvers to the cemetery. There were a few mourners already gathered and then the hearse came and stopped and they carried the casket to the green sunshelter erected in the field. David and Helene stood by, arms around him, feeling him shake. After a time Helene left to get Samuel and
David sat with Danvers on the hill while two men took down the shelter and brought in a small bedless truck. They lowered the casket into the ground and lined up a concrete slab and lowered it as well. The men got in the truck and drove away over the hill. Danvers pursed his mouth. Alright. Don’t leave now I might not ever.

David stood and helped him onto his feet. Danvers lifted his eyepatch and snuck a finger in and set it back. David led him down the path out of the cemetery. Waiting at the road was the truck, Helene and Samuel inside. When she saw them she slid to the middle of the bench seat and had Samuel climb onto her lap while David and Danvers got in either side. Danvers reached his hand around and pulled Samuel’s face to his and he kissed his temple.

Hey boy. How are you? His voice was rough and broken.

Samuel said nothing. Helene put a hand on his shoulder and patted it and David started the truck and drove south into town and east at the square. A half-mile down the road they stopped at Danvers’ and David idled the truck in the drive.

Why don’t you come eat with us?

I got things to eat around the house. There’s food spoilin’ as we speak.

Bring it down. There’s no reason for you to putt around that place.

Oh. Danvers made a face. Well.

That’s enough of a yes for me. David drove on the short distance to their house. Macha met them as they climbed out and followed them to the front door. David held it open for Helene and Samuel. Danvers paused at the door and gazed back at the yard and the truck. The dog stood at their feet, waiting.

We’re gonna keep you busy, Phil. Just stay busy for a while.

Danvers heaved up his shoulders and they went in. David pointed him to the living room and went to the kitchen. Helene stood at the counter dicing dried beef. He came up beside her.
That broke my damn heart.

She didn’t look up. It broke mine too.

He shouldn’t have been there.

She stopped and laid the knife down. Do you want to blame me for that?

You wanted him to go.

I wanted him to make his own decision.

David pivoted away. He’s nine. There’s things he doesn’t need to decide.

Well, I guess you should have put up more of a fight about that. She stared dead at him and her jaw stuck out and he could hear a hiss of breath. He realized it was his own and left the kitchen. In the living room he found Samuel sitting next to Danvers, reading a book, his feet propped up on Macha’s flank.

Sam. David shook his head. Put that book away.

He wasn’t botherin’ me.

It’s rude. Put it up.

Samuel stood off the couch and went upstairs. Danvers watched him go and shook his head.

I wouldn’t discourage a reader, Dave. Liable to wind up like you or me.

David sat on a chair across from him. Sitting he felt all of his weight and more. Not like I really know what I’m doin’.

I never raised any. But it seems like you’ve got it right.

I wonder sometimes.

Where’s your buddy?
I don’t know. Maybe with his ma. He turned his head toward town as if he’d see it through the wall. Samuel was coming downstairs. David patted his knee for him to come over. You can read a little later.

Okay. Samuel stood next to the chair.

Dried beef gravy for supper. You want anything else? Anything from the house? Danvers lifted his chin. Nah. Somethin’ to drink?

I’m alright.

David drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair. Why don’t you see if your mother needs anything.

Okay. Samuel left the room and their voices trailed back. He looked at Danvers. Do you need any help?

With what?

With money. The headstone, the funeral. Macha rose and dropped back to the floor beside David. He petted the dog’s back.

No. We both had a little policy. And savings.

Well. Let us know if you do.

Sure.

They were quiet again, listening to the sounds of cooking and the sounds of the birds outside in the budding trees. The ticking of the mantelpiece clock. The screen door in the kitchen opened and shut and David imagined Samuel walking out into the yard. He saw the boy studying the patterns of bark on the trees or following the path of an ant. Lying back in the grass and watching the clouds. He imagined Samuel’s hands and wrists. There was a strange symmetry in them with the rest of him. They were long but the fingers were not, the palms broad,
wrist thin like his mother’s. A longness, a height to everything about him that couldn’t be added together, couldn’t be measured to say this is where his size came from. He looked so much like his mother. All he had kept of his father were the eyes and the hands. He wondered that already Samuel might have something else of his, the call David had. Or worse, if he had in him the same desires as his godfather and namesake. He wondered what his son might grow into. Helene was down the hall, and he imagined her watching Samuel, looking out the window from the stove. He shook his head and looked at Danvers. You want a beer?

Alright.

David rose and went to the kitchen. He moved quietly and opened the refrigerator behind Helene.

Almost done.

Okay. He got one of the few beers and shut the refrigerator.

Tell Phil he can come and sit down.

David went into the hall. Danvers was at the door waiting.

I’m headin’ home.

Now, you got no good reason to. Helene’s about got dinner ready for you. He cracked a hairline smile. I got you a beer.

Danvers was humorless. I gotta go back eventually, Dave. I may as well do it now.

He set the beer on the hall table and Danvers opened the door. David stepped toward him.

Gonna walk me out there?

He nodded. I might.

Well I can’t stop you. They went out the front door and onto the porch. Danvers paused at the railing and put a hand on it. Look, Dave. We were always sorta solitary people. We never
got to have kids for whatever reason. He breathed in slow and turned his head aside. It was either gonna be her or me standing here. I’m sorta glad she got spared it.

David felt a hollowness in his chest. That if he spoke his heart would echo. Danvers stepped off the porch and walked to the road. He raised a hand. David stood there a moment after he’d gone around the bend and went inside. In the kitchen he looked at Helene and his shoulders raised and he sighed and shook his head.

I can’t imagine. I don’t want to.

What? Samuel had been stacking plates and stopped.

Nothin’ bud.

Me or mom dying?

Yeah, that.

Samuel nodded.

He went toward him and put an arm around his back. You don’t need to worry about it.

Samuel nodded again. He let him go and Samuel looked up. David thought he could see in Samuel’s eyes that he understood.

IV

David was standing with Macha on the front porch when Red came walking around the bend. Macha struggled down the steps and then trotted to meet him and she circled his legs and came back to the yard. Red lifted his hand and dropped it and David raised his.

How was everything?

Pretty rough. We all took it real hard.
I’m sorry.

He shrugged. Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe it would’ve hurt him worse to see it later. I dunno.

Neither do I.

He hung his head out past the railing to see the sky. It wasn’t long after midafternoon and the sun was still far from the western horizon. You want to come riding? There’s a little work to do.

Sure.

Let me go in and tell her.

Helene was at the sink and Samuel was still at the kitchen table. He stopped in the doorway and then stood beside Samuel. Helene was washing the dishes. There’s some work to do with the cattle. Will you be alright?

Yeah.

He patted Samuel on the back and pointed to the sink. Why don’t you let those be, hon? Because things need doing here, too.

David jerked slightly. Well. He turned. I’ll be back. He left the kitchen and got his hat and jacket from the coat rack and went out. At the sound of the door Red stood up from the bottom porch step. They went down the road toward Danvers’. Macha followed them until David pointed at her. You stay.

The dog halted and went back. They went on to the barn. David pointed Red to the second stall where Samuel’s silver bay stood chewing at the stall door. He led the horse out and they saddled it and David’s in turn and Red led them out of the barn. David took the emasculator down from the shelf and wiped it clean with a rag. He poured disinfectant over it and his hands and shook them dry. He held the tool against his shoulder and stepped out and Red balked.
You didn’t say you were doin’ that.

David pitched the emasculator to him. Too late now. He took his bay toward the gate and Red followed. He let them through and shut the gate and stepped up into the saddle and he watched Red struggle up. When he was settled they rode southeast, cutting across the property. They rode in silence for a long while, taking in the faltering grass and the few trees. They passed the remnants of old boundaries, fallen fenceposts and the squared foundation of a long-gone shed. They leaned back as their horses stepped down a grade and righted and when they were back over it they saw the herd gathered at the creek in the distance. Red turned to David.

Know him by sight?

No. But there’s only about three hundred head here. Shouldn’t be hard to find.

Red smirked. They separated and cut into the animals to spread them out and they circled and backed and he watched Red ride around the periphery from the corner of his eye. There was something in Red’s silhouette and the rope in David’s hand was gritty from memory and he was in the trench by the dry riverbed counting his bullets. It was raining like it always rained and the sky was low over the trees and he could see them coming out from behind the cover of ferns and dwarf bamboo and sliding into the draw and running toward the other side. Red was the first one over the mouth of the trench to meet them and then he was there with Red and they were rushing to meet the guerrillas and the rope in his hand was another hand thick and rough and he cut the man open and when Red called to him and pointed he didn’t know how it was not raining.

He’s right here.

David spun the horse. The calf was at the edge of the herd and David dropped the loop over its head easily and pulled it tight and he dropped from the saddle. Red was still on his horse and David passed the rope to him and he rode off until the calf dropped to its knees and David
pushed it to the ground and knelt on its shoulder. A cow bawled but when David looked none were coming. Red came over and he handed David the emasculator and pulled on the calf’s foreleg and patted its neck.

Docile enough thing, ain’t he?

David nodded. Keep an eye out for the momma. He rolled back to the calf’s rear and pinned the tail to its back with his elbow and pulled the scrotum free of the legs. He took the knife from his pocket and lined the blade up and cut and pulled. The calf recoiled and screamed and Red lay overtop it to keep it from thrashing away.

There’s the fight.

He took the calf’s testes one at a time and pulled them until the muscle in the cord separated and he crimped the first with the emasculator and held it tight. The tail slipped loose from under his arm when he went for the second testicle and the calf began whipping its tail about and it spiked on the knife lying in the grass.

Hell. Blood was painted across his chest before he could grab hold and he pinned the calf’s tail down and crimped the second testicle. He let the testes drop to the grass and opened the tool and stood away to get a spraycan from the horse and he doused the scrotum with it. You can let him go.

Red rolled to the ground and the calf stood wobbling and it ran with the weightless skin flapping red and pink at its rear. David stooped to pick up the knife and he wiped it on the seam of his jeans and put it in his back pocket. There was a spatter of blood on Red’s cheek and across the sleeve of his shirt and hands. David spun around to find himself in the field and he saw the horses standing aside grazing and he wiped at his brow with the back of his hand. The smell of tissue and insides were on his fingers. He closed his eyes.

Got a headache or something?
No. I’m alright. Let’s go. He pointed toward the horses. They mounted and headed back for the gate. The light was just beginning to pull from the air in the east. Red was ahead of him and from the shape of his back David was there again with the soil and blood slathered on him like porridge and he could feel against his knuckles the stiff crack of a windpipe and then he saw Red cutting the femur from a dead guerrilla in the middle of the draw. He cut the socket tendons and turned the bone in his hand and lifted the lateralis from where it hung over the head and cut it off and the man’s leg lay open and hollow and the muscles flayed were draped across his uniform and David shuddered and leaned from the horse and vomited. The horse stopped and Red sawed around and helped David into the grass.

Jesus, bud. What the hell?

Between his fingers there was a give like the rubber tube of an artery. He felt soaked through. His ears were ringing.

Hey, come on. Red slapped at his cheek. David rolled his eyes up. He retched once and fell onto his hands and knees and he stayed there for a while with Red sitting on his haunches beside him, holding his hat. The land was beginning to color from the sunset and it was getting cool. Eventually David sat and he wiped his eyes and mouth with a handkerchief. He sat there breathing slowly and looking at Red every so often, unmoving. He held the handkerchief wrinkled up and he began to fold it and cocked his head.

Do you still have that bone? That femur?

Red put his hand on the earth and he shifted his weight. I think it may be in some chest someplace at ma’s. Why?

David shook his head.

Do you have yours?

He closed his eyes. What?
Red leaned back. He stood slowly. Come on. Let’s get you back on your horse. He took David’s arm and hauled him to his feet and they walked together to the bay. The horse was watching them and it pushed its muzzle to David’s chest as he passed. David put his foot in the stirrup and Red boosted him and he swung his leg over. They rode close by until they reached the gate and Red opened it. They put the horses up and Red watered them. When he came out of the barn he put his arm around David and they walked down the drive. David kept his head low from Danvers’ house and on the road he turned to Red and Red just held him close. He stopped them at the bend and he framed David’s shoulders in his hands.

Are you okay? You don’t want to pile this on the family.

David nodded. Yeah. I’ll make it.

Nothin’ to hash out?

No.

Alright. He put his arm around him again and they went up the porch steps. Red opened the door and pointed David to the bathroom and David went in and washed out his mouth. It was coming on twilight through the windows when he walked into the hall and saw the three of them together listening to the radio. Red’s duffelbag was full and zipped up. Helene moved over for David to sit on the couch beside her and he did, leaning over, elbows on his knees. Samuel was sitting on the ground at the foot of the couch reading his book from the afternoon. David breathed in and sighed, covering his face with his hands and rubbing.

I’m gonna leave in the mornin’.

Okay.

Samuel closed his book, thumb in the pages. Why?

I just don’t like stayin’ put much. And I think I’m wearin’ your Daddy out.
Samuel glanced back at David. David met his eyes for a moment and then stared at Red. Red smiled slowly and then looked away.

I think it’s just been a long few days for all of us. Helene found David’s hand. Maybe you’ll feel differently about it tomorrow.

Might.

Later that night he brought the chairs from the dinner table into their bedroom and set them at the foot of the bed. He spread a sheet over them and brought in a blanket and pillows and threw them underneath. Samuel sat in between David and Helene on the bed and they read a storybook before he crawled into the makeshift tent and they shut out the lights. He lay awake holding her long after she fell asleep, after the shuffling in the tent stopped. The dream came back to him and the whole of the day and he felt that some battle had already been lost. He thought of the look in Samuel’s eye and its stillness and he tried to remember the last time he’d seen him smile with abandon.

There was a knock at their bedroom door while it was still dark. He sat up in bed and he didn’t move though he knew what it was. Red knocked again and David rolled the covers back and stood. He looked in on the tent of sheets and opened the door. The hallway was cool and it felt like a window was open somewhere in the house. Red was dressed with his bag slung over his shoulder and he was quiet for a moment. Macha was standing beside him.

Well, Dave. I’m headin’ out.

He nodded. He tried to delay the moment to get the fog from his head and to find something to say.

Red stuck out his thumb and scratched his neck, the bag lifting. When I talked to your woman she acted like you don’t do this at all, have episodes. I figured it was me.
I don’t want to run you out. I. He looked at the door. He pointed to the porch and they stepped out. Red had taken David’s jacket from the coatrack and he handed it to him. It was a little later than that first morning and the eastern horizon was lined with the weak early light that stayed and stayed and then became dawn. The conversation had stopped and they leaned against the railing on the porch steps facing away from each other. Finally David stuck his hand between them. I want Sam to get to know you.

I’ll write.

You never write.

I will.

David jerked his head aside.

I was gonna leave yesterday but it seemed like a shit thing to do. I just can’t hang around any longer. I feel like I’m wasting time.

You can’t even say goodbye to Sam?

I nearly didn’t say goodbye to you. He shifted from the railing and stared at David. But I wanted to tell you to be careful. I don’t wanna assume I know what’s eatin’ you, but it looks like it’s about got you by the throat.

David nodded slowly. Yeah. His voice was soft, broken.

Things’re gonna get worse. I saw some rough things out there, back east. It’s all goin’ away. He paused and looked out at the yard. Tell everyone I said bye. It was good to see my namesake.

Yeah. I’m glad you did. David stepped down to meet him and they shook hands tightly and hugged. You take care.

Always. Keep your head down. Red backed away from him into the yard and then he turned and headed for the road. He went east, away from town, toward the sun.
Early June. It was hot and there had been only one brief rain. The grass was all blonde and there was no green save the fading leaves of the trees and the corn and their garden. The air above the road thickened like gasoline vapors. Cicadas sawed loud in the trees. David climbed the porch steps and they creaked and shifted under him and he reached for the carpenter’s pencil behind his ear before opening the door and going in. There was a boy and a girl younger than Samuel sitting with Helene in the living room.

You find a couple strays?

Just babysitting. They’re Corinna Brown’s kids.

He patted the frame of the doorway and went on into the kitchen. It was as hot in the room as outside without a fan going. He took a small yellow notepad from a drawer and sat at the table scratching out figures of diesel, how much they had, how much they needed, where it could be cut. He sat there at the table a while and Samuel passed by the open kitchen window and went to the tree at the fence. It was young and its branches bent up away from the ground but Samuel leapt and grabbed and David watched him kick at the trunk. There was a moment where he kicked up and let go of the branch he’d hold of and David thought he might fall but he regripped and pulled himself up. A pale leaf shook free and fell beside Macha on the ground.

What’re you working on?

Helene stood beside him, bending over. He saw down her blouse briefly and she caught him and smacked his arm.

You.
He smiled. Can’t help it. He reached for her waist and pulled her next to him and he
turned back to the paper. Just working on the fuel situation. We need to put down some
herbicide but I don’t think we’ve got the diesel for it.

Can we do without it?

I really don’t know. And I don’t see how we could do it by hand. Poke holes in a bucket,
maybe. Use your water can. Be done with it in a couple months.

Hm. She patted his shoulder.

What’s with the kids?

Corinna needed them out of the house for a while. She called me earlier. I guess things
are a little dire.

I believe it. He frowned, drew a sharp line across the paper below his markings. Oh, I
dunno. I guess I’ll talk to Danvers about it. He didn’t look from the paper. Helene patted his
shoulder again and let her hand drop away.

How’d Sam get up there? She pointed out the window. Samuel had gone up another
limb and was standing with his feet wedged in the crook of trunk and branch.

Boy’s a monkey. Only explanation. I oughta go get him down from there.

He’ll be fine. I’ll call him in for lunch in a minute. Helene let her fingers drag along the
tabletop as she went to the door. They were both watching him. Macha below, gazing up at him
or the sky or nothing at all. David stood.

Be back.

You don’t want to wait on lunch?

Nah. He put the notepad back in the drawer and tucked the pencil in his pocket. You
feedin’ the children?

Yeah.
His mouth went to one side. Alright. He went out. It was hotter in Danvers’ house. They sat in the living room where an array of fans were set up. Danvers had on a near-transparent tanktop. He stretched the neck to mop at his forehead. Hot.

Yeah.

So what’d you want to ask me? You got that froggy look on your face.

You think we can skip the glyphosate this year?

This year? You mean can we skip it from now on.

David raised an eyebrow. What?

You don’t have enough fuel, right? What makes you think you’re gonna come across more in the future?

David said nothing. One of the fans had flipped a book open on the sidetable and the pages lifted and fell back.

Dave come next year you’re gonna be plantin’ and pickin’ by hand. I don’t know if you’ve thought about that or not.

I have. I thought maybe you’d have some advice.

There ain’t any secrets, boy. Run out of gas you get some mules. Hire up some hands. Permanent, not just boys for a weekend.

David looked away. The fireplace was shut up and the floor before it ashen, black from ground coals. The doors on it clacked together from the wind and clacked again when it cut out.

We don’t have the money to hire anyone.

I know you don’t. You don’t have the money to buy all the animals you’ll need. Or the stables to put ‘em in, either. You’re gonna have to cut way back.

Did you ever farm that way?

No. My pappy did. Him and half a dozen other men.
He hung his head. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. You don’t think we’ll get any more gas?

I don’t know why you keep on asking questions you know the answer to. Danvers leaned toward him. You name me one thing that’s broke down since the war that got fixed. You can’t do it. Can’t hardly get mail. Highways are all broke up, government can’t repair ’em. It’s just a matter of time. He sat back again and gestured toward the window. It’s all illusions, is what it is. People had about a hundred year daydream. Cars and planes and spaceships. Think of it. Your boy probably don’t know we had men on the moon. Might not believe you if you told him.

David turned away again.

It ain’t a bad thing, son. Where did all that get us? All that technology, all that learning. Right here. Got us to right here. And that’s the only place we was ever gonna go.

David rose. I don’t know if I can believe that.

Why’s that?

Knowing I threw away a good bit of my life to make this.

Now, no. That ain’t it. If you hadn’a done what you did things would be worse.

David laughed sharply. Well. I guess that’s alright.

That’s all you can hope for.

He stood near Danvers, staring down at him. I sure hope you’re wrong.

Danvers smiled deep and without teeth. He rose. Don’t get too down, boy. People farmed a lot longer without gas than with.

David nodded. I’ll see you. He swung his hat onto his head and left. When he got in the door at home Samuel was trudging upstairs and the Brown children were in the hallway waiting to leave.

You kids need walked home?
Helene called from the kitchen. No, I got them.

He passed the children and leaned against the refrigerator. What’s Sam’s problem?

Oh, he wanted book money. She scanned about the kitchen once and patted his arm before going into the hall, talking to the children and leading them outside. David fixed a sandwich and ate it standing at the sink. When he finished he stepped out the backdoor and waited for Macha to find him but she didn’t come, and he went down the road to saddle his horse. He rode into the pasture and checked the newly-castrated calf and the rest of the cattle. He checked the near lengths of fence where they tended to stay and the watertubs to see if they were dry. The wind out of the southwest was constant and unchanging like it was blown from a machine. He thought of Red out wandering in it, and Samuel walking, and there was a slow sinking in him and he looked down as though he’d find his horse had fallen into mud. He’d wanted to catch up with them on the road but he thought better of it. A bird dropped by his head and flared its wings and was lost in the grass. He turned his horse in a circle and rode on until late afternoon. When he was hungry again he rode back and stabled the horse and walked home, looking behind himself twice for his family. The shadow of the porch fell long in the sideyard. He went up the steps and he paused at the door. In the slats of shadow and light the form of something below the wood. Aw hell.

He left the door wide and stepped down from the porch. He peered through the trellis at the side and saw it as just a mass, a stripe of gold along a ribcage. He knew it was Macha. He went to the other side and saw the trellis was scratched at and dug under. He pulled at the thin wood bars and they warped but didn’t budge. He heard Helene coming.

David?

He pulled again and stood and wrenched at the wood until it began to crack and he let go and kicked and kicked again. He broke a hole in the center and began snapping the pieces back
until he was able to fit through. He crawled with his chin barely above ground. His eyes adjusted and he could see the dog clearly, tongue aloll, eyes closed. He reached out and touched her muzzle. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead to his nose, dripped off.

Macha’s dead.

Helene was quiet. Sam should be on his way back.

Should?

He’s at the library. Skillman saw him and gave him some money.

I don’t know what to say to that.

Neither do I. She shifted. Do you want help, babe?

He wiped at his forehead with the back of his hand. Would you get me a sheet?

She went inside. She came back out and went to the side of the porch where he was waiting with his arm out of the hole.

Thanks. He took the sheet and crawled back. He laid it out and pulled Macha onto it and began dragging the sheet backward. He stood when he was clear and he pulled the sheet from the trellis and wrapped Macha in it. Then he sat down again and uncovered her head and leaned against the porch stroking her ear. He patted her neck and carried her into the backyard. He laid her down under a tree by the fence and went to the shed for a shovel and started digging. The dirt he broke up was light and powdery. Samuel appeared at the grave with a small shovel. He looked at David before he pulled the sheet back from Macha’s body and David nodded. He petted the dog’s flank and put the sheet in place and dug opposite his father. David stopped for a moment and met Samuel’s eyes.

You don’t have to help, bud.

I want to.
He almost reached out to Samuel but the dirt was between them. Samuel started digging again. When they were finished David put the body into the grave and he stood over it and told Samuel to go inside. He waited until he heard the door and he knelt in the hole. He wiped at his eyes with his shirtsleeve and stood to dig again. He cast shovelfuls of dirt onto the sheet until he had no more dirt to replace and he stood leaning against the shovel and he was sick with something like dread. He was sweating and shaking and deep beneath him he felt something move. He felt that he stood on the lip of a maw, feeling the first tremblings of its opening.

VI

The sun was descending and the light had begun to settle orange as they cleared the table. David’s head was down but he could not help but see the silhouette of the tree against the sky, and what he couldn’t see he thought of. The dirt and the small cross, small brass tag nailed to the head. The fence behind the tree and the land behind it, the cattle, beyond that the dry creek, the high-tension wires humming. Beyond that he hadn’t been in years. Samuel was beside Helene at the sink and David went over to them. Get Macha’s things together and we’ll put them in the attic.

Samuel stacked the water and food dish beside the refrigerator and carried them into the hall. Helene lined up by David, arms pressing. She was looking at him and he was staring out the window.

David.

Yeah.

She put her head on his shoulder. She said nothing.

One helluva day.
It's almost over.

I wish that was true. They heard Samuel overhead and David put a hand on her back. He walked upstairs and saw Samuel standing by the drop steps, holding a box. David reached for the rope and pulled the door down and set out the loose wooden ladder. He took the box and went up into the attic with Samuel following. The room was nearly dark and he felt in the air for the string of the bulb and found it. There was a plywood path down the middle of the attic and alongside it boxes were stacked over the supports, ancient insulation between. Bits of newspaper and cornhusks stuck out from behind boards. He set the box down at the end of the walkway and saw Samuel pointing. He hadn’t come up off the steps yet. David came closer and saw the writing on the box he’d pointed to and his shoulders sagged: Army.

What’s in there?

For a moment he cast about for something to distract Samuel, to explain the box away, some idea. He stopped. You want to find out?

Yeah.

Come up here. He pointed at the box of Macha’s things. Put that up in the corner there and I’ll show you. David passed Samuel on the walkway and he opened the army box and for an ecstatic moment thought the femur was there. There was only his uniform, a shoebox. He set the box down on the walkway and Samuel came back over. They sat together and he let Samuel pull out the contents. First the dress uniform thick and musty, the few combat medals on it, the silver caduceus and cross. When Samuel laid it down across his knees he looked at David with his forehead knit close and something pulling at his lip. Next were the boots, the shoebox of letters and trinkets which he opened and flipped through. There were pictures of David’s mother and an old girlfriend, a few of Helene. There were a few small paperbacks and faded magazines. The box was empty but for a small glass vial. Samuel picked it up and held it to the light. Various
metal slivers that rang when he shook it. There was a larger piece the shape of a heavy button. He set the vial down on the floor.

That big scar.

Yeah. So you know what those are?

Yeah. He began to put the things back. He paused at the shoebox. Could I read these?

When you’re older.

He put the shoebox back and then the boots and folded the dress greens. They stood and David carried the box back to its place and they went down the steps. He pushed the stairs up and shut the door. They went downstairs and passed Helene in the hall.

What took you?

We got caught up looking at some things.

I see.

They passed her and Samuel followed David to the kitchen and out the back door. David got the hose out again and watered the garden. He took the hose around front with Samuel following and he checked the hanging plants on the porch. When they’d finished the sun was long set and in the east the sky was already transparent, dark, full of stars. David sent Samuel to shut off the water and came around coiling the hose over his arm. They met at the back door and stood together looking at nothing.

Why did you hide those things?

I didn’t really hide ‘em. The christmas lights are up there too. You think I hid those?

You know what I mean.

David glanced at him. It’s something I don’t like thinking of. And something I never wanted you to have to know about.

Why? It makes me proud.
Why’s that? He gestured to the small concrete stoop at the back door and they sat.

I dunno. You fought. You were brave. You must have saved people because you were a medic.

How’d you know that?

The medal with the snakes.

David smiled. Listen. I fought when I was just a kid. Your godfather and I dropped out of school and caused your grandma a lot of grief. I don’t regret it because I got to meet your momma through it. I hope that because I fought you won’t ever have to. But whoever I saved or helped, it wasn’t worth it. The only thing that makes it worth it is that now there’s peace to raise you up in.

Okay.

Yeah? You believe me?

Maybe.

Well the whole point is that you never find out if I’m right. David put his hand on Samuel’s head. Come on. They rose and went into the house. The light was on in the living room. We watered everything.

I noticed. Her voice echoed as they approached. They both stood in the doorway to the living room looking in at her. The radio was on low. It’s bedtime.

Samuel and David exchanged small frowns. Alright. He went in and hugged her and she kissed his cheek. Samuel started up the steps. David watched him go and looked at Helene.

He found my box of army stuff.

She raised an eyebrow and he went up into Samuel’s room. He was sitting on the bed tugging off his socks. David watched him get under the sheets and pull them up to his chest. David stepped forward and put a hand on the bedside table.
Thanks for helping me today.
You’re welcome. I’m sorry about Macha.
Me too.
Was she sick?
She was old. It was just her time.
She’s in heaven?
David rose up slightly. Yeah. She’s in heaven. He tried to find in Samuel’s eyes the thing he’d heard in his voice. He saw nothing. Goodnight. He leaned down and kissed Samuel’s forehead.
Night.
David turned off the lamp and shut the door and went downstairs. He sat beside Helene on the couch and slumped against an armrest. Phil told me some bad news this afternoon.
What’s that?
He said we’re not gonna get anymore fuel. Ever. Not that I couldn’t of guessed that.
She sighed and shifted her leg onto the couch to face him. You should talk to Skillman.
What for?
To sell some land, David. What else?
We talked about this already. We’re farmers. You need land to farm.
We’re people. People need to eat.
He made a face at her.
I’m serious.
So am I. We sell that land and it’s only a profit for so long. It won’t do Sam any good when he’s our age.
You know how far away that is?
Yeah, I do.

She put up her hand. Let’s not fight about this tonight.

Alright. I’m okay with that. They sat quiet for a while listening to the radio. It was
country music and aside from news it was all there was. After a little while he eased and saw she
had relaxed and he scooted closer and put his arm over her shoulder. She kicked at his boot with
a bare foot.

So what’d he think? About the box.

David breathed in, stretching. Said he was proud. I discouraged that as best I could.

Mm. She rose and took his hand. Come.

David leaned over to turn off the radio and followed her to the bedroom. He kicked his
boots off at the door and they both stripped down. She pulled him close. He settled over her and
kissed her neck, pushing her hair clear with his lips. She nudged him aside and rolled overtop
him.

He went into town in the morning while it was still dark. As he rounded the corner to go
to the diner he saw a horse hitched to a streetsign. The diner was lit up and he saw heads through
the window. On one side was a chiropractor’s office that had long been closed, the other now an
antique shop. He went into the diner and scooped up the thin newspaper from a rack beside the
door. A woman behind the counter acknowledged him and shifted her apron. He sat and she
came over.

Coffee?

Yes’m. He opened the paper and skimmed it. Headline of the storms, the gas running
out. He flipped the page. An article on the drought. His coffee came and he ignored it at the
mention in the article of the aquifer going dry. He skipped a full-page ad for government bonds.
There was a small article on the inside that said Dixon’s police and fire departments had gone
under. He shut the paper and drank the coffee. He looked out the diner window at the dark streets, the orange lamplights, nobody awake save those in the diner. It was the same the morning Red and he first left home, walked to Banning and caught a ride to a recruitment office. He finished the coffee. He went up to the counter and paid and walked down the road in the dark.

VII

A sunrise later in the summer. He went into the kitchen and made bacon and eggs and a pot of coffee. He was chewing on a half-cooked piece of bacon when Samuel came in the room yawning.

Mornin’ kid.

Morning.

Whyn’t ya go wake yourmomma? We’ll eat and you can come into town with me.

Okay. He went down the hall and David heard stirrings from the bedroom. He made their plates and set the pan to soak in the sink. Helene came down the hall.

You made breakfast?

Yeah. Surprised?

No. I just thought you’d already be out.

Shortly. Sam and I gotta go to town.

She sat watching him. He got three glasses down from the cupboard and poured them full of milk and set them on the table by their plates. Samuel came back downstairs and they both sat. They reached for the pepper at the same time and David pushed it forward. David finished before either of them and he wiped his mouth and stood. I’ma take a quick shower. Make sure you get a move on, Sam.
Okay.

He pointed at his plate. You got enough pepper on them eggs?

Almost.

He put his hand on Helene’s chairback as he passed. He went into the bathroom and showered and shaved. When he came out Helene was in the living room reading, feet up on the arm of the couch. He stood by. Where’s the boy?

Showering.

Did he just get in?

No, he went up a minute after you. Should be about done.

Okay. He lifted her book up to see the title and went upstairs. He heard the shower running and pounded on the bathroom door. Hey in there!

What? The water stopped.

How’s it take you twice as long to shower as me and you’re less’n half my size?

There was a pause. I have smaller hands.

He laughed. He stood at the window a moment to look out at the morning and went back downstairs. He stood by Helene’s feet again and leaned on the couch. He rubbed at her legs absently. She hummed and smiled at him. He moved on, the thin ridge of callous at her heel, drug his nails up to her toes and she squealed and slapped her book shut.

What’re you doing?

Playin’.

Stop.

He took her feet solidly and rubbed the soles with his thumbs. Better?

Mhm.
The bathroom door opened. He heard Samuel walking to his room and he stood up and slipped his hands from her. He leaned against the doorway by the stairs while Samuel came down. You ready finally?

Yeah.

Let’s go. Samuel fell in behind him and they both waved as they went out the door.

David rolled up his sleeves and he watched as Samuel did the same. They both glanced into the yard as they passed Danvers’ house and went on. You ready to go back to school? You only got a couple weeks left.

Yeah.

Been a good break?

Mhm.

At the square David looked up at the unblinking stoplight. They stopped at the post office so David could read the sign taped to the door.

No deliveries. Well damn. We may as well take down our mailbox.

Huh?

Used to be the post office did their job every day but Sunday.

Why can’t they?

There’s no more fuel to drive cars. And I imagine they can’t pay enough folks to walk all over the country and deliver the mail.

Samuel considered this. They went on down the street toward the south end of town where the grain elevator stood and where the Landmark store sat across the street. They passed the collection of shops along the square that struggled and vacated. A flower shop, antique store and hardware store. They crossed to the Landmark and entered and a man behind the counter nodded at them. The smell of feed and dust and leather. Rows of shelves with specialty grain in
white sacks and buckets. Lamps and cages, polished tack hanging along the wall, ointments in the back. David lifted a small plastic bucket of liniment. He found the price on the side and handed it over to Samuel. They went to the front and David paid and they left. The pavement ended and turned to gravel outside of town and David listened to Samuel’s march. Twice he kicked at the ground and pebbles skittered ahead of them. A truck came down the road and they walked half in the grass to give it berth. When the truck got close he saw it was from the mine and it slowed and stopped beside them. Skillman was driving and he rolled down the window and leaned out.

How dee. You got a minute, Dave?

I do if you do. He pointed at the truck.

Skillman seemed puzzled for a moment then killed the engine. He leaned himself against the door, arm crooked out. Dave, I would give you just a heap of money for some of that land.

He tipped his head for Samuel to leave. Go on home.

Samuel started walking but only went a few steps away.

Dave, I don’t know where you get the idea that I’m a bad guy.

David opened his mouth and paused. I never said you were.

That’s alright, you don’t have to. People think a man with money’s just lookin’ to get more.

Listen, Skillman.

Don’t worry about it. You’re entitled to your opinion. I do good work and you know that. I helped a fella the other day got his leg caught in an auger. Brought down the cutting torches myself. He seemed to stare at Samuel in his mirror for a moment. I just want you to know that my offer for your land is still good.

I don’t know how many times I gotta tell you.
I’m not asking for all of it. I did the research. I’d be giving you more than ten years worth of what you make out of just what I’m asking for. That’s ten good years. You might not see that much out of it for twenty.

Who knows, maybe longer.

May be. God forbid.

David smiled. No thank you.

Skillman drew his hand back in the window. You’re sure.

Yep.

Well, keep my offer in mind.

I ain’t about to sell it to anybody else.

Skillman laughed and started the truck. He waved and drove off. David watched it go for a stretch and then he took the vase from Samuel.

What was he saying, Dad?

He wants to buy some land off us.

Why don’t you do it?

They started walking. It’s not worth it. Whatever he pays me, it won’t last longer than the land. It’d be good for me, but not you, you see? That land will always be there for you.

Samuel nodded, thoughtful. Is Mr. Skillman bad?

Not really. It’s just hard to trust folks with that much money. I guess generally we’re all after something. I got no reason to pick on Skillman for that.

What are you after?

Food on the table. For you to grow up happy.

What about you and mom?

We’re happy if you are. Are you?
Mm.

Mm, the boy says.

I am.

David took the liniment at Danvers’ and told Samuel he’d be down in a minute. He knocked at the side door and took a step down. Danvers came to the door.

Seems like you was just here. Don’t you have anything to do besides bother an old man? You take precedence.

That’s heartwarming. He opened the door wide for David and pulled him in.

How are you this morning?

They went into the kitchen and Danvers lifted his chin slightly. Fair.

Well, that’s somethin’.

I’m always somethin’. Did you want a cup of coffee? I got some fruit. Oranges.

Danvers took a seat at the kitchen table and spun the fruitbasket around. Pretty good oranges.

Where’d those come from?

Skillman, of all people. I guess he wants to keep me buttered up for somethin’.

I just had a little talk with Skillman, in fact.

He’s another man with too much time on his hands.

Yeah. Still after that same property. Said he’d give me now what ten years would give me in yield. If I was lucky.

That ain’t a bad offer. But you didn’t take it.

No.

Good. Have to kick your ass, you sell the land I give you. Danvers reached into the basket and pulled out an apple. He polished it on the breast of his shirt and bit into it. He sat chewing.
You think it was the right choice?

Right how?

For the farm.

Well sure for the farm.

But otherwise?

Otherwise I’d say you’ll be makin’ a different decision down the line. You made the right one for now. But it’s gonna be a dry couple years.

David turned aside and rested his arm on the counter. Out the window he could see the corn and the trees and he imagined seeing the water drawn from them.

The phone rang after dinner. Samuel rose from where they all sat reading in the living room. He went into the hall and answered and he brought the phone in and handed it to David. It’s Mr. Spangler.

Thanks. David took the phone and he gave the book to Samuel. He stood and went out into the hall and listened. He hung up and put the phone in its cradle. He looked in on the living room while stepping into a boot. Spangler’s outta diesel. I’m gonna head down to the old man’s and roll out a barrel for him.

You’re giving it to him? Helene peered at him from over her book.

No. Least I don’t think I am. We’ll see if he brings his billfold.

She glared and he weathered it.

So what if we gotta pick a couple acres of corn? Be good for us.

A corner of her mouth lifted and she closed the book in her hand. I don’t want to hear you complain when you do.

I won’t.

You need to make sure you keep some at home for us.
Me or the gas?

Both.

It all comes back around. Just watch.

She glanced at Samuel and went over to David. You believe that?

He was going to smile but her tone stopped him. For the moment.

I bet you do.

He tried to smile again and it came out seeking. I bet you’ll be getting some flowers out’ve the deal. That count for anything?

You might break even.

He grimaced and went out. It was getting dark already. He listened to himself walk along the gravel road between the fields and the bulks of cows and the corn. There were headlights coming down the road as he reached Danvers’ and they stopped the truck sputtering. The lights went out. A figure came toward him and when Spangler got close David raised a hand.

Cut it a little too close I see.

Yeah. I don’t suppose you got a little tank and pump.

He smiled in the near dark. Crickets had begun to chirrup. We’ve got somethin’. He motioned for Spangler to follow and they went to the garage.

I’m sorry to drag you out here. You’re sure you can spare the gas?

David looked aside at him. Wouldn’t be out here if we couldn’t. They went into the open garage and David hit a lightswitch. On a table sat a gallon gascan. A once-translucent plastic siphon hung on the wall behind it. He picked them up and pried the lid from a barrel and dunked the siphon into the hole. Spangler offered the opened can for the other end. When it was full they went silently to Spangler’s truck and Spangler emptied the gascan into the tank. He put the can into the bed and David sat on the tailgate while Spangler drove them to the garage. He
backed the truck to the barrels and David dropped to the ground. He set the planks against the tailgate and they rolled a barrel to the ramp.

Ready?

Yep.

They pushed it up onto the bed and David leapt up after it and stood it up. He jumped over the side and Spangler closed the tailgate and struck the latch with the heel of his palm.

I can’t thank you enough.

Once is plenty.

Spangler put out his hand. Thank you.

David drew a breath and winced in the dark before taking it. You’re welcome.

You ever need help with something you let me know.

I will.

Alright, well. Spangler went around to the front of the truck.

Come by sometime, we’ll have dinner.

Sure. He got in and started it up. He stuck an arm out as he drove off.

VIII

The backyard was half covered with leaves. It was just after harvest and the stalks of corn stover stood broken off or lay askew. The wind never stopped and against any windbreak leaves and cornhusks built up and were covered in a thin layer of dust. He sat in the kitchen with a pile of books. Some from the library, some from Danvers. Old schematic books with thin yellow paper. The radio in the living room was on. The books were full of drawings of antique farm equipment, diagrams of yokes and plows and seed drills. He rubbed at his eyes and sat back
and looked at the clock on the wall. He stood and went to the door to put on his coat and walked into town. The sky was empty blue and cold and the town quiet. The post office was now open only once a week. Carl Brown was in the lobby filling out a card.

Hey, Carl. Haven’t seen you in a while.

Brown looked up. Yeah.

I miss your haul?

Didn’t have one. Replanted and nothing ever came above ground.

I’m sorry to hear that.

Here to give a forwarding address.

What?

Brown nodded. We got a buyer already. I feel kinda bad for ‘em honestly. Nice little colored family.

David shook his head. I’m sorry to see you go.

She’s got some family’s gonna put us up. We’ll be alright. It’s just what we need to do.

Yeah. Well, good luck to you. David shook hands with him.

I appreciate it. He grimaced and fanned the card toward his face. I need to get this in.

Gotta catch the train.

Okay. David followed him to the desk and when he’d slid the card under and turned David tipped his head to him. You take care.

You too.

He tightened his lips. He stepped up to the desk and the woman went back and got his mail. It was a single letter, from Red. He thanked the woman and put the letter in his back pocket and went out, west toward Banning and Carl Brown’s house. It was after noon and the
sky was beginning to cloud over in the west. It was getting cooler. He took the letter from his pocket and opened it and read it walking in the middle of the road.

_Dave,_

_Indent you I’d write. I’m gonna keep this short so I don’t shock your system. There’s a letter in here for the godson, too. I hope you’re doing alright. You probably know me well enough that you can tell I’m just clearing my throat._

_I wanted you to know that I went down to the gulf out of curiosity and it just ain’t there anymore. The storm was worse than they said, or I guess people were too caught up in losing their oil. A lot of folks died and there’s a lot of looting. I’m not sure I’d believe that except I’ve seen it._

_I guess this isn’t much of a happy letter. I just want to make sure you’ve got your shit together. Give everyone my best. I come by this address every so often, so you can write back. I’m doing fine. Hope you are too._

_Keep your head down,_

_Red_

He read the letter over again and put it back in the envelope. At home he set the letter on the counter and went back to his books. He studied them for a while then got a notepad and began listing supplies. Beside some entries he put asterisks to mark what he might scavenge from abandoned farmhouses and old barns. When he finished the list he heard footsteps on the porch and for a moment he waited to hear the skitter of Macha’s paws on the wood floor. The door
opened and still there were more footsteps on the porch. Samuel came in with a girl his age, then Spangler, and Helene. David stood and went into the hallway.

Hey folks.

Hi Dad. Samuel led the others in taking off their shoes. David tried to catch Helene’s eye. Spangler came forward and David put out his hand.

How ya doin’, Rich?

I’m alright. I hope you don’t mind, we ran into Helene walking downtown and I think somehow we invited ourselves to dinner. You met Paige before?

I believe so. I don’t think I ever knew her name. Where’s Becky?

At the flower shop.

Ah. David pointed him to the kitchen. I got some books in there might interest you.

Okay. He passed David and went down the hall. Helene came up to David and kissed him on the cheek.

I hope you didn’t have plans.

Not a one. Probably good to have him here, actually. Get a second opinion. He began to say more but Samuel stood before him with Paige.

I’m gonna show her my room, Dad.

Okay. Oh, Sam. Your godfather wrote you a letter. It’s on the counter.

Samuel stopped from the first step and ran into the kitchen, leaving Paige behind. He came back staring at the letter in his hands and reading it as he went. David looked back at Helene and they went into the kitchen. Spangler glanced up from the opened books.

This what you’re planning on?

Unless I come up with somethin’ better. Have you?

No. Only thing I could come up with was tryin’ no-till. Finally have a reason to do it.
I thought of that too. Keep a bit more water in the ground. He sat down across the table. He leaned in with his free arm and propped his chin in his hand. I just don’t know. So much work I can’t think of where to begin. He breathed deep and turned to Helene.

How was your day, darlin’?

Long.

Have a seat.

She opened a cabinet, ignoring him. So, Red wrote. Anything special?

I think anytime he puts pencil to paper it’s special.

Well what’d he say?

Nothin’ you really want to hear.

You can tell me later.

David dipped his chin. Alright.

Spangler closed a book. So how’re you set for horses?

Poorly. Bein’ that we ranch we’ve only ever had need for quarterhorses. I was thinkin’ it’d be cheaper to get my hands on some mules.

You may be better off getting drafts, I’d say.

Hell, I’ll take whatever I can get. You know anybody has ‘em?

Has ‘em? There’s people turnin’ horses loose. It’s a damn epidemic.

What, ‘cause they run out of money?

Or the land’s failed, can’t graze, can’t afford feed.

He considered for a moment. So you want to go out and hunt horses.

Pretty much. Better than payin’. That and we’d be helping the horses.

David looked back at Helene. What do you think?

I think you’re not nearly cowboy enough.
He turned to the table. She’s right. It’s one thing to ride around in a field. I’ve never had to break a horse.

Alright. But if I was to happen upon some, would you be interested?

Sure.

After dinner and after Samuel had gone to bed he and Helene lay together in the dark, awake. His arms were around her and he could feel her breathe and tense.

What’s the matter?

We had a meeting today. The school was waiting on money from the state and we just got word that it isn’t coming. There won’t be enough for next year. For anything. There’s just no money. We would have shut down earlier like the other schools if the mine wasn’t doing so well.

He frowned against her shoulder. I’m sorry, mother. He leaned to see her face and the side of her mouth tugged. I saw that. Go on and smile.

She smiled. She rolled over to face him. I’d better do it now, huh?

He would have spoken about the letter but her face was so sad and what light there was showed in her eyes all liquid. He kissed her. Her chest sank with a slow breath.

This is the beginning, isn’t it?

Yeah. It’s been a long time comin’, too.

Sam will be ten in half a year.

I know.

Did you ever imagine yourself getting so old?

We’re not old.

I know. But did you?
No. He pulled her closer so that he didn’t have to look at her. No, I think I skipped from the church steps to the hospital to us sittin’ in rocking chairs on the front porch.

She laughed against him. They were quiet a while. What if we left?

He let a slow breath through his nose. It’s no better anywhere else.

Mm.

She had said it lightly and he said nothing else but the idea stayed with him until they were asleep, and on after.

IX

Through the winter he and Spangler made their equipment with Danvers overseeing. The winter was dry and the southern wind did not let up. The snow that fell stuck in the ditches along the roadside and turned red from dust. He let the cattle loose in the cornfields and in the evenings he and Samuel would drive them in again. He thought of branding them and letting them go free until spring.

He was thankful to be as busy as he was with the converting. When he paused at his hammer or sat his bay or when there was no one at his ear he heard the wind and nearly saw it, the dust it carried, saw it in currents plying around him like a stone in a creek. He was on horseback at the edge of the woods to sweep the cattle in when the wind picked up and spun the dry dirt and corn husks and just as quickly it died and he could hear the husks rattle as they hit the ground. He looked south beyond the house at the blank horizon and he waited for something to crest it but nothing did. Helene’s words came to him and he thought that now was the chance to leave, to take what they could and get away. If he waited any longer they would stay, and if they stayed they would see this thing that would not be undone. For a moment he could feel the horse
under him tense and he felt the adrenaline pump into him but he didn’t move. It deadened in his limbs and weighted them and slowly he held up the reins and went ahead toward the cattle.

The days got longer. There seemed to be a new season between winter and spring which was timeless. The trees in the yard began to bud and stopped, the red in them fading until they were the same color as the bark. He watered the trees occasionally but it did nothing. The morning of Samuel’s birthday David read an article in the paper that said a farmer across the state line had been robbed and beaten to death.

They had made two seed drills from a diagram and both he and Spangler tried them the same day. Spangler had only found a single draft horse but David was able to hitch his bay to his drill to start. They worked on Spangler’s fields together for several days before David began his own and Spangler joined him at the end of the week. David was coming out of the barn riding the bay when Spangler arrived with the larger drill and draft and they went together to the wide northern field.

I’ll show you where to start off at. Hard to keep track of, isn’t it?

I planted flags.

Wish I’d thought of that. They went down the road a little further and David halted the horse. I had to go by landmarks. Halfway in, starting at that fencepost and going east. He pointed. You see?

No I don’t see. Spangler shielded his eyes. But I can figure it out.

Okay. I’ll be right out. David took the horse back to the barn. He rigged it to the harness and loaded the drill with seed. Going to the field he saw to the southwest a long and thin tail of dust rising, someone plowing another field. They worked opposite sides of his field and coming closer they hailed each other at their passing. It was a full day’s work. They met in the
north end of the field with the sun swung over to the west. David twisted at his hips, stretching, and he looked back at the field and to Spangler.

Thank you for the help today.

My pleasure. They shook hands.

Back again tomorrow?

Sure thing. Mind if I leave the equipment here?

Not a bit. Follow me. They went out leading the horses to the garage and they stowed the drills and harnesses. Walking out from the back of the shed David saw something dark red on the southern horizon burning up out of the ground. He felt the blood drain all away from his face and pool heavy in his stomach. He reached out for Spangler and caught him by the arm.

What?

David pointed.

What in God’s name? Is it a fire?

As they watched the scrim of red rose higher and it seemed to undulate and twist. It grew taller still before David moved. Jesus. He started running for the house. He heard Spangler behind him. He was already on the gravel and pounding up onto the porch. He opened the door and shouted in. Sam?

He heard Helene start to the hallway from the kitchen. He’s not home. What’s wrong?

Where is he?

He went to the library from school. What’s the matter?

Shut all the doors and windows. There’s some kind of storm coming. David ran back out as Spangler reached the porch and he tossed an arm at the truck and he’d already started backing when Spangler dove into the bed. He tore out of the short drive and onto the road. He was still staring at the storm as they pulled into town and he slowed the truck by the flower shop
long enough for Spangler to leap out. David drove southward down the middle of the street as
the red came head on over the edge of town, the creek consumed, sun blotted. It knuckled across
the ground like an enormous fist, its bottom black and the top rearing far overhead. He heard the
plink of grains of dust on the windshield and the town darkened to a dull rust. He pulled over
short of the library. There was a bundle on the sidewalk and in the thickening haze he made out
the shoes at the bottom. He opened the truck door and was stung and blinded by the dust. The
grit stuck in his teeth and muddied his lips as he called to Samuel and saw the bundle move.
David pulled his shirt off and looped his free arm under the boy and put the collar of the shirt up
against his mouth. Carrying Samuel he turned and lost sight of the truck, nearly running into it as
he staggered low against the wind. He dropped Samuel on the bench seat and slammed the door
shut. He lifted Samuel’s face to his and saw his eyes raw and colorless in the twilight. Samuel
said nothing but clung to David and buried his face in his chest. David put his arms around him
and peered out the windshield. The front of the truck had disappeared.

Are you alright? He heard nothing back. He leaned to the glovebox with Samuel in his
lap and took out a bottle of water. The light in the glovebox popped and went out. He opened the
water. Look at me. He tilted Samuel’s face up again. Keep your eyes open. He cradled the back
of his head and poured the water just above his brow. Samuel blinked. The water ran streaks
down his face and David stopped to let him breathe. He took a drink and offered the bottle and
Samuel drank. He shuddered and pushed away to sit next to David. They both looked out at the
void around them. The sidewalk was visible beside the truck and then a thin patch of yard and
beyond he knew was a house but it was consumed. The dust hissed along outside and through the
air vents and it collected and swirled on the windshield. The truck tilted in the wind. He watched
Samuel wipe his face with the shirt. Are you okay?
Samuel picked at the corner of his eye. Yeah. He was about to say more when a bluish arc of light crossed the hood of the truck. Dad.

It’s okay. We’re safe in here. He reached to start the truck and the static shot his hand out and lit the cab. He swore and grabbed the key again but nothing happened. He dropped his hand and rubbed at the numb fingers. The air outside was dark, interrupted only by faint bolts of blue crossing the truck hood and mirrors. Inside he could barely make out the shape of Samuel’s face and hands. We’ll just have to wait a while. It’ll die down soon. He thought he saw him nod. The dust was building up on the windshield and on the wipers.

I was trying to run home.

I know.

I left my book.

We’ll get it. He hugged Samuel. He sat back and stared out at the dark and listened to the wind. There was a watch in the change tray and he picked it up and examined it but couldn’t read the time. They sat. He guessed twenty minutes had passed when it seemed to get lighter, slowly so that he had to close his eyes a while and judge the change by memory. It wasn’t long after that they could see past the hood of the truck and then the curb and down the street. The head of the storm was moving over the tops of the houses and stores. It tumbled like smoke, like a twister set on its side. He waited a moment and opened the truck door and stepped out. Dust fell from the door. Samuel got out on the other side and walked around to him and they stood in the street. He’d stopped the truck half on the sidewalk. The gutters were filled with dust that flowed up onto the curb and the streets and alleys and any standing place where there was purchase was covered. The walls of the bank and of the other stores were drifted up with the dust and there were thin mounds in the truck wheels. He put his hands on his hips. The sky was white, scoured, and the sun itself seemed raw. They both stood in the street for a while longer,
joined by storekeepers and neighbors who came out blinking at the sky and some of them leaning
against each other or the dirty walls of their homes. He got back in the truck to start it. The
engine misfired once and turned over. Through the open door he saw Samuel dig through the
sand and shake his library book out before climbing in. They drove toward home. A house had a
busted window, a woman already sweeping dust out the front door. They sped up along the
country road and David saw the color of the soil had turned to what had fallen. He felt weighed
down by the dust. They pulled into the drive and got out and went into the house.

Helene?

There was a noise from the bedroom. In here.

He opened the door. Helene came out of the bathroom dragging bunched-up blankets
and pillows from the tub. Are you alright?

She dropped the bedclothes. Yeah.

You just set in the tub and waited?

I couldn’t budge the mattress. She shrugged. I watched from the door. What was that?

I dunno. He looked at Samuel. Just dust, a dust storm.

Helene sat on the bed. I watched out the backdoor after you left and you would have
thought—I don’t even know. She shook her head and brushed a hand across the bare mattress.
Her palm came away dirty red. I guess we’d better start cleaning.

I need to check on the animals. And the old man, for that matter.

She sighed and nodded.

I’ll be back to help in a bit.

Okay.

David leaned across the bed to kiss her and he held Samuel’s head in his hands and went
out. The wooden floors were coated finely with dust, their tracks from the front door brushed
through. He went down the road to Danvers’ and knocked at the side door but there was no answer. The latch on one of the stalls clacked to and he walked to the barn. Danvers came out the doors and put a hand up.

Boys got a little spooked, nearly busted out the sidewall. They’re alright though.

Are you?

Oh yeah. Little duster never bothered me.

Is that what they call those?

What I used to hear ‘em called.

Think it’s screwed me over?

Hard tellin’. You haven’t plowed so you ought to be okay. Everybody around here who did just lost all their topsoil.

He nodded. We’ve got dust all in the house. I just barely got to Sam. Who knows if he would’a choked or what.

Mhm.

Have you seen any of the cattle yet?

No. I imagine you’re okay though.

Sure hope. He thumbed to the barn. Good to ride?

Yeah. Go ahead.

David went by and Danvers followed and watched him tack up the bay. He led the horse out of the barn and put his foot in the stirrup and stood up onto the horse. He grimaced at Danvers. Worried about all this.

I would be. I am.

David smiled tight. He clicked his tongue and Danvers walked beside him and opened the gate and he rode into the field. The grass and the bare trees were all dusted still and along the
fenceposts there were small piles of sand. He rode to the dry creek and back and he sighted the herd under a tall lightningstruck locust. They were all aground and he appraised and counted them. He dropped from the horse and went over to the nearest heifer. Her eyes were gummed and her coat matted and coarse but aside from that nothing. He remounted and rode on deeper, scanning the empty southern horizon as the sun began to set. There was a bruised yellow tint to the sky. He rode clear to the edge of his property and he put his hand atop a fencepost and he stayed that way staring south as if he might will the weather back. He felt the slight warmth of the sun on his face and he felt it fade. He’d closed his eyes without realizing and without realizing he found he was praying. His breathing tight and heavy through his nostrils with his head bowed and the sensation of his chest expanding beyond its bounds, something white reaching out from it. The wind picked up and he turned the horse and started home.

X

He gave himself the morning to rest and be in the house and in the dull early light saw the dust everywhere, on everything, even though they’d cleaned. It was on the blinds and curtains and on tabletops. Samuel came downstairs and Helene was drinking coffee at the table and both of them were bland from light or dust. The only color he seemed to see was from the eyes of Samuel, cold and electric, like the sky through frosted glass. Like his own. He felt tired, restless. He passed a hand through his hair and felt the sand caught there. When they finished eating breakfast he showered and dressed. He went out with Helene to bring in the laundry from the clothesline and they said nothing about the dust that shook out of the sheets or that rose from their footsteps on the lawn. He told her he was taking Samuel out for a ride. When they got into town all the doors of all the houses were open to sweep out the dust. The front windows of a house
were boarded up. David raised a hand to the people he passed and they nodded gravely or
grimaced and went back to their work. They went on out of town toward Carl Brown’s
farmhouse and they hitched their horses to the fence.

What are we doing?

Just introducing ourselves. We should have done it earlier. David knocked on the front
door and stepped back. The porch was clean. Someone walked up behind the door and there was
a moment before it opened and a girl a couple years older than Samuel stood there with her hand
on the frame. She was tall and her hair was pulled back by a headband behind her ears and from
there it expanded in a tight dark corona.

Can I help you?

David smiled. We're just here to introduce ourselves. Are your parents home?

Yeah. Are you sellin’ somethin’?

No. We’re farmers.

She raised her head and glanced from David to Samuel and disappeared into the house
with the door agape. A few moments later she returned behind her mother, only a few inches
taller than she. The woman put her hand on the frame.

Can I help you?

I’m David Parrish, and this is my son Sam. We wanted to welcome you to town and see
if there was anything we could do for you.

You’re a little late for the welcoming committee.

I’m sorry we didn’t get out here earlier. We’ve been switching out equipment and
planting. Between that and everything else, well.

The mother held her mouth tight and finally she put her hand out. I’m Delia. That’s
Melanie, behind me.
David shook her hand. Pleased to meet you. She took Samuel’s hand. Melanie stayed where she was.

My husband is out back workin’ on the windmill if you’d like see him. She bent slightly to Samuel. You can come inside and play with Mel, honey.

Samuel looked at David and David shrugged. She ain’t gonna bite you, I don’t think.

She does you just bite her back. Delia stepped aside for Samuel to come in. He went in and David smiled at Delia and stepped off the porch. He went around the house and into the backyard. The windmill was set deep into the property where Brown had grown hay and last season’s crop still stood. The hay was wilted brown, long and beat low by the wind. There was a path to the windmill and David trod along it until he saw a man bent over the pump of the windmill, a shirt hanging from his shoulder. The man raised up and David waved. The man wiped his hands on his jeans and took a step forward.

What can I do for you?

I’m David Parrish. I farm on the east side of town. About five months late introducing myself.

The man smiled wide and put his hand out. O H Reckard.

David shook. That stand for anything?

O H shrugged. The story goes my Daddy didn’t trust the hospital. Thought they’d charge him for the ink to print my name.

No foolin’?

No foolin’. Though some would say the O stands for ornery.

They were quiet for a moment, both with dimming grins. David turned aside. So how’re you doing out here?

Well, we’re fine so far. But we haven’t had to do any real work yet, either.
You farm before you came here?

Nope. From Atlanta. Born in South Georgia. I was a country boy for a while, moved into town when I was ten. Did a two year stint in the desert, went to the big city when I got back.

What branch?

Marines.

Ah. I was army.

Oh yeah? O H leaned against a leg of the windmill.

Talamanca, though. Right on the cordillera.

Oh, man. I heard that was rough.

David nodded, quieted for a moment as his mind went back. What brought you all the way out here?

I was unemployed for about four months. Had a good job, factory closed down. One day a man on the streetcorner stands up on a box and starts yellin’ about how the government was tanking and everyone needs to get out. Month after that the hurricane came through. There was nothin’after that. No food, no water. Woke up one day and there was no electricity. Looked outside and all I saw was kudzu everywhere, all over everything. Like I’d been asleep or something. He paused. So I loaded up the car and we went as far as we could outta there. Ran out of gas around East St. Louis and I swear to you that same soapbox guy showed up and said ‘Farmland for the taking. Farm, best chance they is.’ He was passin’ out flyers with a phone number on ‘em and that’s about how it went. We lived outta the car for a couple weeks, then found a place to rent. Worked a shit bank security job for a while. One day I called the number and got this address, bought it. He spread his arms at the hayfield and everything around them. Came out on a train, stayed in Banning until few months ago, and here we are. Farmers.
Well, you probably couldn’t’a picked a better town. I hear it’s worse just about everywhere else. Have you started planting yet?

Huh uh.

You know how you’re gonna plant?

Huh uh.

David raised an eyebrow at him. You got anything to plant?

It’s already in the ground, ain’t it?

Oh, bud. No. David smiled. He watched O H look at the field. The hay’s up just because there was nobody here to cut it down. Brown left before planting.

O H grinned crookedly. Shit. He braced his hands on the crosspiece behind him.

What have you bought besides the house?

Nothin’.

Well. That’s a good thing then. Means you haven’t sunk any money. How many acres? Eight hundred.

Whoo. Alright. He scanned along the ground like he might find a solution there. Brown wasn’t hiding any mules or plows in his basement, was he? Anything you got that I can’t see?

O H shook his head. Huh uh. I got the land and the house.

David put his hand to his mouth. He took it away and held up two fingers. You got a couple options. You can try to stick it out to next year on what money you’ve got, buy up to be ready next year. Or you can stand in front of me when I tell my wife I’m gonna help you plant when I finish my own fields. And that’s assumin’ my partner’ll lend a hand too. I’m sure he will, but.

O H tapped the metal beneath his hand. I tell you what. Here’s the third option. He put his hand in the air and trotted two fingers along. You walk backwards out of here and I go back
to workin’ on this pump and time’ll just go in reverse right up until I forget all this bad news. Jesus.

    I can try that if you like.

    Son of a bitch. He shook his head. First that sandstorm, then you tell me this ain’t the land o plenty. I mean I ain’t afraid of a day’s work. But Jesus.

    It’s no paradise anymore, but it may be as close as you get.

    Which says somethin’ about everyplace else.

    David grinned. Yeah, it does. You want to talk it over with your wife?

    I’d better. She’ll probably throw me out either way.

    David pivoted on his heel to see the house. He turned back and pointed at the well. I oughta tell you too. No water comin’ up?

    Dry as a bone.

    It ain’t because it broke. There’s no water to be had. The water table’s been shifting. There’re a bunch of wells out here that have gone dry.

    Man, you are just a black cloud. Let’s try that third option first and we’ll see if God smiles on my fool ass self. He shook his head. He pushed off the windmill and they started for the house. I wonder how long it would’a took me to figure it out.

    Couple months?

    Longer, probably. Probably not until someone was eatin’ a ear of corn in front of me.

    David laughed. I’ll swing by tomorrow morning, get your answer?

    Sure. If I’m hangin’ from a tree you don’t need to call the police. It was Delia, justifiable homicide.

    He laughed again. Alright. They came to the patio door and O H opened it. Samuel and Melanie were at the kitchen table playing a board game.
Wife?

What did you call me? They heard Delia from a front room.

I called you wife. Did you go and change that? I gotta sign papers, you know.

You keep callin’ me wife and you’ll be seein’ those papers. She came into the kitchen from around a corner.

We got things to talk about.

Like your failin’ memory? She put a hand on her hip.

Like that, yeah.

David put a hand on the back of Samuel’s chair. C’mon bud. About time to get back.

Let me finish.

No. Come on.

He can stay. O H tilted his head. He can give you my answer.

David turned to him. Okay. I’ll be goin’ then. Don’t be gone more’n an hour, Sam.

Nice meetin’ you all.

You too.

He nodded to O H and walked to the front door. He heard Delia say answer to what, and David smiled and went out. From the road he scanned the southwest for signs of a storm and found the fields and horizon vacant.

The weeks were long. O H came to the farm and helped David and Spangler finish David’s cornfields, then they rode the equipment out to the west side of town and started O H’s. In the middle of planting a wind came up weaker than before and stirred up flanks of dust from the neighboring fields. The three hid their faces in handkerchiefs and stood the winds out and they could see each other grinning by their eyes when they were able. The next two days it rained
and the land flickered green and grew and the trees and flowers opened and the men stood tall and straight like wheat for the sickle. Only David felt the hiss of it about his neck.

XI

It was a quiet day weeks from harvest. There was a moment to himself in the kitchen when he saw the letter from Red on a stack of old mail and he sat to reply.

Red,

You’d think I’d have written sooner, but I guess time got away from me. We’ve been busy around here as you can expect, without gas. We’ve got to use horses and mules like the old days and we’ve been getting dust storms up here that just about bury the fields. There’s a couple other farmers around that I’ve thrown in with and we help each other out.

Sam’s getting big. He’s getting real tall. Probably too smart for his own good. You know I worry about him all the time. Do my best to set up a life for him and already it’s not looking like much. I think our moms did a better job of it. Anyway. What else can I depress you with? The school shut down. Helene put up a fight about teaching without pay but the school wouldn’t hear it, so she’s bringing all the kids she can around here every morning, everyone that’ll come, and she teaches them anyway. Not many kids. We got no police now, just the sheriffs, and someone’s been going around taking the copper out of houses to sell it for scrap.

So, lord, how are you doing? You got a woman at this address or something? Are there kids I should know about? Sam found my box of army things a while back and I had to fess up. He figured out I got shot. The boy’s so quiet I never know what he’s thinking. He’s not like I was at his age. Well. This is getting long. Write back.
Riding into town there was a thick shell of dust molded solid by a recent brief rain. It covered the siding of houses and fences and ran along the gutters. It had been trod through in the middle of the street and dried and turned the sides of boots the color of clay. He slid the letter in the outgoing slot and walked out to the street. He saw Spangler in the diner and he went in and sat at the counter with him. He ordered coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich. The waitress brought him the coffee and he sat over it.

How you doin’, Dave?

Could be worse.

Knock on wood. Spangler tapped on the underside of the counter.

We still havin’ that harvest party?

Yeah. I think we’ll take it in a week or two early, too. Rent a conveyor and make use of that silo settin’ in my backyard. I don’t feel like chancin’ a freak hailstorm or locusts or god knows what.

He smiled. I hear that. David’s sandwich came and he bit into it and looked out the diner window. A group of children crossed the street and he saw Skillman walking and they met. Samuel and Melanie and Paige were among them. David pointed. School let out.

So I see.

Skillman doffed his hat to them and he bent down and pulled out a handful of change.

Huh. David took another bite and breathed through it. Every time I try to hate that man he goes and does something like that.

You know I’ve never met him.
Well I guarantee he’ll come in if he sees me. Just you wait. They watched. The children passed around Skillman and he was grinning. He went by the diner peeking in and he stopped. The bell rang when he opened the door and came to the counter.

Howdy folks.

Mr. Skillman.

He leaned over the counter, removed his hat and looked at Spangler. I haven’t had the pleasure.

Richard Spangler.

He put out his hand. Charles Skillman. You can call me Chuck or Charlie or whatever suits you. I’ve been known to answer to Chubs a time or two.

Spangler smiled and shook his hand. Mr. Skillman works.

Works for me too. You’re a farmer?

Yessir.

Best of luck to you.

Thanks. Spangler stuck a toothpick into a pickle slice and ate it. Well, I’ve got some things to see to at the house. He patted David’s shoulder. Be seein’ you. Nice to meet you, Mr. Skillman.

You too, Rich.

Spangler put a few bills down and left. Skillman stood off from the counter and turned to David.

How’s business?

Not the best.

I’m sorry to hear it.
David studied at his plate, the crumbs and patterns of grease. You know I have a hard time believing you got to where you are going by whatever name people want to call you. Knockin’ your head against the ground.

Skillman faced the counter again and raised his eyebrows. You never know. Maybe that’s exactly how I got here. He breathed in. You know I hired Jacob Miller on a while back.

Yeah?

Mhm. We’ve got a position or two still. Got some new veins.

That’s good.

He sang your praises. And you know I like you anyway.

David looked at him. Are you offerin’ me a job?

Part time. Work around your needs.

He finished his sandwich and pushed the plate forward. I’m tryin’ to decide whether or not I ought to be offended.

It’s not charity. I’m not softening you up.

Yeah, you say that.

Skillman paused a moment then smacked the heel of his hand on the counter. You are god damned hard to deal with, you know that? He glanced up at the waitress and frowned. Sorry ma’am. He took up his hat and left.

The three families came to each field for harvest and ended at Spangler’s, north of town, and went through the fields picking the corn and collecting the ears in buckets and a wagon, Paige riding the horse. They set up stations for shucking the corn and shelling it. The last day they held a potluck and had a bonfire, roasted one of Spangler’s few hogs. David and he stayed near to the fire, rotating the spit and watching the children. There was a small stand of corn still left and
Melanie and Samuel and Paige ran through the stalks tagging each other and disappearing. O H came from around the grain silo and ran toward the corn. Spangler grinned and shook his head.

You know where he gets his energy at?

Wish I did. I could use some. David let the spit swing back and put his hands in his pockets, sighing. He turned around to look at Helene and Delia talking at the table in the yard. Becky came out with a fresh pitcher of lemonade and she went around the table pouring into the glasses already there. David went to the table and took up his glass and drank.

It's just Kool-Aid. We don't have any lemons.

He put the glass down and smiled. I ain't picky.

Becky nodded toward the corn. You want to bring the children in for dinner?

I suppose.

Delia sat back in her chair. Leave O H out there. If he don’t wear himself out he won’t sleep tonight.

David laughed and went to the corn. The stalks were brittle dry and he could hear them shifting all around them, the footsteps of one of the children. He walked between the rows and saw the flash of Melanie and then of Samuel.

Time to eat, kids. He heard them running deeper into the stand. O H was standing still and straight the next row over. He came to life grinning.

I can smell that pig, man. I been dyin’ for the past hour.

David grinned. Well let’s get at it. He turned around and yelled for the others again and they left the corn. They waited for the children at the edge of the field and Paige came out with a slight scowl on her face. Melanie and Samuel followed, out of breath. David patted Samuel on the back as he passed and they went to the table to eat. Spangler had banked the fire enough to get at the hog and he began cutting portions off and giving them to Becky on a long platter. They
came to the table and everyone took their seats and passed the food around. The sun began to go down and when they finished eating the women cleared the table and the men put up tents near the fire. Becky brought out a red frisbee and she threw it to the children and everyone circled to pass it between each other. When it got too dark Spangler fed the fire and it grew high and they sat nearby and watched the flames.

In the morning they were awakened by the settling of dust on their tents like a snowfall of rust. David and Spangler were the first ones awake and they stood out by the ashes of the fire taking in the fields and Spangler beamed at him.

Got this season licked, at least. Wind can blow itself to hell.

Careful sayin’ that sort of thing.

The next afternoon Becky called and said her husband hadn’t been home. David rode out and when he got to the house he saw the top of the grain elevator was open. He got off the horse and draped the reins around the porch. He knocked and Becky came to the door.

Thanks for coming out. Have you called Mr. Reckard?

Not yet. How long did you say it was since you saw Rich?

Since this morning. He came in for breakfast and I left for the morning shift.

He looked aside at the yard and frowned. Huh. Well, I wouldn’t be too worried. Probably he just fell off his horse and hurt his ankle or somethin’. Hobbling his way back now.

His horse is in the stall.

Well. David rubbed his chin. I’ll start lookin’. O H’s number is the same as Carl Brown’s old one. Tell him I’ll be checking the old truck path along the fence.

Okay.
David stepped back onto the porch and Becky shut the door. He loosed the reins on his horse and rode around the house and began to head for the fence when he looked again at the grain elevator and stopped. There was no reason for the top to be open but one. David dismounted and climbed the steel rungs up the side of the silo and he peered in at the drying corn. It was sunk in the middle. David breathed in and went slowly back to the ground. He led the horse to the porch and tied it up again and knocked. Becky opened the door and he took off his hat, his moves stiff.

Ma’am. Why don’t you take Paige on into town, or maybe to my house?

What’s the matter?

Just go on to my house. You know how to ride?

Yes. She stepped back from the doorframe. Her eyes narrowed.

You can take my horse.

Why? What’s happened?

He’s fell into the silo, Becky. You just need to go. His hand had started to shake and he felt something inside himself turn cold and familiar. She hadn’t moved and he stepped into the house and put his hands on her shoulders.

How do you know?

He wouldn’t leave the elevator open. He stared at his boots. I’m sorry.

Paige. She called up the stairs. David dropped his arms and the girl came down the steps. We’re going to visit Mrs. Parrish for a little while, okay?

Is Sam there?

Yeah. Oughta be a whole bunch of kids there right now. David stepped aside for Paige and she looked from him to her mother and went out.

Bye Mr. Parrish.
See ya, kid. He smiled and motioned for Becky to go on. She didn’t move.

How do you know for sure? Could he still be alive?

He shook his head. No. I’m sorry.

She convulsed and twisted away from him. She started for the back of the house and David stopped her. She pushed and twisted out of his hands. What if he’s just fallen in? You don’t know.

Becky. You don’t want to see. And you really don’t want Paige to see. He glanced at the door. Paige was standing beside it. O H and I’ll, we’ll get everything straightened out and give you a call when we’re done.

Oh, God.

I know.

She clutched for the banister beside her.

I know. He put an arm around her and they went onto the porch and he was careful to avoid Paige’s eyes. Becky took her hand and they got on the horse. He went to the telephone and called O H and Danvers and went outside to stand by the silo. He paced for a moment and rapped the metal side with his knuckles and then he went to Spangler’s barn and he found two extension cords and a circular saw. There was an outlet at the side of the house and he plugged the saw in and drug it to the silo and slid the guard back and let the blade go. It rattled hard and flung sparks against the skirt panel and he turned his head and pushed with his shoulder until he felt the blade sink in and he drug it in an upside-down v. He could smell the chaff and dust smoldering and the hot metal and his hands and arms stung from the shaking. He stopped at the bottom of a leg and pulled the saw back and examined the ruined teeth and the rift in the side of the silo, filings and bits of corn fallen to the dry ground. His ears rang as he held the saw back up to the top and he started it again and he pulled down until the leg matched and knelt to cut along the bottom. The
vibration was easing and he stopped the saw and pulled it back. The teeth were worn smooth. He got another blade from the barn and started again and pulled with his eyes closed until he felt the corn start to fall around his legs and he stood and threw the saw away and kicked the uncut corner of the v and the metal popped and flung up and he had to stumble back as the corn slid out in a wash over the yard. He shut his eyes and listened to it fall. When it finished he looked through the cut metal hatch and saw a sleeve and arm pale from dust. He reached in and felt Spangler’s wrist and let go. He went back to the house and called the sheriff and waited on the front porch. O H came shortly, driving a mule and wagon, Danvers beside him. David stood slowly from the porch and went out into the road. O H was holding the reins limply across his knee. Danvers just put out his hand and David took it and Danvers reached further and grabbed David’s arm and held it. David walked beside the wagon as they brought it around to the corn.

You just cut into it?

Yeah.

You dumb shit. You know better than that.

I had to do something.

O H stopped the wagon at the wash of corn. What’s the matter?

Danvers pointed at the hole in the bin. You can’t just cut into one a’ them. They build up with gas and dust and it can blow sky high. You don’t wanna even smoke near ‘em.

David ignored him and went to get shovels. He came back and handed one to O H and began slinging corn into the wagon. O H was still staring at the hatch.

There wasn’t any chance we could’a saved him, was there?

No. It’s just like drowning. He was gone pretty quick. Danvers shifted on the bench and rubbed at his eyepatch. How’d his girls take it?

David shook his head. Paige don’t even know, I don’t think.
They were still scooping the corn into the wagon when the sheriff rode up on a morgan. He came around to the elevator and stepped down from the horse. He removed his hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead and there was a line chapped into his hair from the brim.

Which of you called?

David set his shovel against the side of the wagon. I did.

You’re Dave Parrish, right?

Yeah.

Sheriff Lucas.

David nodded. I didn’t know whether you’d want me to move him. He pointed at the elevator. The hatch was hanging open by an inch.

That’s fine. What’re you doing with that corn?

Takin’ it to the silos. See if they’ll drop the drying charge so we can get his wife a bit of money out of everything.

Where’s she at?

I sent her out to my house. I can call her.

If you would. He walked to the elevator and bent to look in.

Should I get the coroner?

He turned from the hatch and straightened. No. There’s no reason to call him out here.

It’s pretty clear this was accidental. He made eye contact with each of them for a moment then pointed at O H. Would you give me a hand?

David watched them lean inside the hatch and he left them to call. He came out and they continued digging. When O H and he filled the wagon they took it into town, stopping in the street as Becky and Helene came the other way.

Delia’s with the kids.
David nodded. He looked from Helene to Becky. We’ll be back just as soon as we can. They drove the wagon on and unloaded and went back. The sheriff and Danvers had taken Spangler inside and laid him out on the couch in the living room, wrapped in a sheet. There was dust tracked along the wood floor. Becky was talking to the sheriff in the hall and Helene and Danvers were standing aside. Helene came up to David when he got through the door and she hugged him.

You okay?

He shook his head. I dunno. O H and I gotta go shovel the rest of that corn.

It’ll wait.

Just let me do it. Let me get it done.

She stood back and let her arms fall. Alright.

O H went by and David followed. When they were outside O H held one of the shovels up. I got this, if you wanna stay inside.

No.

You sure?

Yeah. He reached for the shovel and O H handed it to him.

They buried him with the money from the corn. There was a little left over. Danvers found a buyer for the draft horse and the hogs that were left. There were days spent at the house with Becky and Paige, bringing food, all of them sitting around quiet. O H pulled him aside during a visit and showed him a letter from the bank. When David and he left one evening Becky asked if they could tear down the silo and David had to tell her he wouldn’t know how to begin, or how to haul it away.

One afternoon a month later O H came to the house and he and David stood on the porch with the air cool and dry and the trees bare, shriveled patches of leaves on the ground.
I got another letter from the bank today. They’re takin’ back the house.

David frowned.

They won’t give me any leeway.

I imagine not, what with the market flooded by all you greenhorns.

Hey, I’m just doin’ what the man with the cardboard sign told me. You know’ve a better place to get advice than that and I’ll follow it.

David laughed. He looked at the field beside the house. The doubling of fence where the grazing land stopped and the broken cornstalks began. They were quiet for a while. He watched O H rubbing and picking at his nails. David stood off the porch railing. What if we moved you out here?

What do you mean?

He pointed to their right. Take half an acre or so and put up a little house. Work with me.

You serious?

Yeah I’m serious. We bust our asses helping each other and it’s just driving corn prices to the ground. This way we solve a little of both problems. We might need to find more animals, but it’s doable. He’d leaned and set his forearms on the porch railing. If Rich were still here.

Yeah.

Have you told Delia?

No. I’m hidin’.

What I thought. Go tell her.

O H looked at him. He shook his head slightly. You’re some kind a saint or somethin’.

David soured his face. Hardly. I’m gainin’ just as much as you.
Whatever you say. They shook hands and he stepped off the porch. You think your
wife’ll go for it?

I imagine. Be more worried about yours. David waved him away. Good luck. He
turned from the yard. He had his hand on the door when he heard the snap of cloth from the back
and he went off the porch and around the house. Helene was shaking out sheets that were hung
on the clothesline and her hair was over her face.

I am more than fed up with this dust.

He helped her take another sheet off the line and they flung their arms up and down and
rattled the sheet between them. So, mother. He let the sheet settle. Have you talked to Delia
about how they’re doin’?

How do you mean?

Moneywise.

They’re not well off, if that’s what you’re asking. She began to fold the sheet and joined
her hands. He mirrored her movements and they stepped together.

I guess. They met hands and she took the sheet from him. I told O H I’d help him build
a little house.

She’d bent to put the sheet in the clothesbasket. You what? Where?

Here. He pointed across the yard into the field beside the house.

She straightened up. She seemed taller than she ought.

I couldn’t think of anything else to do for them.

How exactly are we gonna help them, when we’re going to have a time feeding ourselves
this winter?
He shook his head. I won’t be buyin’ anything. Just let a acre go and donate some time. He watched her walk back to the line to take a pair of jeans down. I can’t farm all this land by myself. With O H helping out we can get it done.

She folded the jeans and set them in the basket.

What do you think?

She stared at him and put a hand on her side, waving the other toward the field. I don’t know, David. I trust you.

It’ll be nice, don’t you think? Having them right next door.

Yeah.

We’ve never really had neighbors. Just Phil.

Mhm. She thinned her lips. You can’t work for free, you know.

I don’t.

Uh huh. If I didn’t pay attention you’d give the shirt off your back to any man on the street. Then you’d ask if they needed mine.

He smiled and tried not to laugh. It’s a prettier sight, at least.

I’m serious, David. What if you got hurt? We can’t afford to keep doing this.

He sobered. Well. I dunno. I don’t know that we can afford not to, sometimes. Bein’ good to Rich got us just about everything we have now.

I suppose. She took another pair of jeans down.

It can’t ever be the wrong thing to do.

That may be. Helene folded the jeans and looked at him. She paused in her movements for a moment and she set the jeans down and came forward. Tell me what you’ll do when it comes down to feeding us or doing the right thing.

What do you mean?
She took another step. Someday you’re going to have to decide whether you want to be
the good man or the man who feeds his son. I want to know what you’ll do. Would you give a
stranger walking by our last loaf of bread?

He tried not to back away from her and to turn his head. He tried to match her gaze,
intense and dark, hooded by lack of sleep and the light reddened with dust. No.

No? You haven’t said no to anyone yet, David. Except Skillman, and he’s the only man
around who could help us. You’ve said yes to everyone who’s asked and yes even when no one
did. Helene shifted her feet. She pointed at the house. You’re so hellbent on protecting Sam
from life and death and all these things and you don’t see that we’re one more season away from
having nothing. She stopped. We have to come first. Sam has to come first.

He does.

He doesn’t. Sam in twenty years does. You want him to have this perfect life you never
had and it’s already too late for it. He was never you to begin with, and this— She lifted her arms
to the land around them. This isn’t the same place. You know that.

David nodded.

This is what we have. And we might not even have that for long. What would we do if it
was you that fell into the silo?

He nodded again. He felt like a child, heartsunk.

Go on and build the house, David. She went back to the clothesline. She looked as spent
as he felt, and thinner. He went inside.

XII
They collected materials for the house wherever they could. Wood and shingles from abandoned barns, a disassembled shed. They put the roof on in mid-November. The weather was dry and the southerly wind was strong again. There were two storms before they finished and David knew dust would be endlessly falling inside. All through building he watched his cattle roam about the field behind the house and he could hear them blowing and snorting and he saw the matting of their coats over the ribs and hipbones. He had seen nothing in the field other than his cattle. There were no deer picking from the remains of corn, stepping out of the woods in the fogless dry mornings. The soil was being covered over with the dust and the empty yard of the new house and the fields and the road were much alike, redbrown and smooth. Broken cornstalks sticking up out of the sand.

It was early afternoon and they were nearly finished painting the shack. They were at the back wall with the bucket of whitewash and a pail of milky water. A film of dirt was on the surfaces of both and the paint on the walls gritty, the brushes heavy with dust. They had been painting for a couple of hours. O H dropped his paintbrush into the water and wiped at his hands.

I’m goin’ into town for beer.

David dipped his brush into the water and shook it out. Okay. He watched O H round the corner. The southern sky was white and the sky cleared as he drew his eyes north, then back to the shack. He took the brush out and started painting again. He’d nearly finished the wall and was thinking about giving the whole house another coat when O H appeared holding two six-packs, a few beers missing already, and waved him in. They sat at the table picking at the flecks of paint on their skin and looking around the interior, the dirt floor and bare walls. The windows from a small ruined barn with hazy glass. The house was dark. The walls were built in sections to be pulled away and stuffed with more insulation. They were quiet for a while, crowded, pressed in.
O H raised his beer. A toast.

To what?

To havin’ no further to fall.

David took his beer and held it up slowly. They touched bottoms and drank.

I saw somethin’ different in my mind when you said ‘build a house.’ Dirt floors. Dirt fuckin’ floors.

It could be worse.

O H looked at him. You tell my family that. Tell them it could be worse than walkin’ on a dirt floor in they own home. We had a house back in Atlanta. A house, now, not no apartment, not some damn shack.

We’ll build you a better one when there’s money.

Yeah. He craned his head up and put his arm over the back of the chair. Jesus.

What?

You can’t know what this feels like.

David said nothing. He finished his beer and got another.

I guess I thought it sounded good. Sounded good on paper. But lookit this place. It’s bad enough for me but puttin’ Mel in here. I don’t know, Dave. I don’t know if I can take it. Livin’ on your property and workin’ for you.

Call it yours.

O H brought his gaze back to level.

Call it yours. It’s yours.

He began to laugh. I love you man, but you are fuckin’ clueless.

David stared at him, his beer halfway to his lips.
Don’t even. Don’t even worry about it. You mean well. Just shut up about it. Don’t say somethin’ like that again.

David held the beer still then raised it and drank. He twisted the ends of the can in his hands and crushed it between them. He drank another. They were quiet again for a long while and David could feel the alcohol working on his empty stomach and felt his fingers going numb. Dust began dripping and flowing down from the ceiling as if it were suspended in oil. The windows had gone opaque, brown and nearly lightless. David stood up and the chair skidded in the dirt and he lurched and caught himself on the table.

It’s another storm.

O H smiled. More floor. He wiped the mouth of his beer with his shirt and drank.

G’won home.

David went to the door and stood by it for a moment. He opened it and heard a window creak and he heard the wind outside the house now sucking in through the window. O H raised his hand as if to brush him away and David went out and shut the door. Everything was rust-colored and turning darker. He raised his shirt up over his nose and held it and went out of the lee of the house and nearly fell over from the wind and the sting of the sand. He pressed his shirt to his mouth and breathed slowly and began to walk with his eyes closed and he stumbled over a cornstalk and fell to the ground and another stalk jagged across the inside of his arm. Coughing, he looked south. It was as though he were rushing through a black tunnel. To the north there was the slightest white on the horizon, the shapes of trees and fenceposts in silhouette. He got to his knees and stumbled forward with his hand shielding his eyes. The ground was almost visible and by the vague shape of his own boots he followed his steps and found his way to the porch. He went in and closed the door and slumped against it, picking the dust from his eyes.

David?
Yeah. He heard Helene coming from the kitchen. A flashlight blinded him and he closed his eyes.

Are you okay? You’re bleeding.

I fell. Is the power out?

On and off. She knelt in front of him and lifted his arm. Let me get some water.

I’m okay. I’ll go wash off. He took her hand and she stopped mid-rise. The house creaked.

You smell like beer.

O H wanted to drink.

She stood. Go shower. She handed him the flashlight. Here. Don’t come out until you’re sober.

She left. There was a dim brown light coming through the back window and candlelight flitting off the kitchen walls. He rolled onto his hands and stood and went into the bathroom. His face was ghoulis in the mirror, eyes ringed with dust and swollen red, hashmark abrasion on his cheekbone. He undressed and turned on the shower. The water ran cold on him and he sat down, a stripe of brown snaking to the drain, swirling. The lights went out and the pipes choked and stopped. He made sure the shower was off and waited a while longer with his arms on his knees, his head down and eyes closed, dripping. Eventually he stood and dried in the dark. He switched the flashlight on and set it on the toilet. He damped a cloth with alcohol and swabbed his arm. It stung sharp and cold and he took the cloth away and dropped it on the pile of his clothes and went into the bedroom to dress. When he finished he stepped into the hall with the flashlight in hand. All the windows were dark and the wind was still high and moaning against the house. The children were on the floor in the kitchen, Samuel and Melanie and Paige and others. Helene was sitting at the table with Delia. They looked at him as he went by, stepping past the children to get
to the basement. With the door open he could just see the stairs. He went carefully and opened the breaker door by feel and switched on the flashlight to reset it. The kitchen lights came on. As he mounted the wooden staircase the breaker popped and the lights kicked off. He sat down on the stairs and put the flashlight beside him and leaned back. He heard Helene come to the door.

We already tried. It just keeps shorting out.

Yeah.

We’ve got dinner ready.

How?

Matches.

That ain’t safe.

Well we made it. So eat.

He stood and climbed the steps. The children were eating already and their spoons were clanking against the soup bowls. He hadn’t heard them nor smelled the beef stew simmering. He went over to the stove and ladled a bowl for himself and leaned up against the back door. Helene and Delia were still sitting at the table, Helene without a bowl. You gonna eat?

I’ve been picking at it since I started cooking.

He said nothing. He tried to see out the window but there was only the reflection of them all, candlelit.

Delia thumbed over her shoulder. Where’s Ornery?

He stayed back. David stared into his bowl. I think he wanted to see if he could patch any holes the dust was comin’ through.

The storm didn’t pass until late in the evening, and it was after midnight before all of the children were picked up. The night was as black as though the storm hadn’t passed. He came out onto the porch with the flashlight and started backwards when he passed the beam over the yard.
Everything the light touched was dust, covered over, feet high. It was almost a brickred and he felt as though the house had fallen upon Mars. There were high drifts across the road that rose at fenceposts and troughed between like a long stone wave and where it was able the dust rolled evenly across field and yard. Thin shadowed undulations in it like the paths of snakes. He switched off the light and stood in the dark listening to the soft breeze and it was nearly warm and so dry that it felt like he was still inside, in some other room, closed off. Through the gloom he saw a single square of light from the shack and then the light was cut as O H stepped between.

The wind kept steady the next morning. He and Samuel went out with masks and woodworking goggles tight on their faces. The back of the house was sloped up with sand as high as the kitchen windows and they dug out the back door and a made a path to the shed. They walked to the barn and got their horses and David hitched his to the cart for hay. It was slow going through the dust and David had to dismount to push the cart on. There were signs of animals that had suffocated: the hind legs of a rabbit, tufts of feathers. The halfmoon of a lost calf fallen prostrate and nearly covered over. The wheel tracks and footprints filled in and were swept away. Samuel carried shovels to dig out the fences and to rake out grazing land for the cattle. Two old cows and four yearlings had dropped and two were partly eaten and the living wandered across the new desert with strings of brown mucus hanging from their jowls. He and Samuel dismounted by them and Samuel dug trenches to the ground and David tried to lead the cattle to the hay he’d brought but they were dumbstruck and even when roped to the bales would not graze. David loosed a heifer and dropped back against a dustpile. He sat there working the rope and glossing over the land. The wind shifted and the horses began to stamp and back.

Dad.

David looked up. Samuel was pointing past the herd at a thicket of dry brush grown around an old line of fencing, nearly buried in the drift. A ragged and mangy coyote was pacing
near the cover, invisible but for the white fur of its belly and the dark around its eyes. The whole herd was bawling in unison and the horses circled and began to panic and David reached for their reins and dragged close. Shit. Sam. Run it off.

Samuel held the shovel over his head and waved it and David saw the coyote perk its ears. It made no moves until Samuel came around the herd and it fled into the brush. The horses began to calm and David eased up, patting their flanks.

Okay. He let go and rubbed his hands, scanning the dim horizon. Let’s head on in.

Samuel rested the shovel against his arm and got on his horse. David tied a length of rope around the legs of one of the fallen yearlings and looped it around the saddlehorn. He took the reins and led the horse and they went out. Along the way to the barn he stopped them for a moment to pull the rabbit from the dust and he stuffed it in the saddlebag. They put the horses up and David rigged a pulley from the rafters to hang the yearling up to butcher. He pointed at the covered bales of hay. Feed and water the animals. I’m gonna talk to the old man real quick. We’ll get the other ones later.

Alright.

David walked out of the barn and knocked on Danvers’ side door. He heard him come and the door opened and Danvers peered down at him.

Get in here. Danvers stepped aside and David followed him in and shut the door. I see you’ve been out in it. How’s the herd?

Pretty rough. Six dropped. He lifted the goggles from his eyes and blinked and rubbed at the seams pressed into his face. We’ve got a coyote problem.

Oh, do ya? I can make you some traps if you like, show you how.

Sure.
You just get some cable, thin cable, and some stakes. You don’t need any fancy cages or anything. Danvers was by the counter and he was reaching down a glass from the cupboard. He set the glass on the countertop and cocked his head slightly. You look like hell, you know.

I believe it.

Danvers blew into the glass and filled it from the tap. He handed it out to David.

Thanks. He drank and breathed heavy through his nose. He drained the glass and put it on the kitchen table.

You haven’t been by lately.

I know.

Helene says you aren’t at the house much, either. She was complainin’ when she dropped off one of them loaves of bread she made.

I’ve been busy.

She says you’re lookin’ for things to stay busy.

David’s hand was still on the glass, his fingers perched.

Well?

He took his hand from the glass and reached for the goggles in his pocket. He pulled them out and looked down at them, rubbing a thumb over the lens. It’s hard being there. He thought of the dream from long ago, of the storm and of the teeth. The work I’m doin’ isn’t worth anything. It’s not puttin’ that much food on the table. It’s just work.

You can find payin’ work.

I got an offer for payin’ work. From Skillman.

Danvers’ brow lifted.

A while ago. He knows how bad things are.

You just can’t swallow your pride.
Could you?

Yeah. Danvers put an elbow up on the counter. You mean to tell me you couldn’t?

I’ve already thought about it.

Danvers’ eyes narrowed. Go ask your ma what she did for you when times were tough. He shifted his back. I always felt awful proud of you for goin’ back and getting Red, dumb as it was. I don’t know anybody else who’d do it. You did. But there are times when morals don’t serve nobody but God. If holdin’ fast to your rules means your kid goes—

David put up his hand. I get it, Phil. I got it. I feel like shit enough already.

I’m not tryin’ to ride ya.

I’m sore from somethin’. He stretched the goggles over his head. I’ll be back. He let the goggles rest on his forehead and looked at Danvers. Neither said anything. Danvers stood there and when David turned he leaned forward as if to stop him but David had already slipped the goggles down to his eyes and was out the door.

Outside the wind had picked up and a low red haze held over the land. He walked toward the house. Once out of Danvers’ property he stood in the road or the ditch beside it and spun in place until he’d taken in the desert in panorama. The whole world seemed dwarfed, shortened. The fenceposts and trees all had their bottoms cut out from them and they stood now like children’s versions of themselves. He imagined how the dunes must have built up against the shops in the center of town and how porches might be swallowed. He saw the school playground with a stunted metal slide, swingsets with the chains sunk into the ground and the seats eaten up. He wondered if it was too late to leave. Then he started walking again and he opened the front door and went inside. It was a Saturday but there were children in the house along with Samuel and Melanie, eating leftover stew in the living room. David smiled at them and went on to the kitchen. The pot was on the stove and there were rags hung up to dry on the curtain rods above
the windows. He got a bowl of stew and sat eating when Helene came down the stairs. She was carrying dirty rags and when she looked at him she shrugged. There were circles under her eyes and he felt pulled to her. He saw their courtship. The time in the city of nursing him from the war. The night on the lake, and their wedding. She was drinking a glass of water at the sink and she came and sat across from him with her hands together on the table. He had eaten most of the watery stew when he put his spoon down and stared into her eyes and he felt dry and withered by them. After a moment he reached his hand out and put it over hers and he withheld his wonder at how chapped they were. How cold and rough and thin. For a while they stayed that way though their eyes averted. Then the sun passed a cloud and a shaft of light came onto the table and lit the dust in the air and the dust that had fallen into his soup. He squeezed her hand and grimaced and stood up.

I need to get back out there.

Okay. She leaned in the chair.

Couple head got brought down by the storm. Need to butcher them.

I see us sick of beef in the near future.

He went to the back door and stopped. There a reason why everybody’s kids are sitting in the living room?

They know they’ll get something to eat here.

Well.

You’d better not think of protesting.

I wasn’t.

Good.

They stood there for a while and he crossed the space between them and they kissed. His eyes were closed tight and wet and he felt the grit between their lips and the layer of dust as it
came off his arms and onto her hands. In the shed he found a spool of cable and old railspikes and he got the shotgun down from the ceiling and carried them down the road. Danvers showed him how to make the noose of the snare and to tie it to the stake. They took wire hangers and cut them and wrapped them around the stake to hold up the noose and Danvers came out with David holding the snares. David saddled up and he leaned down to take the snares and rode out into the pasture. At the section of fence where they’d seen the coyote he dropped to the ground and dug out a place to plant the snares. He could hear the sand grains tapping at the lens of his goggles. He looked back at the horse and picked up the shovel and walked to the brush and planted the snares. The freshest kill from his herd was nearby and he took out his pocketknife. There was a moment flickering in his head before he knelt and cut under the calf’s ribs and dug out the heart from the chest. He cut the heartmeat like an apple and lay thick wedges of it on either side of the snares and he stood back and he dropped to his knees again, driving his forearm into the dust and scrubbing, abrading the fluid and blood. When he finished he rose, patted his red and stinging arm free of dirt. The wind snapped around him and by the horizon he figured an hour of rusty daylight before he needed to return. He rode to the farthest fallen cow and began to tie it up when he caught the smell. It had gone too long and it was too warm. The rest were beginning to go as well. He rode to the barn and with the time left in the day brought out bales of hay and dug a place for the cattle to graze.

XIII

The next morning the sky above him was the same color as the sand below. He rode to dig out the border fences and check the traps. They were empty and the hunks of heart buried and he dug them up and wiped them against his coat and laid them back. There was no way to tell if
the coyote had been there. None of the animals had been taken down. He set to the fences and when the sun was fat and the barren land around him laden with tepid bronze light he rode back to the barn and watered the animals with the handcart. Helene came down the path and he forced a smile to meet hers.

Gonna butcher that calf?

Try to. She huffed.

The old man’ll help if you ask. He’s better at it than I am. I gotta go into town.

She nodded. I’ll see you back at the house.

He looked away. Yeah. He took his bay from the stall and rode toward town, looking back over his shoulder. Dixon lay buried under the sand, in some yards drifting up to the mailboxes and over porch steps. The streets were dug out a lane wide, the dust furrowed as high as the horse’s belly. Ahead sat a nearly consumed car, the sand sinking in through an open window. He passed a few miners at the square headed toward the restaurant or the bar and their uniforms were a bland palette of coal and red dust and the worn blue cloth, Miller at the end of the group. They all ignored him as he rode by. David hitched the horse up to the top of his mother’s fence and got down. The walkway was swept out though the dust was already sliding back over the concrete. His mother opened the door before he came in the yard.

Where’s my grandon?

At home. I got him digging so the cows can graze.

What’s the matter?

David almost stepped back. He pinched his mouth to one side and brushed his knuckles across his jaw. What was it like, raisin’ me?
She studied him for a moment. It was a walk in the park and I always knew just what to do. What do you think? It was hard even when your Daddy was around. She paused. You’ve been a father a lot longer than he was. It’s a little late for doubts.

He gave a thin smile. Skillman offered me a job, just before Rich died. I didn’t take it ‘cause I didn’t want to owe him anything.

How is taking a job owing him?

It just seems like it. You know he’s hassled me about buying land, and then he offers me a job.

Mhm.

Now I wonder if I was just making excuses, it was just pride. Or stubbornness. That’s what Phil says. And now things are lookin’ bad enough I feel like I don’t have any other option.

He had been looking down between them or away and when he turned back to his mother she was smirking.

You’re just now getting desperate. When you’re really down you won’t have anything to say about pride. She shifted against the doorframe and pointed at him. Do you remember when we had that apartment on Race Street?

Kinda.

I slept in a closet. There was only the one bedroom, and I let you have it.

He backed to the porch railing, a weak smile on his face.

I wasn’t ashamed. I did what I had to. No single mother in this town would bat her eyes at that. And nobody’d blame you for taking a job.

Alright.

I’ve worked at the office for I don’t even know how long, now. I’ve gotten three raises. Just three. She held up her fingers. Pride’s for rich folk.
Okay. He smiled. I’m gonna get out of here. He stepped forward and hugged her and she kissed his cheek.

You better have my grandson out here before long.

I will. He left the porch and got on his horse. He rode south, past the square and the granary and the dry red wash of the creek and out of town. He hadn’t been by the mine in a long while and it had grown squat and wide. On the periphery the sand and gravel equipment rose up above piles of rock and further on the ground was dug out lower and lower until it centered in a dropoff that was over a hundred feet deep. The raw dirt was gray with red drippings and everywhere machinery stood half-erect or idle. He watched a dumptruck far below him roll by a mineshaft. He rode on until he’d reached the line of foreman’s trailers and the small cabin where he would find Skillman. He tied his horse to a post and knocked on the door. A whistle blew behind him. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair and put it back. The door opened and Skillman stood in his suit of gray.

Kindly surprised to see you here.

David took a step back. I am too.

Skillman looked at him for a moment. I’ve got just a minute, if you want to have a seat.

Okay. He followed Skillman into the cabin. It was a single room, the wood stained dark. There was a desk with two plush chairs in front of it and a couch to the side. A polished cavalry revolver hung on the wall behind the desk, the head of a buck mounted beside it. Skillman pointed David to one of the chairs and went over to a small sidetable and poured a cup of coffee.

So I imagine you’ve come to ask me for that job.

That’s right.

I can’t give it to you. His back was toward David, bent to stir something into his coffee. He straightened and brought the cup over to David. You like it black, right?
Yeah. David took the cup and set it on the arm of the chair.

Like I said, I can’t give it to you. It appears we’ve hit a boundary. The newest veins we opened are tapped already. We expected quite a bit more from ‘em. He stood up against his desk. Fact is I have to fire the people I brought on.

David stared at the carpet. He sat, beginning to slouch in the chair. He felt paralyzed and small. The cabin grew cavernous.

I’m due to head up north. Oversee a new mine. If there’s anything else you want to tell me you need to do it now. I won’t be back for a while. He leaned back and crossed a heavy forearm over the other. David felt him watching and he felt and heard him shift to his feet. I wouldn’t take that land from you now even if you told me to. You’re not nearly sure enough. You’d end up regretting it.

He nodded. Skillman took the coffee from him and put it on his desk and stood beside him. David got up and rubbed at the side of his face and looked Skillman in the eye for the first time since he’d come to the door. He didn’t mean to but he seemed to square against him and Skillman only stared back. Then he put a hand on David’s shoulder to guide him and they walked out together and Skillman shut the door behind them.

Best of luck, Dave. I don’t know what it’d take to turn the land back to what it was, but whatever that is I hope it happens.

Thank you. David loosed his horse and got on.

XIV

It was January and finally cold. When the snow fell it was white only briefly before the dust covered it, and the snow was always thin and gave little water. David was putting a shovel
back in the shed after cleaning Danvers’ steps and the front porch, and it was already near dark. The snow was old and had melted down and iced and the clouds gone on, the sky clear and stars appearing. He had opened the shed door when he heard a thud, set the shovel inside and shut the door again when he heard another. Through the window at the back he saw Helene go in the hall and there was another thud. After a moment she came to the backdoor and opened it, leaning out.

David, someone’s trying to break in at O H’s.

He already had the shovel back in his hand. Did you lock the door?

Yeah.

Stay inside. He pointed with the handle of the shovel. She began to close the door and stopped.

Don’t hurt him.

He waved her off and went along the side of the house. The thudding was loud, and as he closed the distance between himself and the shack he could hear wood splintering. He trotted low the rest of the way, carrying the shovel almost motionless in his hand, and braced up against the side of the shack. The wood vibrated. His pulse was high in his head, in his eyes. When he cleared the side he saw a thin man dressed in shirtsleeves throwing his shoulder against the door. David spun the shovel around, holding the metal end against his forearm, and he stepped lightly to the man and as the man backed for another charge David swung twohanded at his leg and the shovel snapped across his thigh and the man fell onto his back, eyes wide. He made no sound. David swatted the man across the face with the flat of the shovel and dropped to his knee, the jagged remnant of the handle thrust to the underside of the man’s mouth.

The fuck are you doing?

The man sputtered, making wet nonsense sounds and when his mouth opened blood spilled down his cheek. His eyes were watering and his pupils wide as dimes. His hands groped
at David’s shirt, trying to push him back. David pushed them away and pricked at the man’s chin with the handle.

You tryin’ to break in here?

I thought it was empty.

It’s not.

Okay. He seemed to nod. Okay.

David breathed through his teeth. Helene was calling to him from the front porch. The heaviness fell away from behind his forehead and he tossed the shovel behind him. He looked at the shack, the door busted in, the wood bright where the hinges had been ripped off. They must have gone into town. David stood up and turned toward the house. Helene was on the front steps and Samuel was at the door. He stepped away from the man. Call the sheriff.

Helene went inside. Samuel took her place at the steps and pointed past David at the man, struggling to his feet. His leg collapsed underneath him and he fell again. David leaned and gripped him by the collar of his shirt and began to drag him toward the house, waving for Samuel to go back in. The man grabbed David’s arms and had begun to ramble and David stopped halfway between houses to twist the man’s arm around and drag him by the wrist. He hauled the man to the post of the porch steps and he set him up against it, staring at him. Samuel was at the door.

Go on in, Sam.

What happened?

Nothing. Go inside.

Is he drunk?

Go inside.

Samuel opened the door and went in, looking through the window.
You’re lucky I don’t kill you. You tried my door you’d be dead.

I don’t—where am I?

Hell if I know.

What?

David glanced aside. I know where I am. I got no idea where you are.

The man said nothing. He scratched at his arm, pale and scabbed. His eyes began to scan around and his head followed almost as if it were floating, bobbing slightly. Helene looked out at him from the door and nodded and he nodded back.

Did you break my leg?

No.

I can’t feel it.

Consider that a mercy.

They were silent a while before he heard O H and his family round the bend, and O H lifted his hand.

What’s goin’ on, Dave?

He jerked his thumb toward the shack. Caught him trying to break into your house.

The hell? O H came in from the road. Delia pushed Melanie on to the shack.

I dunno. He’s wired for sound. Dudn’t know where he’s at.

O H stood by David and tilted his head to look at the man. You clock him?

Yeah.

With a truck?

Shovel. He ain’t feelin’ anything. David wanted to spit. He inhaled and looked toward the shack and O H patted his shoulder.

‘f I leave you with him for a minute will he come up dead?
Depends.

Well. Try not to kill him. O H walked across the yard to the shack, looking at the dragmarks in the dust and snow before he went inside. He came out with a thin jacket and crossed the yard. He pushed the man from the post and slipped the jacket over him.

What’re you doing?

The guy’s about blue, Dave. O H zipped the jacket up and left the man’s arms out of the sleeves, tying them back around the post and knotting them. And now he ain’t going anywhere.

David stepped away and looked around himself. The sky had gone completely dark and the snow was gray. Squares of light fell from the windows of the house and in the beams he could see dust settling. Delia and Melanie came out of the shack and Delia stopped at the side of the house.

Can I use your tools, Dave?

Help yourself.

She and Melanie disappeared around the back. The man was blinking hard, shaking his head. The backdoor opened and shut. Helene came from the back with Delia and Melanie carrying a drill and screws and they went across the yard to the shack. After a moment there was a light from inside and they watched Delia set up the door. She was lining it up on the hinges while Helene knelt to fit a screw into an eyelet.

Someone gonna help me with this or not?

O H looked at David. You got him?

Yeah.

O H jogged to the shack. David stared at the man, his head hanging down, body slack against the jacket. The side of his face was swollen and there was a line of white matching the seam of the shovel. A shadow crossed the light of the living room window and David saw
Samuel’s frame in it. David put his hands in his pockets, just noticing they were cold. Helene passed behind David to get to the porch and went inside and he heard her padding around in the hall. The man began to murmur and David ignored him. The wind was blowing through something on the house and whistling and when it faded he heard a horse and it came into view with a deputy atop it. David stepped from the porch and saw that it was Miller.

Howdy, Dave. He dismounted.

Evenin’. David took the reins and tied them to the porch railing. The horse was heaving and there was a pattern of sweat below the saddle blanket. When’d you get deputized?

Not too long ago. Got let go at the mine.

Yeah.

They were quiet for a moment. Miller was looking at David and finally he nodded toward the man on the porch steps. What happened?

Heard thumping next door, found this guy knocking the door down. You want me to get O H?

Who’s that?

Neighbor. He jerked a thumb to the shack. It’s his house.

Miller lifted his head. Yeah, get him.

David went across the yard toward the shack. David knocked softly and glanced down at where the door was cracked. O H opened it, his hand on the frame. He swung the door back and forth, testing the hinge.

The deputy’s here, O H.

Okay. He stepped out. They walked to the porch and David left them at the steps and went inside. Helene was standing against the doorway to the living room with a cup of coffee and she held it out to him.
Is that Jake?

Yeah. He took the cup by the top and drank. Thanks. He paused, drank more.

How will he take him to jail?

I dunno. Never seen a guy get carried off on horseback. They turned to watch. O H and Miller were standing together in front of the man. After a few minutes Miller glanced up at the window and beckoned. David set the coffee down. I imagine I’ll have to ride into town with them. She pursed her lips and he kept on looking at her. She said nothing and finally he dropped his hand to the doorknob.

David.

Yeah.

I was watching you that whole time. Sam too.

He stared at the floor. There was a tightness in his throat that he heard in hers. He felt carved out. Neither of them had moved and he was still at the floor when he deepened the gesture to nod and opened the door. Miller was putting the man in handcuffs and he beckoned with his free hand as David came out.

Like it if you came with me into town. Get your statement.

Alright. He looked over at O H. You all finished?

Uh huh. I’ll see you in the morning.

Miller loosened the reins from the porch railing and got on the horse and David walked beside as they followed the man into town. In the open the grit was blowing and David tucked his face into the front of his coat for shelter. A sand drift had broken and slumped across the road and they passed over it. The man stumbled and righted himself and they went on. There was half a foot of sand in front of the door to the old police station and Miller and the man stood back while David kicked at it until he was able to swing the door open. Miller dismounted and tied the
horse and they went inside. The lobby was dark but there was light through a glass door and they went in.

Wait in there. Miller pointed at an open office and shuffled the man down to a small holding cell at the end of the hall. David went into the office and sat in front of the desk and waited. After a few minutes David heard Miller walking back and he came in, tossing the coat to him. In the good light he seemed haggard. Miller raised his shoulders and sighed and slumped behind the desk. He cocked his head back and his Stetson fell to the floor with a flat smack and he made no move to collect it. Third shift is killin’ me, Dave.

David grimaced. He unzipped his coat and spread it open. I can’t imagine.

Second is okay. Least you’re still half among the living.

Yeah.

Miller raised his head and leaned forward in the chair. He put his elbows on the desk. I heard you tried to sign on at the mine. How’d that go?

Worse than I expected.

Miller smiled. Everybody’s gettin’ pinched these days. He gazed up at the ceiling.

Yeah, it’s about as bad as I thought things’d be. I didn’t see these storms coming, but I had the rest figured pretty well.

What do you mean?

You remember how I said times were changing. He looked at David and reached for a pen on the desk. He began to click it by his ear. I just sorta saw it all fallin’ to pieces. His eyes wandered off to a corner of the office. You remember what I said, yeah?

About what?

About everyone havin’ to stick together.

Yeah. David sat up. He had his hands braced on the wooden arms of the chair.
You know how good the mine’s been for this town.

I know how good some people say it is.

Miller’s eyelids drooped for a moment. He flipped the pen around in his hand. If you sold off that corner of your property you’d be givin’ me and about a dozen other guys a job.

You’re a deputy.

You want to know how much I get paid for stayin’ up all hours and haulin’ in junkies? It ain’t much. And not all of them are as spacey as your friend back there. He tilted his head back toward the cell. Mining’s not the best job there is but it pays good. And it ain’t just me, Dave. A bunch of other guys got laid off. We’d get put back on, you’d get a fat check. And I can’t imagine Skillman wouldn’t offer you some cush job for makin’ him richer.

David stared at him for a moment. He breathed deep and sighed and he opened his hand and lifted it from the chair. I’ve been over this with him a hundred times. I’m not interested in employing the town. I can’t worry about that.

I helped you and all the farmers around here when the time came. I’m just askin’ you to return the favor.

What kind of favor was that? Selling us diesel? What’d you lose in that?

What are you losin’? However many acres of desert?

I’m not selling.

It’s the right thing, Dave. You got the means to put food on the table for a bunch of people in this town.

I’m the father of one kid, Jake. Just one. There was Helene in him and a rising anger at Miller and only a little doubt at his hypocrisy. Miller clenched his jaw. I got some money yet in the bank. You think I ought to pass that around?

You’ve got the opportunity to help your fellow man and you won’t do it.
That’s right. I’ve seen both sides of that. On one you’ve got me and on the other you’ve
got my best friend diggin’ himself out of a tunnel with his bare hands and a bullet in his gut
because he felt like he was doin’ the right thing. David drove his finger down on the back of the
chair. I ain’t puttin’ my family out for someone else.

Miller was motionless save for his breath and his thumb slipping over the pen plunger.
David dropped his hands from the chair and stepped back. You still want my statement?
Miller waved him away. I don’t need it. His voice was thick. You took in that nigger
without much complaining.

David spun back around. His eyes were narrow. You are a lucky son of a bitch, Miller.
One lucky son of a bitch. He went to the door. You aren’t worth the shit on his bootheel.

Go to hell, Parrish.

David grinned smugly and went out. He zipped his coat back up in the cold and buttoned
the collar over his face. It was still long dark and the wind was blowing but the night had the feel
of restlessness that came in the later hours and he felt righteous walking back until he came to the
house and opened the door.

XV

There was another storm a week later that covered the fences and drove the cattle off the
property. When David and Samuel rode up on them the entire herd was rangy and they wheezed
collectively. A few more had fallen and suffocated. They chased the herd back and O H joined
them to dig the fences out and David called around to see if he could sell some off. By the end of
the week he’d made an arrangement with a butcher partway across the county. Samuel and he
rode out with O H afoot and they cut twenty head from the herd early the next morning. They left
O H at the gate and drove the cattle onto the road. The day passed for clear as they came through the town, the sky white and the wind low and dry. By the afternoon they had opened their coats. They broke for lunch in the road and Samuel raked out the ditch to see if the animals could graze. There were static-burned weeds under the dust and nothing else.

Don’t worry about it.

Samuel looked back at David.

They’re going off to get slaughtered. They’re not getting any fatter.

As they went southwest the dust got deeper and everything around them came to level almost perfectly. There were whole lengths of fence he knew were buried. It was dull red they rode through and dull red that rose behind them and trailed off in the breeze. They passed a barn half underground, the roof caved and reaching to the dust. Ahead in the distance was a copse of gray trees and after half an hour they passed them and saw a few small houses on the other side. The dust had blown up to the sloped roofs and had come through the window of the second house. Samuel rode up to the house to see into it. He stopped his horse for a moment and caught up.

They reached the butcher by early evening. He came out of the front and swung his arm to the side for them to go around. They followed him to a pen and herded the animals through the open gate. When the gate was shut David leaned down and took the butcher’s hand.

Much obliged.

It’s business. I needed it same as you.

Alright. He looked toward the house. The pens ran clean to it and he guessed the whole back was a meat locker. There was a trough on either side of the pen. You mind if we rest our animals?

Not a bit. Come on in and sit for a while if you like.
They let the horses water and the three of them went into the butcher’s house. There was a glass counter in the front and two doors and he took them through one into his living room and the three of them sat in front of an old television. The room was dim and there was a low hum from the freezer at the back of the house. The butcher went into the kitchen and called out.

I’ve got some beer.

David looked at Samuel. Sure. They heard the refrigerator open and the two of them stared at their reflections in the screen.

You can turn that thing on if you want. Nothin’ but the snow races and bad news, anymore.

Neither of them made moves to turn it on. The butcher came back in with two bottles of beer necked in his fingers. He twisted the caps off with his free hand and passed the bottle on. David watched him idly bend the caps in his palm and set them on top of the television. They drank and Samuel sat with his hands together, picking under his nails. David finished his beer and set the empty bottle on the floor between his feet. He looked at Samuel and shifted in his seat to see if it was getting dark there was no window. He stood and stretched his back.

I appreciate the drink. We oughta get goin’.

The butcher nodded. Let me get you your money.

They filed behind him. He led them to the front and went behind the counter to pull out a ledger. He scrawled something down and tore out a check and handed it across to David.

David glanced at the check and folded it into his back pocket. Thanks.

Let me know if you want to thin your herd some more.

I will. They went to the door. He raised his hand before opening it and they walked out.

The sun was halved on the horizon and it lay in a muted and quavering pool. They started back with the sunset behind them and their dim shadows long ahead. The road and field were
distinctionless, darkening like a heavy bruise. They passed the houses and David pointed for them to turn toward the trees and they dismounted. David took the packs from the horses and Samuel followed him through the treeline. It was near dark already and by the time the wood was gathered for a fire David was searching for the matches by feel. He started the fire and it grew and burned fast and the trees caught the light and their shadows fenced and backed. They sat next to each other on their sleeping bags, eating sandwiches and passing a canteen between them. The wind began to pick up and the fire leaned with it and they looked at each other. They finished their sandwiches and the wind slowed and stopped and then snapped the fire out and they were in thick dark with the dust pelting them and scattering off the trees in volleys.

Dad?

Here. David reached out for Samuel’s voice and pulled him to his bag. He unzipped it and threw it over his back and wrapped it around them. His head was tilted away and pressed against the back of Samuel’s. You okay?

Samuel nodded. David shifted his legs and felt the sand come in under the sleeping bag and fill the rim of his pants where his shirt was lifted. The branches rattled overhead. He realized his eyes were open and shut them. Samuel’s back rose and fell and he could feel his heartbeat become steady.

Late in the night the wind slowed and he woke Samuel and wrapped him in the sleeping bag. He dug through the waste for the other bag and pulled it free from the sand. The night was fully dark and the fire had been buried. He kicked until he found embers floating dimly in the black. He dug through the sand and found fistfuls of grass and he dropped them onto the coals and blew and watched the coals brighten and the lines of grass catch and smolder. He blew again and coughed on the air and made a small flame. He pulled more grass and the fire grew and he could see himself and the nearest trees and Samuel behind him watching. He went nearly beyond
the light of the fire and found the horses coming toward him, shivering. David led them ahead patting their necks and talking to them. When they’d calmed he sat beside Samuel on the sleeping bag. They watched the fire. David shifted and a spark leapt between their shoulders. Samuel smirked and they sat for a while in silence before David turned to him.

How’s school going?

Samuel laughed once. It’s not really school. I just go to the library and mom makes sure I bring home a new book. He had the canteen between his hands and he drank.

You don’t do those little classes she has?

No. She makes me stay for the math, but I’m too far ahead for the rest. She said she’s working on new stuff for me. He reached for a twig in the sand and snapped it. I’m worried about her.

Why’s that?

I don’t know. I worry about you too.

David said nothing for a while.

I never see you or Mom eat.

We eat. I eat all the time.

Mom doesn’t.

David sighed and put his hands on his knees. You don’t have to worry about us. You worry about you.

What’s there to worry about with me?

He opened his mouth. He reached his arm out and pulled Samuel to his chest and leaned over to kiss his hair. There’s plenty. I worry about you every waking moment. He held Samuel until he felt him stretch and he let him go. They both slid deep into their sleeping bags and waited for morning.
They reached town before noon. The wind was dead and a few people were out sweeping or cleaning windows. At the barn he let Samuel go on and got fresh water and hay for the horses. When he rounded the bend he saw the family gathered at a table set out in the sand and his mother and Danvers and O H and his family were milling about. They all waved and he walked up to them, smiling, and he hugged his mother and Helene came around the table and stood beside him.

What is all this?

Your mother’s idea. She got tired of not seeing you. Helene smiled. How did we make out?

Not too bad. Where’s Sam?

He’s getting cleaned up.

David nodded. Alright. He swept his eyes across the table and he held back a deep smile. He thought of the emptying cellar and the dust over the soil. He thought of all the lack and then he kissed Helene and went inside and as he was taking off his boots and coat Samuel came down the stairs. He seemed so tall.

XVI

Months passed. The storms had eased but the wind kept up and flung what dust was already on the ground. David stayed close to the house and worked budgets to see what they could afford for the coming season. He led Helene’s schoolchildren in sweeping the yard clean with cornhusk brooms and their cleaning revealed a brown and wretched yard.

An early morning a month before planting. He’d gotten a call from Becky the night before saying one of Rich’s friends came by talking of a few half-starved draft horses wandering
where Rich had gotten one before. She said she thought he’d want to know. David thanked her and talked to Helene and O H. That morning he went across the yard to the shack with a bag of food and water and change of clothes. He knocked on the door and waited. Delia opened it and stood aside for him to come in.

He’s getting dressed.

Okay. David stood just inside the doorframe and set the bag down. Delia shut the door and went to put a pot in the basin. Melanie was at the table eating breakfast and he smiled at her.

How’s school goin’?

She shrugged and put down her fork. Fine.

Delia snapped a rag at her. Don’t talk with your mouth full, girl.

David grinned and looked away from them at the rough wood walls. He was rarely inside and only once since the last duster and they’d put up pictures and there was a painting along the back wall where they’d put the couch. Melanie saw he was looking.

I painted that.

No kidding? He raised his eyebrows. He stepped closer to it, a creek in watercolor, bluegreen grass, a woman in front of a weeping willow. He looked back to Melanie. It’s really good.

I painted it before we moved here.

He said nothing. He tried not to see the walls and the floor and to think of what she could have been or what Samuel could have been. One of the two doors opened to the small corner rooms and O H stood there threading a belt through his jeans.

We ready?

Yep.
Alright then. Let’s go be cowboys. He went to Melanie and took her cheeks in his hands and kissed her head and he kissed Delia and took a small duffel bag from her. They went to the door. See ya’ll after a while.

The sun wasn’t long up and the sky was overcast. They walked together to Danvers’ house and David pulled the horses out of the stalls and led them out after saddling them. He tied their packs up and pointed to Samuel’s silver bay.

Well, bud. Get up there.

O H smirked. I’m gonna surprise you. Be a natural. You’ll want to give me your hat. He put his foot in the stirrup and grabbed the saddlehorn and pulled himself up onto the horse and groaned. He shifted, standing up, and sat back. Whoo, that coulda been bad.

David mounted up and turned the bay. Plenty more opportunities. He started the horse forward and O H followed him and they rode out. It was cool and there was a breeze from the north that blew at their backs as they went by the granary at the edge of town. He thought it might snow if it got colder, if there was any water in the clouds. They passed the wide open scar of the mine.

So how far we goin’?

Depends. If we find a horse right off looks like it hasn’t been fed in a while we might go another couple hundred yards.

But seein’ as how we won’t?

Be about a full day’s ride one way, bit more. Probably across the state line. Rich said he found his just inside Colorado.

Never been to Colorado.

It’s nothing special. Everything looks the same until it’s different.

O H grinned. I’ll remember that little gem.
They rode on. After a while they reached the interstate and they stopped their horses. There were several inches of dust covering it and the median was nearly invisible with it, the tops of burned grass spiking through. Down the length of the highway in places were lines of dead trees, some toppled onto the road, the dust built up against them. David dismounted and brushed away the dust under his boot until he could see the pavement, cracked and worn paintless, crumbling.

The breeze died in the afternoon and the air warmed. David hadn’t been far south of Dixon in years and he thought whenever they crested the soft rises that passed for hills they might see before them a desert of high red dunes or a place where the land and sky were one blur of crumbled brick. They rode quietly. By now he knew that O H was sore but there were no complaints. It was several hours past the highway that they smelled smoke and David wished he had brought a gun. He thought on it for a while, that he even wished for one, that he entertained the thought. There was no smoke to see on the horizon. The plain was broken by gray or black trees in the distance and fenceposts and dead powerlines. The fences themselves were cut or bowed to the ground or gone.

If I didn’t see this every day I’d think we landed in hell.

Yeah.

You were never in the desert, right? Overseas?

Just the jungle. I never went overseas.

O H looked around them. It ain’t quite like this. But it’s got some of the ingredients. I half expect to see some tanks rollin’ by. If not them then Indians.

Well you won’t see tanks anymore.

Yeah.
David halted his horse. Let’s break for a bit. He held the reins up for a moment, circling. They were in the middle of an empty field, keeping track of the road they followed by the powerlines. He dismounted and took down his bag and watched as O H hefted his leg over the horse and dropped down. They squatted in the dust and picked out their lunches and ate. O H dropped onto his back and sighed.

My ass is gonna be sore, boy.

Should have brought a pillow along for you.

Uh huh. He sat back up and picked a leg under himself to stretch it. How did Rich know to come down here?

There was a guy raised horses he heard about. Went under and he just turned ‘em loose. Killed himself.

He stood. Let’s change the subject. Somethin’ happy.

Okay. Shoot.

We got full bellies and families waitin’ on us.

And? David stood.

We got jobs. However rough they may be right now.

And?

That ain’t enough for you?

I know it oughta be. But if I had my way I’d at least be raising my son someplace that didn’t look like a preacher’s dream.

O H patted at his pants. Shit outta luck for that one. You ready?

Yeah. They mounted their horses and started along the road again. Toward nightfall they reached a crossroads and in the southeast corner sat a farmhouse. A worn picket fence ran across the yard with the dust halfway up the posts and behind the house was a small barn with a
horse nosing over a stall door. As they crossed the street the front door opened and a man came out onto the porch. David nodded to the man and O H raised his hand. The man’s chin dipped and he put his hands on the porch railing. They passed by and passed the barn and O H leaned over.

He didn’t live there, does he.

No.

He was starin’ pretty hard.

He’s just a squatter. Worried we’d come to throw him out or something.

O H sat straight. If you say so.

The sun was deep behind the clouds and there was no setting, only the slow draining of color from the land and it seemed as though the ground was bleeding out, turning gray and cold. The road ahead and behind them was empty and with the going of the light the sounds they made came clearer. The passage of the wind.

I wish we hadn’t passed him so close to dark.

Me neither. David squinted into the dusk. Ahead was a line of black on the horizon and after a while the line became a stand of trees. We’ll lay up in there for the night.

We gonna make a fire?

Not if we can help it.

I thought you said he was just a squatter? O H’s teeth showed in the dark.

Yeah, well.

They made it to the trees and dismounted. They led the horses in and tied them and David watered them from a small pot while O H cleared the ground so they could lie down. He took the blankets from the horses and spread them out and when they were done they sat on their blankets in the dark listening to Samuel’s horse chew at the bark of a tree.
I wish he’d quit gnawin’.

He ain’t hurtin’ anything.

I can’t hear anything else.

There’s nothing to hear.

O H sighed.

We’re not in the desert.

I know.

They were quiet for a while. They’d both gotten into their sleeping bags and thrown their blankets over them.

What’s the worst thing you ever did?

You mean in war?

I hope it was in war, yeah.

David didn’t answer for a minute. He searched about for something, replayed everything near that day. If you asked other people I guess you’d say it was toward the end of my tour. I was about three or four months from out. Short timer. A couple days before they took back Talamanca we were holding them off in a dry riverbed. Had casualties, were low on food. Guy named Bradford, a real shit, got hit with a phosphorous round, was burned all to hell. David put his hands behind his head. He felt the lie liven and grow in his mind. He was staring blindly at the sky. So while we’re laid up on one side of this riverbed we get one of theirs, shoot him in the leg, I put a tourniquet on him. We’re taking potshots at each other for a day, then Bradford up and dies. I never liked that son of a bitch, ever, but I’d been in country with the guy from day one. So we’ve got the prisoner sat up against a tree, away from the line. I sneak back there and stare him in the eye while I cut loose his tourniquet. Watch him bleed to death. Just sat there looking at him.
Damn. O H shuffled around in the dark. David could hear he was facing him. Why’d you say ‘if you asked other people’?

Well. He thought a moment. It’s the circumstances that make what I did bad to others. That he was a prisoner, I watched him, you know. But I’m not so sure that matters. I don’t know that every life I took wasn’t just as bad. I mean, the root of it is that I didn’t have to kill him, yeah?

I guess.

Well, who did I really have to kill? Anyone? Everyone? I don’t say it’s the worst thing I ever did because I don’t know if there’s a difference. I was never any good at that, knowing for sure. Red was.

That’s Sam’s godfather.

Yeah. He always knew. Or he was sure he did.

This is the guy that you had to go back for, right?

Uh huh. Couple years after the war. Ran out on Helene to bring him back. She just about left me over that. David paused. That’s the one thing, though. The one thing in my life I did that I did on my own that I know was the right thing. All the other stuff I dunno. But getting Red was batshit stupid so I know I did it just because it was right.

Heh. I like that.

They were quiet for a while. David shifted. So what’d you do? What’s your worst thing?

Me? O H laughed. Man, I never even fired my rifle in combat.

You son of a bitch.

He kept laughing.

You lucky fucker. David rolled over and threw a handful of sand in O H’s direction. They were silent for a while, David thinking about Red and about Samuel. About that day, the
rough twenty-four hours when he pulled the tourniquet and when he killed men barehanded. He wanted shut of those thoughts. I saw that painting Mel did.

Pretty good, right?

Real good.

Yeah, she’s a regular artist. By his voice David could tell he was grinning. We were hoping back when, you know, we could fast-track her, get her in a art school. Delia wanted to see her go someplace private up in Decatur. She was good enough. Now, I don’t even know what good school’s doing her. Maybe she’d be better off watchin’ us.

It’ll do her good.

I dunno, man. What good?

World can’t stay this way forever. Give it time.

How much time? Fifteen years already and it’s only gotten worse. I don’t think that’s gonna change.

David said nothing. He wanted to argue, to convince O H he was right, so at least one of them would believe it.

They were up at first light. David made a fire to warm their breakfast and O H watered the horses and untied them. The clouds had broken up overnight and in the east the light came pale and uncolored still. He watched while O H circled about their camp looking for tracks and when he sat by the fire with his hands held out he shook his head. They ate bacon and beans and kicked the dust into the fire to snuff it. They packed and saddled their horses and rode out of the trees. The sun rose onto their shoulders and their shadows slanted long across the dust and joined and parted and joined with the shadows of the power poles and the tops of trees. It wasn’t long before they came to a two-lane and a sign nearby for a Colorado state route. They rode east along the highway until they found another sign that listed the towns and David stopped.
We’re in the right place. I guess just cruise around until we see somethin’.

Sounds good.

The nearest town was almost five miles ahead. As they rode O H pointed out a dense line of trees. The road and treeline converged a mile on and they stopped the horses before the suspension bridge that crossed the water. It flowed red, thick and smooth, riffling through a section of wire fence stretching over the creek. There were weeds and grass growing near the edge where the dust had fallen away, weeds growing out of the dust, and the green of them was strange, as if his eyes weren’t used to it, or they were some new tone. David started the bay onward and they crossed over the bridge and rode down into the field along the creek. In the distance he could make out the hazy frame of a water tower. Bare fenceposts were set across the field that stood below the boots of David and O H, the dust that thick in the lowland. Further on they came to a furrow trod into the dust and they turned to ride along it.

What do we do once we find one?

David shrugged. See how feral it is. I dunno how much breaking a horse needs after a year or however long it’s been loose. We’ll just rope it along and hope it comes with us.

They went on. They were coming to the edge of town when the tracks curved and they followed them, back toward the road. The tracks faded and split on the thinner dust as they rode into the town and David could see the horses had been feeding on the early buds of bushes and the remains of hanging plants and flowerbeds. The houses around them were decrepit. The dust slumped over porches and up to doorways and was trackless except in a few homes. The pavement widened as they came downtown and there was a long stretch of brick and stone buildings and storefronts, the dust mounded up on the sidewalks in soft waves. At the main intersection a broad-boned sorrel horse stepped by them calmly, its shoulders and ribs working under its red hide. Another horse followed. David smiled and let out a quick laugh.
What’re the odds?

O H shrugged. I dunno. Let’s get on ‘em.

That first one. Bigger. They followed the horses, going slow. We’ll wait ‘til we’re on out of town again. I don’t want folks to think we’re horsethieves.

I don’t see anyone to accuse us.

David frowned. Yeah. He looked around them. They were closing on the horses and the stores had fallen behind them and the houses were smaller and closer together than at the edge of town. He saw a window shot through, the glass white. O H pointed to their left and down a sidestreet was a row of empty lots, the houses burned, blackened posts sticking up out of the dust. The horses had stopped in the street and were watching them. His bay came forward swishing its tail and he let it lean its head to the sorrel. He patted the blaze on the draft and it didn’t shy. He gestured for O H to stay and slipped the rope from his saddle and tied a lead as the bay and draft circled and he slipped the lead over its head. The draft shivered as he cinched the rope up and he leaned over and rubbed along its neck and withers and he payed some rope as the slack went out and the draft tossed its head. It settled and he drew in and the draft didn’t fight and he looked at O H and grinned. He gathered the rope and reins in one hand and put the bay down the street a few yards and the draft was slow to follow but came along. It sidled to them and he talked to it and petted it while he looped the lead around the saddlehorn. He circled his finger in the air for O H to turn and he rode the horses to the intersection and they started back the way they came. The other draft was staring at them, unmoving. They rode out of town with O H in the lead and he pointed out new wheeltracks in the dust. O H leaned forward in the saddle.

I almost wanna follow them back.

David nodded. They rode out of town and broke for lunch at the creek and they let the horses drink. They ate sandwiches wrapped in waxpaper and David balled his and threw it
toward the creek. It fell short of the water and rolled, leaving odd wobbling marks in the dust like
the tracks of a limping bird. The draft horse eyed the ball. O H sat up.

What’d I tell you about shit getting bad?

David sat up and went to the creek for his bay. I don’t even know you could say it’s bad here. Who’s supposed to care whether the town’s standing or not?

The folks who used to live there?

He stopped beside O H with the reins in his hand. They’re gone. If they weren’t I guess they’d have a say. It’s not theirs anymore.

O H stood and saddled his horse. They mounted up and David tied the draft to his saddle and they left the creek for the road and headed west. It was a while riding before O H looked aside at him.

How’d you get so pessimistic and stay so nice?

I’m a complicated man.

They went on until they reached the road north and took it. The cart tracks went westward. The draft was placid most of the way but they were slow for its meanderings and it was nearly evening when they passed the camp from last night. It got cold and colder as the sun sank below the red horizon. David set his hands on the saddlehorn.

You want to go wide of the house up ahead?

Seems like a good idea.

They angled their path off the road and went into the field alongside it, the horses sinking into the dust built up in the ditches and climbing out. There was a fence ahead and they rode down it for several yards before finding a low wire to step the horses over. In the distance and dark they could see the house by the white fence and barn. Smoke was lifting almost invisibly from the chimney and the sky above was still clear and populated with stars and the horn of the
rising moon. David and the draft were a length ahead of O H and O H evened with them and thumbed toward the house.

What say would the old owners have if they came back?

David shook his head. Kick the guy out, if they want.

What about him?

He turned to look at O H in the dark. What are you getting’ at?

I’m just wonderin’. I like to know what people think.

I dunno. He was quiet for a moment. I’m selfish. I stopped caring.

Uh huh. You’ve always been a pretty great guy, from what I hear.

Yeah, well. If I can’t answer you a simple question like that, I don’t know that I am.

All the right you do oughta count for somethin’.

I guess we’ll see.

Hours later they rode past the quiet mining grounds with the few lights opening the pits to them. The town was asleep. When they reached the square O H was slumped in the saddle and his hands were limp around the reins. The draft horse had been falling back every few hundred yards and he pulled it close in by the lead as they came out of town and the draft and Samuel’s horse followed him to the barn and he dismounted. He woke O H by shaking his saddle and he muttered something and lifted his head.

Go on home, bud.

He looked all around. We back?

Yeah. Thanks for your help.

Uh. He leaned over the horse to glance at the ground. I don’t recall doin’ anything.

Well you kept me company. That’s something.
I guess. He slipped his leg over the horse slow and awkward and stepped down. Oh, Jesus. I am sore.

David smiled. Walk it off. I’ll see you tomorrow. He patted O H on the back and pushed him to the road. O H cast a hand back in goodbye and David took the saddles from the horses and hung them up. He let them into their stalls and fed and watered them and he pulled the draft into the barn and led it into a vacant stall, bringing in hay and a bucket of water and taking out the tack. He was wide awake and wanted to raise the house and talk with Helene and Samuel and he thought back to when he was a toddler and slept between them some nights. When they would lay awake talking hushed. When Samuel would crawl into bed and twist his slight fingers through David’s hair. He started for the road.

They had a small party in the library for Samuel’s eleventh birthday and let him pick out several old books. The volunteer librarian was there when he blew out his candles and he gave Samuel a book himself. Two boys from Helene’s school group came, brothers named Moore, and Paige and Melanie and Delia. When the party was through David offered to see the brothers home but they waved him off and ran on down the street. Paige left at the flower shop and the rest of them walked home together, David splitting off at the barn. He let the horses and mules out and looked them over. He put feed in the stalls and fresh water and found O H in the barn checking the equipment. There was a flash of a smile across his face.

The old man told me to expect rain soon.

David inhaled. He caught the breath and held it swollen in his chest. He set about wordlessly and they greased axles and sharpened blades. They taped cracking wood and put wedges into loosened mortises. When they finished their work for the day they walked to the road together and neither of them spoke of the dark blue sky overhead or the chill in the air. David went up to Danvers’ door and turned back to O H.
Come in for a minute?

Sure.

David rapped on the door and stood by. He heard Danvers shout from inside and as he came walking to the mudroom David opened the door.

Just start coming in already. You ain’t about to catch me at somethin’ shameful. He pointed to O H as they came in. I imagine your man told you the news.

Yeah. We just finished working on some of the equipment.

Don’t get too far ahead of yourselves. A little rain didn’t mean much.

I know.

I don’t want you to be disappointed when it peters out. He looked over his shoulder. Come on and sit down. You caught me napping. Foot’s half asleep. David and O H followed him into the living room. Danvers sat in a recliner and they sat across from him, watching him rock.

You need to think too about the farmers who ain’t as smart as you. Or don’t have me at their ears. You get a little rain you’re gonna see every fool came out here from the east plowin’ to hell and back. No offense, O H.

None taken.

If the rain stops after that everybody’s at square one. That said you both might buy your women some flowers.

O H grinned at David. Will things turn around if it keeps rainin’?

I don’t see why not. It ain’t like it was poison fallin’ from the sky. It was just dirt.

Yeah.

Once you get some rain you’ll see weeds comin’ straight through the red stuff. Next day, guaranteed. Come to think of it you’ll probably have a hard time keepin’ up.
Mm. Well. David put his hands on his knees to rise. Wanna have supper with us?

Nah.

You need anything?

Nope.

I’ll see ya later then. He and O H stood and they went to the door. David called back.

Thanks for the good news.

Glad to give it.

He and O H left and began to walk home. They were quiet and smiling and they parted in the yard, waving. David went inside to the kitchen sink for water and saw Helene through the window, standing where the garden would be. He tapped on the glass until she turned around and he met her at the door. Suppose to rain.

Finally. How much?

Dunno. Danvers wants us to wait and see.

That seems smart.

Yeah. They both looked at the dirt at their feet. Kid upstairs?

Yes. Sam started in on his stack of books already.

What’s he wantin’ for supper?

Grilled cheese and tomato soup.

David put his hands on his hips. That’s a little plain.

It’s what he asked for.

David said nothing. He knelt and picked up a handful of dust and sifted it through his fingers. Then he dug to the topsoil and broke a hardened piece of earth off and cracked it in his hands and crumbled it between them. The red dirt and brown and the black grease on his hands.
It rained three times, each a full day. The rain washed the dust into a slurry of mud that ran into the creeks and melted from the piles in the fields. The trees budded and the grass livened, weeds flourished with the smaller plants and sprang up all along the fields and roadsides. Helene started work on the garden, enlarging it to take advantage and when the land had dried David and O H hoed out the weeds and planted over a span of weeks and the three of them waited for the first green of their work. Pacing the road going into town David saw the ivy winding and milkweed and the red buds on the treebranches. The sand mounded against houses in town had solidified and cracked. He walked the trails he’d used for the tractors and took his horse down other roads to the fields of other farmers and talk with them a while. He came home from riding in the early evening and the sunlight was just golden on the land around him. Samuel was walking far ahead and David called for him but he didn’t turn. David rode the horse into the barn and dismounted. He brushed the horse down and watered it and walked home. Helene was in the living room reading. He stopped in the doorway and she looked up.

Hey, father.

Hey. Sam come through here?

I haven’t seen him. What’s wrong?

Nothing. I just saw him ahead of me comin’ home. He’s probably in the backyard, readin’ too. David came into the room and sat on a footstool and took off his boots. He heaved a sigh, content. Rain’s takin’ real well.

Helene closed the book and smiled. Oh yeah?

Mhm.

 Hopefully it sticks around.
Yeah. I’ll let you get back to it. I’m gonna wash my hands. He rose and carried his boots to the front door. He went to the kitchen and looked out the window for Samuel. He washed his hands and rubbed them over his face and he saw the silhouette of a tree move, Samuel’s shoulder. The sun was orange in the southwest and hovering over the granary in town. He dried with a rag from the stove. Hey, you want me to make dinner tonight?

There was a shuffling from the living room. If you want.

He started rifling through the cupboards and by the clean sunset light they did not seem bare. He set a pot of water to boil and found a box of spaghetti. He got a jar of tomatoes from the pantry and he sorted through the spices they had and tried to make sauce. There was a knock at the door and David went into the hall. He glanced at Helene in passing. You may regret lettin’ me cook after all.

I’m not surprised by that.

He grinned and opened the door. O H stood there with a hand in his pocket.

Hey, bud.

Hey.

Is Mel in there by chance?

David shook his head. Huh uh.

O H pinched up the side of his mouth. She ought to be home and she ain’t. She knows to be back before dinner.

He turned toward the living room. You seen Melanie lately, mother?

This morning.

David turned back around. Sam’s readin’ behind the house. We could ask him.

Nah, that’s alright. She’s probably just late comin’ in.

More than likely. I’ll send her down the line if she drops by.
Appreciate it. O H put up his hand. Later.

He shut the door. The phone started ringing. Well dang. He was on the phone for a matter of moments before he hung up and ran to the door. Helene looked up at him as he was halfway outside.

What’s the matter?

Get Sam inside. He was out and bounding off the porch and was running to O H’s shack. He knocked once and opened the door and stuck his head in. O H was sitting at the little table eating, Delia on the other side with her back to the door. Hey Ornery, come on.

O H wiped his lips and stood up, bumping the table across the dirt floor. What for?

Come on. He nodded back slightly. Delia looked at him and he let his eyes flick to hers and back.

What’s goin’ on with you, boys club?

David said nothing. O H rounded the table and David backed from the door and once it was shut he began to run. He heard O H behind him and they went to the truck and David struggled to start it. The gas was low and the front end shook.

What’s goin’ on, man?

Christ. David tried the key again. Delia had come out of the shack and she was coming toward them when the engine caught and they backed out into the road. O H was staring at him but he just shifted the truck into gear and sped down the road. It fishtailed briefly and David brought it back and dust floated in the rearview. The new flora streaked by and the dark red mounds of dirt and O H was yelling at him until finally David looked at him on the straightaway. Somebody shot Mel. Becky called, Paige came home all covered in blood.

O H rocked back. His head tilted like he was agreeing with something. They came into town and went north at the square. Past Spangler’s property they took a side road. O H hadn’t
moved. His hands were on his knees and he was staring at the visor in front of him. The woods came tight to the road and the vegetation was lush along the roadside and the treeline.

She said they were by the creek.

The guardrails and culvert came into view. David stopped the truck in front of the rails and they got out. O H started running along the berm and David scanned along the trees for sign of clothes or blood. O H jumped the ditch and screamed and David ran toward him as he knelt at the base of a tree with Melanie in his arms, her head lolled back and eyes closed. She wore a purple blouse that was soaked through with blood up to her shoulders. He was shaking her and her arm slipped from her stomach and fell palm upwards. David knelt beside them and he felt at her neck and the skin was cool and there was no pulse, no flutter of a pulse. He looked up at O H. O H lifted her to his chest and he stood with her legs and arms long and waving. Her feet reached past his knees and a thin-soled shoe caught against his leg and the foot twisted as he stepped forward. When David tried to stand to follow his strength was sapped and he stuck a hand out to catch himself. He stood up and stumbled.

O H.

He didn’t turn. He was walking to the truck with her.

We have to keep her here. The sheriff might find something. O H was still walking, clutching her body to him. David stared as they became smaller and the land slowly darker and he dropped back to his knees. He frayed. His thoughts evaporated. He found himself standing and walking to the truck, O H’s shade down the road. The sun seemed further down than it ought. David started the truck and whipped it around in the road and drove until he was beside O H. The sight of her limp in his arms. David could not see himself stop the truck and help pull her into the cab but moments later she was seated in the middle leaning against O H and he was driving into town. The sun was blocked by the stores at the square as they turned toward the
house. A block on Delia came riding David’s horse bareback, the eyes of both wild. David slowed the truck and she jerked the horse around and followed them. Helene was standing at the edge of the yard and she raised her hands to her mouth as the truck passed and stopped in the drive. David put it in park and shut it off. O H opened the door and slid her out and carried her across the yard toward his shack. Delia jumped off the bay and stopped him and Helene caught up and they fell to the ground together where the fence used to lie. Delia began to wail. Samuel was standing on the porch and he was enshadowed by the house and his eyes were dark floating in the pale gray mask of his face. David got out of the truck and he leaned against the door for a moment after shutting it and he went to the porch and tried to hold Samuel but he pushed David away and ran inside. David stood there while the last of the light was leeched into the west. It was cold very suddenly and Helene rose from where the three were huddled around the body and she came up to David.

Becky called back.

He lifted his head slightly.

Should I get the sheriff to come out here? I need to get them a blanket. They won’t move. Would you start a fire for them?

When he spoke to her she was already gone and he hadn’t seen it. Then she was back and walking toward the shadows on the lawn. He turned to go up the porch steps and when he opened the door he saw the dried blood on his fingers and the web of his thumb, flaking. He thought of a child that died in his arms years ago, bleeding venous blood dark as oil, dripping into the dirt and onto his knees. He walked up the stairs to Samuel’s room and tried the door. It held fast. He pushed and it budged and he threw his shoulder against the door and the chair went along the carpet and he slipped in. He set the chair aside. Samuel was sitting on his bed facing away and his head was down. David went around the end of the bed and sat beside him and put
his arm around his shoulder. Samuel put his head against David’s chest and David pulled him closer and stroked his hair. He felt the boy shudder in his arms and felt his ribs and spine and his shoulder blades and he wanted nothing more than to feed him. A deep shame spread through David and seemed to dim the room as if it had veiled his head. He rubbed Samuel’s arm and took hold of his shoulders and held him tight. Helene was in the doorway waiting and he knew the sheriff had arrived. He eased and dropped his arms and Samuel sat up. David stood and wiped his eyes and went to her. She held him briefly and their cheeks met and were damp.

The sheriff’s here.

Yeah.

There are deputies out looking.

Okay. He’d been staring at the floor. She took his hands and he glanced up at her and her eyes were dark and tight. She let go and he went downstairs and out into the yard. The sheriff and a deputy were standing with O H and there was a light on in the shack. The door was open and from the light thrown he could see Delia’s shadow move about. There was a blanket around O H’s feet. David went over and stood beside O H.

Let’s go inside.

The sheriff motioned for David and O H to go on and he followed them up the porch steps. David told them to sit at the kitchen table and began to make a pot of coffee.

The sheriff took off his hat and set it upside down on the table. He leaned forward and ran a hand over his head. O H, is there anybody you can think of that’d have reason to do this? Anybody thinks of you as an enemy?

O H shook his head. Less you count someone who don’t like black folk. He looked aside, out the window. His face was blank but for a moment when it contorted and David thought he might vomit, then it passed.
If someone’s threatened you at all, that counts. Did someone?

No. We got stares coming into town but it wadn’t anything but people wonderin’ where the hell we come from. And that was a while ago.

Okay. Would she of kept anything from you, if she’d seen somethin’, or if someone’d come at her?

You’d know if someone came at her. You’d of had to arrest her.

The sheriff gave a thin smile and wrote something down. David took two mugs from the cupboard and set them on the counter.

How many people you got out lookin’?

The sheriff flipped a page in his notes. Everybody.

O H brought his thumb and finger together across his lips. He turned his head aside again. Could you raise up a posse or somethin’?

I will at first light.

David watched O H breathe in. The coffee was done. He poured two mugs full and set them on the table. They steamed and neither of the men touched them. They were silent. David remembered the deputy outside and he poured a third cup and brought it out. The phone rang when he came back in and he spoke to his mother briefly. In the kitchen he saw the pot from the spaghetti he was going to cook. The inside was white from the boiled-away water and the noodles were dry and hard.

O H stood. I’m gonna go be with my wife. We done?

I suppose so. The sheriff stood and his head tilted slightly. I’m real sorry, Mr. Reckard. I’m gonna do everything I can.


The sheriff rubbed his eyes. He took up his hat. I’m goin’ back to the scene.
David followed him to the door. Helene was at the top of the stairs. He went out onto the porch with the sheriff and as they watched the coroner’s car came down the road. It parked in front of the shack and the coroner got out and spoke to the deputy. The sheriff put his hands on the porch railing.

You know I’ve never seen anything like it. Five holes in that girl.

I don’t need to hear this.

The sheriff shook his head. Never in thirty-three years. He breathed deep. But I imagine you’ve seen worse.

It’s different.

How’s that?

I’ve never seen hell and home at the same time.

The sheriff glanced at him. O H came out of the shack as the coroner walked through the yard and they met. After a few moments a deputy came wheeling the gurney into the shack and they came out with the body. Delia walked with O H beside the body and they stood by while they loaded it into the back of the car. David had come forward and he wanted to go out with them but he stayed fixed to the porch steps, watching the lights come on in the car and O H and Delia get in the front with the coroner. He choked on a breath and he pivoted like he’d punch the railing but stopped himself. He unclenched his hand and went back up the steps to stand beside the sheriff.

I’m awful sorry, Dave.

He nodded.

The sheriff seemed to sink in himself and went off the porch and got onto his horse. I’ll be back around.

Alright.
David saw that he wanted to say more but he just lowered his head and left. David went in and locked the door and he went upstairs and found the two of them in Samuel’s bed. Helene rose up to reach her hand out for him. He took it and sat against the bed facing the hallway through the open door.

XVIII

He was up again before the sun, watching it come through their bedroom window and watching the sky lighten. When the sun was over the horizon he showered. Helene came downstairs and she walked in as he dressed and lay down with him on the bed. He shifted and put his arm around her and breathed in the smell of her hair. They slept. He dreamt and when he woke couldn’t remember anything but for the moment in limen that he was part of neither world and for that moment the day before had not passed. Then it had and with it all that came before and he was himself holding his wife in their bed in their house, and he did not know how to move. He stayed in bed with her still asleep until there was a knock at the door and he slipped away and passed a hand through his hair. He went to the door and opened it. The sheriff stood there unshaven with heavy bags under his eyes and his face twisted into something of a smile. David pointed them out and they stood together on the porch.

We was up all night with every light we could find out on that road. The sheriff rubbed at his chin to excuse it. How’s your family?

Sleeping.

Wish I could do that. He sighed and looked away toward the shack. Have you seen them up and around yet?

If they ever came home I didn’t see it.
The sheriff pinched his mouth to one side. There wudn’t anything to find out there. Grass flat from where she was layin’. He pushed a balled up hand against his mouth to stop a yawn. God. We talked to that Spangler girl and she was just a complete mess. Seein’ the body and all.

David shifted back a step. I ought to go visit them.

Where was your boy when it happened?

Either at the library or on his way back. I saw him walkin’ home around five, five-thirty.

You think I could talk to him?

I don’t see why you’d need to if Paige was there.

The sheriff put a hand between them. I just want to get all sides.

He doesn’t have a side. He wasn’t there.

Could I just talk to him?

I don’t want him wrapped up in this any more than he already is. The three of them were best friends.

The sheriff nodded. Okay, Dave. If he says something that sounds pertinent, you let me know.

I will. He glanced out to the yard and went to lean on the porch railing. She didn’t see who did it?

Nope. Said she couldn’t see. She ended up hidin’ in the weeds for a while and Melanie was probably long dead by then. His eyes went empty and they both stared down into the flowerbed below. I can’t remember anything like this. Where there ain’t anything to go on. Not that there was ever that many murders around here. He thumbed toward the shack and paused. I’m gonna see if they’re in. You let me know if Sam says somethin’.

Yeah.
We’ll be searching soon. You want me to give you a call?

Yeah, please. David stepped back toward the door and then went inside. He could hear something frying in the kitchen and he walked down the hall. Helene was at the stove. She cracked two eggs against a pan and dropped them in. David sat at the table so he could see her face. He watched her go about the kitchen while behind his eyes he saw nothing but the new green of the trees and weeds and the ditch along the road. There was Paige and Melanie exploring or just walking and before he could find Samuel with them he grasped his temples between his thumb and middle finger and pinched the thought away. What would not leave him was the image of O H and Melanie in his arms in front of the sun, dark, features faded.

Helene slipped a pan of bacon and eggs onto a plate and walked it to the table. Is Sam awake?

Don’t think so.

She went to a cupboard and got two glasses. She filled them with milk from the refrigerator and set them down.

Aren’t you gonna eat?

She looked at him. I already did, while you were talking to the sheriff.

He mouthed liar and she turned her back. She peeled more bacon from the package on the counter and began to fry it. He leaned forward. That for next door?

Yes. She jabbed at the bacon.

The sheriff’s gonna let me know when they’re goin’ out.

I don’t want you out there. She was staring into the pan.

I’ve got to help. He put his fork down. How can I not go?

She shook her head. I don’t want you going out.

It’s not like I want to. I’ll call the old man, have him come up.
She turned to face him and she was glaring.

He tightened his lips. Get as mad as you want. I’m mad too. The phone rang. I can’t just sit here.

You can’t stay here, you mean.

He began to speak but stopped. He met her stare and went into the hall to answer the phone. After he hung up he went out the backdoor and brought in the shotgun and leaned it against the door. He called Danvers and told him to bring the thirty-ought-six. From the hallway he watched Helene putting the food into a container with her back to him. He went upstairs to check in on Samuel. The curtains were pulled and the room was half dark and he lay in bed looking up at the ceiling. David stayed in the doorway for a moment and he came in and stood by the bed. You okay?

Samuel blinked, then rubbed his eyes. He breathed deeply and exhaled.

I need to go out with the sheriff and everybody. I won’t be gone too long. David waited for a reply. Phil’s coming up to visit. He sat on the edge of the bed. Sam. Sam, do you know anything? Did you see anything?

Samuel closed his eyes and shook his head. His chest trembled.

Bud. He put a hand on Samuel’s head. After a while he rose. I’ll be back. He went downstairs and got the shotgun and went out onto the porch. He stepped off when he saw Danvers round the bend riding David’s bay. He had the rifle up against his shoulder.

You want to trade me?

David nodded. Yeah. He met Danvers in the yard and helped him off the horse and they swapped guns.

Found him wandering the yard. What’s goin’ on?
David told him. As he did he switched the rifle from hand to hand. He stepped around and Danvers turned with him.

That’s, that’s just—I don’t even know what to think about that. I saw all them horses goin’ back and forth. How’s Sam?

He hasn’t spoke a word.

Danvers frowned heavily and his nostrils flared with breath.

I got to get goin’. He stepped up into the saddle.

Alright. I’ll take care of things here.

David rode off. He joined another rider carrying a gun at the square and they rode grimly together north toward Storm’s Creek Road and they found the sheriff and the deputies and a few other citizens on horseback gathered there at the intersection. The sheriff hailed David when he saw him and he broke his morgan from the crowd and stopped beside him.

You see either’ve the Reckards yet?

No.

The morgan took a step and the sheriff scanned the people gathered. Coroner said they left sometime early this morning, before light.

David shook his head.

Well. Maybe we’ll find them too. We’re just gonna spread out, is all we’re gonna do. There wasn’t any sign at the scene. He took the road one way or the other. He raised his arm to address everyone. Now I’m not deputizing anybody. I see a lot of guns but I don’t want to hear any. Is that understood?

The crowd assented.

Let’s get movin’.
They broke into clusters and started down the four ways. David and the sheriff rode east together in silence. David had slid the rifle into the saddle scabbard and he touched the butt every so often. They stopped near the scene and the sheriff stopped.

Go on that way if you want. There idn’t anything to see. We combed it about as close as humanly possible.

I think I will.

That’s fine. Don’t go crazy if you see something. Just find one of us.

David pushed his horse forward. He turned back once to watch the sheriff and deputy go on. It was several minutes coming up to the creek and culvert. He imagined Paige running the length of the road bloodsoaked and crying and Melanie laying in the grass and he was gritting his teeth and clenching the reins in his hand and he blinked the blur out of his eyes. Against his arms he felt the thin uniform that wasn’t there and the light took on the metal gloss it had on the mountain and he felt the heat and the rain and slap and cut of foliage and the cool blue-white feeling of the nerves along his palms and fingers as he did at the sound of gunfire. David was already pulling the rifle free when O H came out of the treeline and he let go. He lifted his hand without the rifle and rode up to him and stopped.

Hey.

O H lifted his head. His eyes were wildly bloodshot.

You alright?

He looked aside. No.

Where’s Delia?

She not at the house? She left before I did.

David dropped from the horse to stand beside him. We haven’t seen her.

O H said nothing. He started walking down the road.
There’s nothin’ to find, bud. They’ve been up and down this way.

There’s him to find.

David took the reins and led the horse after him. The road went deeper into the country and they were silent for a long time, watching the gravel and the grass along the roadside hoping something would appear. A long-abandoned shack stood back off the road a hundred yards and O H began to veer toward it. David took the rifle and followed, leaving the horse at the road and they went along the old dirt path.

Sheriff doesn’t know anything new, does he?

No. I don’t think so. David glanced aside at him. Did the coroner find anything?

Used forty-fives. That don’t help any, though. His voice was hollow, the sound coming from just the edges of his throat. They were silent again as they neared the shack. The weeds were tall all along it and only absent in the grooves of the dirt path. David regripped the rifle and O H lifted the latch on the door and swung it open. The tail of a garter snake disappeared under an empty burlap sack in the corner of the room. O H went in before David could shoulder by but there was little to see. A patch of soot and ash, sunlit, where the stovepipe used to be, a small table. There was a row of mason jars affixed to the bottom of a shelf above the table by nails through the lids. The jars were full of old screws and bolts and washers. O H turned to face David and he turned again and kicked the desk so it flew up and smashed several of the jars and the metal and glass fell and scattered upon the desktop and the sound of the breaking glass seemed to continue on. He kicked it again and stepped forward and kicked the side of the shed and the wood splintered and dust drifted down from the roof.

God, dammit. Fuck this place. I come a thousand miles just to get everything took away from me. Leave the fucking city of Atlanta, come out here and my baby gets killed. He looked at David. His hands were lifted. Jesus, Dave. I’m about to go crazy. What did I do?
O H. David put the rifle aside. I’m so sorry, bud.

He went by David, picking up the rifle as he walked out the shed door. David spun with his hand out but O H only walked on, holding the gun by the stock. David followed him and they went back to the road. He grabbed the reins on the bay and they kept going. The sun had risen well into the sky and had begun to fall again when they passed a road that led out beyond his property and the mine farther south. They went on for another half hour and they passed the county sign and O H slowed and faced him. David held the reins out.

We should turn back. You’re staggerin’.

You think he’s back the other way?

I don’t know.

I guess I’ll keep goin’, then.

David let his hand fall. I need to get home. I’ll take that road back a ways, check it.

O H lifted his chin. You do that.

He stared at O H and then stepped up into the saddle. The horse stamped.

Tell me somethin’. He cocked his head, looking up. What is it makes this happen?

What goes wrong in a man’s head that makes him do that, kill people, kill my baby?

I don’t know. Maybe I’m glad I don’t.

O H shook his head. They just don’t give a damn. That’s what it is. They don’t give a shit. They ain’t like me and you. And if there’s somethin’ more’n that I don’t ever want to see it.

He turned down the road and he swung the arm carrying the rifle. Go on. He started walking.

I’ll tell Delia where you are.

O H laughed sharply. His shoulders shook. Okay, man.

David watched him go. He backed the horse around and took the intersection. It would be near suppertime when he got back. The road split a thin strip of woods that formed the
northern border of his fields and the shadows of the trees stretched cool and patchwork across the divide, the pieces of light hitting the brim of his hat and passing on. He was looking at the grass as if he might find a gun cast off there. His eyes glazed quickly and he wasn’t really seeing. If Red had stayed they may have found the murderer already. He would have rode out at once and found him and exacted with a purity the sort of vengeance David knew he could no longer summon. He felt low for not being capable of that, not having lived that way. For ever having said he was foolish. The road met with his own a few miles to the east and he pushed the horse into a trot. The distance closed and he slowed as the house came into view. He stopped altogether and stared at it for a while, and at O H’s shack. He rode the horse through the yard and peered in through the windows of the shack, rode around it to see if Delia was home. There was a mattress and sheet in the middle of the kitchen floor and what he thought was blood staining it. The breakfast Helene made was set on the table, untouched, and he sank at thought of her having to see the mattress. He went across the yard again to the house and tossed the reins over the porch railing. He knocked on the front door and Danvers came from the living room and let him in.

No luck, I’m guessin’.

No.

Danvers stood aside and David walked into the hall. Where’s your gun?

O H has it. He’s still out looking. David pulled his boots off.

He holdin’ up?

David shook his head. He’s just about had it, Phil. I don’t know what to do for him.

Danvers grimaced and held his chin between his fingers. I wish I did.

David glanced up the stairs.
They’re up there. Helene came down for a moment to see if I wanted fed and she went back up. Are you sticking around the house now?

Yeah.

I figure I’ll head on out. Shotgun’s behind the davenport. I’ll leave it here for you just in case.

Thanks for comin’.

No problem. I kept myself in coffee. Danvers waited until David looked at him. Are you alright?

David stood. He took off his hat and rubbed at his head and put it back. I just don’t know what to do.

There idn’t anything to do. You can’t fight this any more than you could a duster.

He shook his head. Red would’ve done something.

You mean the crazy sumbitch that nearly killed a man and left town? Oh, he’d of done a lot of good.

That ain’t the point.

There ain’t a point. Danvers put his hand on David’s shoulder. There’s no point to any of it, Dave. You just do the best you can. And you do. Nobody ever said you had to be everywhere at once or feed the masses or any such bull. He shook him and patted his shoulder.

You’re bein’ stupid. Mourn the girl. Be with your family. That’s all anyone can ask.

David was still. He looked at Danvers. Okay.

Danvers dropped his hands. I’m just down the road if you need me.

Thank you. David walked him to the porch steps. He went back in and shut and locked the door and climbed the stairs. Midway he thought to call Becky Spangler and he stopped and dialed the number. There was an empty buzz and he tried again and got through and she picked
up. They skirted Melanie and their children except her request for calamine lotion, and he told her he’d get her some. She said she was afraid to leave the house. They hung up. He went to stand inside the bedroom to see the shack. It seemed empty still. He went upstairs into Samuel’s room and Helene stood from the chair by the bed. The room was low-lit and Samuel was covered in his blankets. She stood beside him and they went into the hall and she pulled the door closed.

He hasn’t spoken a word. She leaned against the wall. Have they found anything?

No. I don’t think they expect to.

Her bottom lip rose and she dropped her head. I don’t know what to do. Delia and O H haven’t come home. Your mom keeps calling. She let her hands fall against her legs and stared at him. Is this why you’re always out the door at the first sign of trouble?

David’s mouth came open and he tried to not look away.

You left here this morning so you didn’t have to be in that room with us. It took me a while but I figured that out.

I go out there and help. I try to.

She turned her head slightly. Some things can’t be helped, David. You’d do more good here sitting with your son than out there. It’s hard being the one that has to stay, you know that? It’s tiring. It’s all I’ve ever done.

I’m sorry.

We need you here. More than anything. She was reading his face and finally she opened the door. They went in together and David sat on the edge of the bed. Samuel’s back was to them. Helene took a book from the bedside table and began to read aloud for a while before starting dinner. David put his hand on Samuel’s shoulder. You want to come into town with me tomorrow? I’m gonna go check on Becky and Paige.
Samuel shook his head.

I think you might feel better if you did.

I don’t want to feel better.

David paused at his words. I know. I know it hurts. David took his hand away. Could I get you to eat with us at least? You need to eat.

He shook his head again. David put his hand back and sat with him until Helene returned with a tray of grilled cheese sandwiches. David moved to the foot of the bed and they set the tray in the middle and picked at the food. They watched for Samuel to turn around but he never did, and when they finished eating David took the tray down. He wanted to throw the sandwiches out but instead set them on a plate and put them in the refrigerator. The sun had set behind the town and there were a few clouds still lit though the sky was going dark. He went across the yard and knocked on the door to the shack. There was no answer. Back in the house he checked the locks on the doors and windows and checked the shotgun behind the couch. When he came back upstairs Helene was reading from where she left off in the book, laying beside Samuel. David sat in the chair and listened until he saw Samuel’s chest rising regularly. He put his hand on her arm and watched Samuel. She switched the lamp off on the bedside table and set the book down and she and David went downstairs. He watched her go into the bedroom and he checked the locks on the doors again and stood looking out at the night through the living room window. Then he took the shotgun from behind the couch and went into their bedroom and Helene stepped out of the light of the bathroom. He undressed as she got into bed and he slid in under the covers. He held her and felt the cool of her slip against his chest and her hair on his lips. She nestled against him and took his hand in hers. They were quiet for a long time.

We’ll get Sam up tomorrow.

Yeah. I told Becky I’d drop her off some lotion. Paige got poison ivy from the woods.
Mm. Okay. Tomorrow.

Yeah. He lifted his arm and she rolled over and kissed him.

XIX

In the morning he thought it was late summer and they were still so warm against each other that they were wrapped only in sheets. He sat up and got out of bed. He stretched and scratched his arm and looked out the window at O H’s shack and saw the door hanging open. David dressed and put on a hat and he went outside. O H was dragging out the bloody mattress and sheet from the kitchen and he let it go just beyond the doorway and he turned and saw David. His eyes were sunk far into his head and his skin showed pale in places like it was translucent to the bone below. He nodded at David and took up the mattress again and David went around to help him with it, careful of where he placed his hands, and when they’d lifted it up O H stopped and stared at it.

Where’re we takin’ it, bud?

O H looked at him. I dunno. I dunno what I’m doin’. Burn it, or somethin’.

David paused to gauge him. We can do that if you want. He hefted the mattress higher and started backing around to the rear of the shack. O H followed and they dropped the mattress. Do you have matches?

No.

Okay. I’ll be right back. He trotted around for the shack and stopped at the door. The place seemed darker than it ever had and there were thin ruts in the dirt floor where O H had begun to drag the mattress. He couldn’t make himself go in and so he went to the house. Helene was gone from the bed and he heard stirring upstairs as he went to the kitchen for matches. He
brought a small lamp of coal oil with him and he gave the matches to O H and poured the oil over the sheet and shook the lamp. He held the box of matches out in front of him and struck one across the back and dropped it on the mattress. The flame spread in a thin blue wave and stopped and was almost invisible in the sunlight. David backed away. At the border of the poured oil the sheet began to blacken and send up smoke. O H was rocking on his heels and his hands were out before him. The blood on the sheet was obscured by the blackening fabric. He backed another step and scratched his arm absently. He lifted his arm and looked at it and saw the red swath and welts where he’d scratched. The work of his brain froze for a moment and he seemed unable to swallow or to breathe, and then he did.

You got this, bud? You okay?

Yeah.

I gotta go back to the house.

He nodded. David ran across the yard and went in and doubled up the stairs. Helene was sitting against the wall with Samuel in her lap and the blanket was still wrapped around him. She looked up at David and she was crying.

It’s all over him. He’s got a rash all over him.

David crossed the room and bent down and held them both. The light was off and the room was dim. He let his head fall back to look at the ceiling as though it might open to the sky for judgment.

After a while he rose and went to the empty room across the hall to check on O H. The shack was afire and O H was standing beside it. The springs of the mattress were against the back wall and the smoke rose thin and gray to join a bank of clouds sweeping across the sky. David watched for a while before he went back to the corner of Samuel’s room and David
grouped them both around him and they sat together in the dark and he waited for the next thing
to come for them.

When he went out late in the afternoon the rifle was set against the porch railing. The
sky was covered over with clouds and O H was squatting beside the ashes of the shack. David
went over and stood beside him. There was little more than a square imprint of gray on the
ground. The stove, sootblack, was all that stood. He thought he could see stunted table legs and
part of a cabinet door among the ash.

Why’d you burn it?

Figure I don’t need a place to lay down anymore.

Why not?

O H had yet to turn his head. This’s the first time I sat since it happened. All I did is just
walk around. Up and down the road.

Did you find Delia?

He didn’t answer.

O H?

Last I saw her the sheriff come in the coroner’s and she smacked him for not bein’ out
there. He stared up at David. She didn’t say nothin’ to me, just left after that. I stood in the hall
for I don’t know how long. I thought maybe I was goin’ crazy. But you ain’t crazy if you think
that, right?

David shook his head. You’re not crazy.

I left, stood out there on the road for most of the day, thinkin’ he might come back. After
you left. Either he’d have a bullet for me or I’d just beat his face clear until there wadn’t nothin’
left. He smiled. I don’t know what to do, Dave. I thought about just goin’ inside to burn up but I
didn’t want to die in there. He put a hand out beside him and stood slowly. David reached to help him up but O H moved his arm and straightened on his own.

Why don’t you come in and eat some dinner with us?

Naw.

We can get on the horses and start looking for Delia.

She’s gone. If she ain’t come yet, she’s gone. I don’t blame her. He stopped. He shifted slightly toward David. I feel bad for leavin’ Mel to be buried here.

We’ll pitch in. We’ll honor her.

O H shook his head. He breathed in deep. She never belonged here. He lifted his hand and pointed. That’s east, idn’t it?

Yeah. David averted his eyes as if in pain. Let me at least feed you, bud.

He shook his head. He hadn’t taken his eyes from the horizon. You heard about all that end of the world shit, right?

Yeah. Been hearing it for almost fifteen years now. It hasn’t happened yet.

Yeah, no. It is. They’re right. But I been thinkin’, ever since we went to get that horse. It ain’t so much that the world’s ending all at once as little bits of it are. Before I come out here you’d see people down the block walk out they house with maybe a backpack or somethin’, and they had this look in their eyes like they knew they weren’t really goin’ anyplace. They were goin’ out to disappear. Like a dog does.

David said nothing. He glanced at the house, at the porch. When he turned back O H was staring at him. He took hold of David’s hands.

I wish I could give you something like you gave me.

David shook his head and pulled away. Don’t. I didn’t give you anything. Look where all my kindness got you.
OH’s face drifted aside. You don’t know what you’re sayin’. What if this was the best
we was ever gonna have? Huh? And you gave it to us. He pushed their hands down. He
gripped them tighter. I want you to be strong enough to keep doin’ everything you can. Give it
all you got until you’re dust. God can’t damn a good man’s effort. He can’t help but bless it. OH
let go of David’s hands and stepped back. Tell everyone I love ‘em, man.

David came forward and reached out. OH. Please.

Already gone, Dave. He started walking through the ashes. David stood there and
watched his gray footfalls and he watched him pass back onto the reddish dirt now thinly grown
over with weeds. He watched as he reached the road and on until he was small and only
movement among the still treeline.

XX

David turned and went to the house. He stopped to grab the rifle and stood on the porch
and hung his head. It was a while he stood there trying not to look at the still-smoking ashes of
the shack and trying not to see OH walking. Finally he went inside to the bedroom and put the
rifle under the bed and as he came out he could smell tomato soup. Helene was reading aloud
upstairs and he kicked off his boots and climbed the steps and went into Samuel’s room. Samuel
was over the covers and his arms and the side of his neck were covered by the rash. Helene
closed the book in her hands. David stood against the doorway and smiled weakly to one side.
He sunk against the wood and slouched for a moment until he picked himself up again.

Let’s all go into town, go see grandma and Paige. Find somethin’ for all that poison ivy
we’ve got. You up for it, Sam?

Can I stay at grandma’s?
If you want, bud. Why don’t you want to see Paige?

He shook his head. I just don’t.

David grimaced. Okay. Well, let me get cleaned up real quick and we’ll go. He met Helene’s eyes and went downstairs to shower. The water was running when he heard the door open and Helene came in. He watched her through the blur of the curtain, standing at the mirror. He washed and shut off the water and took the towel from the curtain rod. When he was about dry he stepped over the edge of the tub onto the mat and he saw her clear and sharp and dark in the yellow light. She smiled at him and it caught and her face twisted. She stood against him and he held her and ran his hand down the back of her arm.

I don’t know if I can let go.

That’s alright. He nudged her with his cheek. I can carry you. He could feel her smile and her hot breath on his chest. He dropped his arms to her waist and hoisted her up for a few steps and let her back down. It is gonna be a little hard to shave this way.

She laughed and pulled back. He left?

David nodded.

Did he say anything about Delia?

Said she left before he did. From the coroner’s. That was the last time he saw her.

Where were they going?

Home. But I don’t think he planned on ever seeing her again. She rested the other side of her head on his shoulder. He held onto her arms and tried to smile. I won’t be but a minute.

Okay.

He leaned in and kissed her and they parted. He stopped. Hey. Did the sheriff call?

No. She went out. He ran the hot water and splashed his face and lathered. He wiped the mirror with his hand and pulled the skin on his throat taut and took the razor along his cheek.
He could only see his son’s eyes, like his own, and wondered what they’d seen. His hand slowed and stopped, dropped.

David?

Yeah. He was gripping either side of the sink and his jaw was clenched tight. He finished shaving and washed and toweled off his face. He came out and Helene was sitting on the bed. She looked up at him.

Shouldn’t we tell the sheriff?

We ought to. She’d laid out his clothes on the bed and he dressed and hung the towel up in the bathroom. I don’t want to make Sam think about it anymore than he has to. If we tell the sheriff then they’ll end up dragging him out to the station and he might have to say he didn’t see anything ten or fifteen times. He put a hand through his hair to smooth it. We’ll ask him ourselves first. He’s not ready.

No. But what if he did see something?

He grimaced. I dunno. I hope he didn’t see anything at all. He buttoned up his shirt. Helene stood and they went into the hall. She leaned over the banister and called for Samuel. There was silence. David glanced at Helene and lifted a shoulder. We don’t have to go. It’d be gettin’ dark soon anyway. I didn’t think of that.

But you need to get that ointment.

He looked out the window. Yeah. I can run in, do it quick and be back. Is that okay?

Yeah.

Alright. He went upstairs to Samuel and he paused at the doorway to see him sitting on the bed. The blinds were still drawn and the room was dark. He came closer. I’m headin’ out, Sam. I’ll be back soon.
Samuel nodded, his chin close to his chest. His hand passed over the blanket and he
scratched at his leg. David stood there for a moment longer and went back downstairs to put on
his boots. Helene had her hand on the door.

Hurry back.

I will. He stood nearer to her and she kissed him. They hugged. Gun’s behind the
couch. They parted and he opened the door. Love you.

Love you too. He stepped onto the porch and walked to the road. He began to jog when
he rounded the bend. The trees were thick with buds and the grass was coming in green. He
started jogging again until he went by the corporation limit sign and he neared the first houses in
town. The street was empty of all but smears of dust. He walked down the faded centerline
looking at the houses. The doors were all shut and the curtains drawn and he felt eyes on him.
He reached the square and stepped up onto the sidewalk. The diner and store were closed. Piles
of dung in the street and on sidewalks, uncleaned. David knocked on his mother’s door and
looked down the street at the yards and porches. Sides of houses and gutters still trimmed red
from dust. He heard the blinds rattle in the front window and he turned to see the door open. His
mother stood with her hands on her hips.

Get in here.

He smiled and walked inside. Hey, ma.

She shut the door after him. Is everybody alright? I called a half-dozen times.

We’re okay. Sam’s about as shook up as could be. Just barely got him talkin’.

She shook her head. Lord.

I was hopin’ to use you as my medicine cabinet again. You got anything for poison ivy?
She thought a moment. I’ve got some calamine around here somewhere. She pointed him into the living room and went down the hall. I don’t suppose you’d let me feed you before you go.

No. I need to run some out to Becky Spangler and get back home. He stood in front of the couch. Through the doorway he could see the kitchen table and the two-sheet newspaper laid upon it. He went in and picked it up. The headline was the murder, and he rifled through the rest. The forecast was dry, and on the back page with it was a spread about windmills. He folded the paper and set it down at the sound of his mother’s footsteps.

Got you a bottle of it here. She found him in the kitchen and held it out to him.

Appreciate it. He took the bottle from her and slipped it into his pocket. He peered out the window. I hate to just run in and out. Do you need anything?

Heck, no.

Anything need fixin’?

Nope.

He put his hands on his hips. Okay, then. They walked to the front door and he opened it. You want to come stay with us, least until things calm down?

She looked at him with a knowing warm smile. Can’t say I do, but if I change my mind you’ll be the first to know.

He leaned in to hug her. She kissed his cheek.

So what’s Sam been doin’?

David let out a sigh. Just settin’ in bed all day. I almost got him up and out here, so he’s a little better, I think. But he’s a long ways from okay. He looked behind himself. I hate to act like the guy’s hidin’ in the bushes or something, ma, but I need to go.

Alright. My love to the family.
He touched his hatbrim and went out to the street. It was empty as before and there was a slight wind that he could hear through the trees and the fencerows. He went north out of town to Spangler’s house. After he knocked on the door he stepped well away from it so he could be seen from the windows. He took off his hat and rubbed his hand over his head. He heard a lock shunt back in the door and it opened and Becky stood there. Once he was in the door she buried her head into his shoulder and chest and he waited on her to rise but she didn’t. She began to cry. Paige was lying bundled up on the loveseat and there was music playing from somewhere. David smiled at Paige and she smiled slightly back. A question came on her face and she mouthed Sam and he shook his head and mouthed back home. He took an arm from Becky and got the calamine lotion from his pocket and patted her back with his free hand. She rose up, eyes red and her face flushed.

Hopefully this’ll be enough. He raised the bottle for her to see. We’ll need to split it.

Split it?

Sam’s got it too.

Her face went blank a moment and her lips parted.

Yeah.

She nodded and wiped her eyes with the inside of her hand. I’ll get a jar or something. She took the bottle and went around the corner. David waited a moment and followed her. He leaned against a wall and watched as she went through the cupboards.

I’m sorry. I’ve just been a mess. She took down a bowl and a small mason jar.

That’s alright. I haven’t been any better.

Her back was still to him. I don’t know what to do anymore. We have to move out by June and it’s hard enough just being without Rich but now I just. She glanced back at him and turned to face him. I just want to leave.
Now don’t do that.

She put her hands on the counter behind her.

Can I get you anything? Do you need food or anything?

She shook her head. I went to the store just a few days ago. She was looking down and almost smiled. She turned and found a lid and took the bottle from him. Why didn’t Sam come?

I don’t know. He just said he didn’t want to.

She was still facing away from him. She lifted the bottle up.

Paige seems like she’s doing okay.

She’s getting better. She looked out the window above the sink for a moment. Night had come. Well. She crossed the gap between them and gave him the half-empty bottle. Thank you.

You’re welcome. He went to the door and leaned in to see Paige. Take care, kiddo.

Paige lifted her head up over the covers. Thanks.

He went out into the dark and walked to the road. He could see the light from the doorway so long as he was in sight of the house. In town all the houses were lit up with the blinds and curtains drawn. He headed out of town and he saw a figure standing on a porch smoking. He raised his hand to it and the cherry of the cigarette brightened in reply. Behind him the horizon was pale blue and the sky was pitted with stars. He walked quietly with his hands free and away from his sides. The road ahead and behind was clear and as he passed Danvers’ house he saw the moon crest the woods. It was nearly full and the light it cast made the land seem liquid. The fields blued and the road turned silver and flowed like the Milky Way fading above him. He paused in front of the house to stare at everything and in the near dark he could return the land to years ago. He went up the porch steps and knocked. Helene came to the door and let him in.

Think I wadn’t comin’ back? He hugged her.
No. But you know.

He nodded. The whole town’s thinking that. He lifted up the bottle to show her. Let’s see about him. They went upstairs and into Samuel’s room. He was sitting on his bed, reading a science book. David came to the bed and opened the bottle. How you feeling, bud?

Samuel’s face was vacant for a moment before he gazed up at David. I’m okay.

How’s the itching?

Pretty bad.

Well come out here to the bathroom and we’ll get this lotion on you.

Samuel uncrossed his legs and slid to the floor. He took the bottle from David and went past Helene. I can do it. He went into the bathroom and shut the door. David stood beside Helene near the doorway and they looked at each other.

The next morning he went upstairs to check in on Samuel before the sun was quite up. He was asleep. David went down to the basement for a jar of preserves to make a quick breakfast. There were clotheslines stretched across the length of the room that hung empty and he ducked them to reach the shelves. In the kitchen he used the last slices of a loaf of bread and put them on a plate to make toast and set out a loaf to thaw from the freezer. The cattle were grazing just past the fence. He went to the front of the house. The cornfields were covered in sprouting weeds. He stared out until the toaster popped and he saw Helene moving about the room through the crack in the doorway. She came out pulling her hair back while he was standing there and he pointed outside with his thumb.

You mind if I get out there today?

What’re you gonna do?

Weed. It’s lookin’ bad.

She started walking to the kitchen.
I won’t ever be out of sight of the house. He followed her. She took the toast from the toaster and took the china cover from the stick of butter on the counter. She got a knife and buttered the toast and spooned out the preserves and handed him a piece.

Why can’t you just leave it be for today?

It’ll only be worse tomorrow.

Will it make that much of a difference, David? Really? She leaned back against the counter and set a hand on it, elbow akimbo.

It needs to be done.

Why ask me if you don’t care what I say?

That’s a stupid question. You know I care. He’d been holding the piece of toast waiting to bite into it and now he set it back on the plate. He turned to face her as if bracing himself. It felt as though she were running toward him.

You won’t put off going out for one day. You won’t stay here and help me with Sam for just this one day.

I got to feed us somehow. That’s hard enough as it is. It’s just me out there now.

She tilted her head to the side. She was staring at him and her eyes narrowed. It’s an excuse. Call it what you want, whatever it is you do, weeding or planting or chasing down horses. It’s just you running. That’s what it’s always been, even when we first got married. You think you’re helping and you think you’re being a father, but a father does more than provide.

His face went blank and then drew tight in the beginnings of a snarl. You were so goddamn hung up on me providing before. I can’t do everything, Helene. I can provide or I can be a half-decent person or I can stay in here and bawl. I can’t do all three. I haven’t learned how yet. You let me know when you figure out which man you want me to be. He went across the room and opened the backdoor and shut it behind him. He got the hoe from the shed and went
out into the field and began raking at the dirt, spinning the blade to cup the weeds and throwm them aside.

He stopped at noon to get a drink of water and fix a sandwich. Helene passed him at the kitchen table carrying a laundry basket up from the basement. She said nothing and he finished his lunch and went back outside. He hung his shirt over the fence and went back to work. After a while he paused to check the sky and the progress he’d made. He picked up the hoe to begin again and he stopped and turned south. Little more than a year ago he had been there on horseback and he had known this was coming. The sky was gray and the dust was weeks from starting then and he was as good as told to take them and run. He looked at the house and he felt his chest ossify and he staggered with great care for his shell and dropped. His hands kneaded and pulled at the earth. What he could have done to spare them grief, and what he was not doing now. They became thin and scarred and what had he sacrificed. What had he done that led them down the very path he’d tried to avoid.

He got to his feet and left the hoe where it lay and walked out of the field. He wrung his hands of dirt and wiped at his knees and went up to the door of the house and he stopped his fist from knocking and sat on the porch steps. The few black remnants of the shack tilted above the ashes and he couldn’t help but see them and wonder what he may have breathed of them, and where the winds had taken them. He sat there for a while before pulling off his muddy boots and walking in the house. Helene was standing against the counter in the kitchen and she turned her head as he came in. She wiped a hand across her cheek and David went up behind her and put his arms around her. She let out a sob before he felt her tighten and he gently spun her to face him. The light glinted off her other cheek and she pinched a tear between her lips. David leaned in and kissed her and he brushed the hair away where it stuck on her face. She laughed a short, wracked breath.
I almost ran out the door when you walked in.

He smiled. Too late. He kissed her again and they stood holding each other. I’m sorry.

She nodded against his neck. Me too.

They stood apart and went upstairs together. He felt only a little guilt for the hoe left out in the field and for the untended earth. She stopped him by his door and held onto his arms.

Are you going to stay, now?

Yeah.

She let go of him and read him again and they went in.

XXI

The rain they had in the spring was all they had and it kept the fields in weeds that shriveled and choked the corn. He couldn’t get out fast enough to cut them back. The wind was dead and the sky empty blue. There were days he was able to get Samuel out of the house to help him but most he stayed in. Helene had stopped holding classes and taught only Samuel, only when he would let her. It was now four months since the murder. They were only able to buy a flat stone for her grave, the only embellishment a flower.

It was hot the next morning. David woke early and he showered. He watered the garden and when rolling up the hose the light hit the back of the house and he saw the paint had started to crack from the dusters and the edges of every surface were bare entirely and worn smooth. He left with the house still sleeping and rode out to look over his cattle, fattening and calving. As he rode back a breeze came up that held no silt. He put the horse up and going home he pulled his
hat low over his eyes against the sun and took it off when he got to the door. He heard Helene upstairs and he went into the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee. The two of them came downstairs together.

Mornin’.

Samuel pulled her chair out at the table and sat at his own. There were rings under his eyes and his cheeks were hollow. David waited on him to look up but his stare was fixed on the tablecloth. David turned and got a mug from the cabinet and poured a cup of coffee. Helene had set a pot on the burner and she dumped oatmeal into it from a canister.

Haircuts today.

Don’t know that I have time.

She glared at him from the corner of her eye. You do.

He passed the cup to her. Alright then.

She took the cup and drank, eyeing him over the rim. It won’t take that long. She set the cup down, pinched salt and sugar into the pot and added water. She took his hand and they stood that way, arms stretched. When the oatmeal was ready David took down the bowls and she filled them and took them to the table. They sat and ate. Samuel pushed his bowl forward without finishing and David pushed it back.

Eat up. Get some meat on your bones.

I’m not hungry.

Sam.

They fought by their eyes for a moment and Samuel reached for the bowl and ate. David glanced at Helene and the ceiling and breathed slowly. It was getting hotter. When they finished Samuel took the bowls and washed them and David went around opening the doors and windows. He took one of the chairs from the kitchen into the backyard and sat it facing the pasture. He
rested his hands on the chairback. The line of Samuel’s cheekbone lay over David’s eyes. He thought of Samuel in the woods, falling into the poison ivy. He thought of finding some new way to plant. He thought of the land fallow, weeds growing tall and the cattle wild and irrigators rusted. He knew Samuel’s heart for just a moment and he saw its trajectory wild over fields like a star loose from constellation. Then Samuel was by his side and sat in the chair and Helene came out with the scissors and she held them out for him to take. She dropped her hand when she read his face.

What’s wrong?

He looked in her eyes and shook his head. I need to go do something.

What’s the matter? He’d started to move but she put her hand on his arm.

I’ll tell you later, I’m gonna head into town.

She kept her hand on his arm and she read him. What for?

Send a letter to Red. He quieted. Try to get him to keep writing to Sam.

Okay. She let go and he went inside. He wrote the letter standing at the kitchen counter.

Red,

I need to ask a favor of you. Pretty much whatever you can spare. We had a girl get killed up here a while back, one of Sam’s best friends. Sam saw it happen. He’s got this look in his eyes. I can see him goin’ off any day now, wake up and he’s gone. Every morning that he comes downstairs I get a little more surprised. He’s like I was, or more like you, coming home. Like he doesn’t belong here. If you could make it up here I could use you. I think it’d help Sam, and it’d help me. I’m gonna try to find the guy.
He folded the letter and put it in an envelope. He rode his horse to town, hitching up outside the post office. The clerk took his letter and he paid for the stamp. She examined the envelope.

I hope this doesn’t need rushed. Someone burned down the section office. It’s a mess out there.

David lifted his hand into the air to wave everything away. I don’t suppose there’s any way I could pay for express?

She shook her head. You’re more likely to get it there yourself. We haven’t had much luck with those cowboy postmen.

He shook his head and thanked her. When David stepped back outside Miller was there in uniform, petting his horse on the neck. Miller turned at his footsteps and smiled.

Howdy Dave. I heard a little rumor.

David unwound the reins from the post and held them in his hand. What would that be? Your boy was there when the Reckard girl got shot.

He didn’t look at him. He moved around him to stand beside the horse. Who said that?

Dudn’t really matter. Is there any truth to it?

No. He put his foot in the stirrup.

Miller gripped the pommel of the saddle and stood close with his head cocked. If he saw something. It’d be a big deal.

I told the sheriff he didn’t see anything. David looked Miller in the eye. Does he not believe me?
Sheriff might not even know I know. I thought I’d ask, is all.

He wasn’t there.

Miller moved his arm from the pommel. Look, Dave. We’re still out there. The sheriff took it hard. We’re still hunting the guy.

Funny, I never saw you out lookin’. David stepped up into the saddle. He stared down at Miller. I see you got on day shift.

Miller squinted up at him from under his hat. There was a vacancy.

David lifted his chin.

Don’t be surprised if I ride out to see your boy sometime.

He sucked in a breath through his nose and looked off down the street before glaring at him. Don’t be surprised if I kick the ever-livin’ shit out of you. He clicked his tongue at the horse and Miller grabbed the reins.

Be careful talking like that, Dave. You ain’t so blameless you can’t be thrown in jail.

He didn’t say anything. Miller dropped the reins and stepped back. David rode toward home until he was out of sight then let the horse meander. They went down the hill to the granary and he rode seeing nothing. The heat rebounded off the metal silos around him and he began to sweat. Past the train station someone called out for him and he turned the horse and saw Skillman standing on the platform. David wheeled the horse and brought it up beside the stairs.

How’re you doin’, Dave?

I’m alright. He pointed at Skillman’s bare head. Happened to your hat?

It was the damndest thing. Blew clean off my head about a month ago, lost it down a mineshaft. I don’t even think it was that windy.

And you don’t have any spares or somethin’?
Skillman shook his head. You’d think I would. How’s the family holding up? I don’t think I’ve seen you since that girl got killed.

We’re gettin’ by.

You all were close.

Yeah.

Skillman nodded, solemn. Well, you look like you were headed somewhere. I’ll let you get movin’. He smiled and went to doff his hat, reaching for nothing. I’ll see you around.

David rode away. Going past the post office he saw no sign of Miller and went on out of town. He put the horse up and walking home he began to sweat again. The sun was midway through the sky. He walked to the back of the house and the chair sitting empty. Behind it a nest of hair. He looked down at it for a few moments before going to the shed for the hoe and setting it by the back door. He went in and made a ham sandwich for himself and drank a glass of water. The front door was shut and walking into the hall he saw the windows were down. Helene was at the top of the steps with the broom.

You missed your appointment.

David craned his head to see her. Yeah. I got hung up.

Are you headed back out?

Yeah. Water the cattle and do some weedin’.

I can do you really quick, if you want.

He grinned. Can you?

She shook the broom over the banister at him. His smile faded. If Miller comes by don’t let him in. He heard Sam was there.

She sighed and shifted her feet. Do you think we ought to talk to him about it?
He shook his head. I don’t know. I guess I just think he’s been worse than I thought he’d be. Like there’s more to it.

Your best friend never died.

Probably never will. David smirked and it fell to a frown. Yeah. He would’ve told us.

He looked toward the door. I better get a move on.

Mhm. She took her broom and he went out the backdoor. He weeded for several hours and broke to muck the stalls. When he finished he took Samuel’s horse out to let it stretch. They walked down the road and back. The corn was stunted and the dirt dry from his constant turning. There would be fewer weeds for the rest of the season but the corn would stay behind. It was tighter now than during the storms and he thought about selling more of the herd. He let the horse eat from the weeds and grass in the ditch and walked it back to the barn. The shadows of the trees in the yard stretched long and cool and he stood in the shade for a moment before walking back to the house. Samuel was coming down the stairs as David walked in and he rubbed over Samuel’s close-cropped hair.

Hey bud.

Samuel ducked and batted David’s hand away. He went on into the kitchen and David opened the backdoor. David sighed and pulled off his boots. He went into the bathroom to wash and when he came out to the bedroom Helene had a blouse over her head. She pulled it off and smiled at him standing there and picked a tanktop from the bed and put it on.

It’s too hot.

He sidled up to her and put a hand up the back of her shirt. Yeah.

You want to cut my hair after dinner?

I’ll make a mess of it.
It wouldn’t be any worse than cutting it myself. She pushed his hand away and he followed her to the kitchen.

What’s for supper?
Shepherd’s pie.

Okay. He looked out the kitchen window at Samuel, standing at the edge of the yard. Helene was getting out the ingredients and some leftovers to mix.

Would you bring Sam in?

Sure. He went out the back door. A flight of sparrows shot between them and flew on toward the woods. David walked to the fence and he stood beside Samuel and gazed out over everything. The land was flat and golden for a time and in the distance they could see where it sloped and just before the horizon the shadow where the creek ran. Beyond it the stacked gray of the high-tension towers in a line and the few trees that had never been cut. One locust that stood tall and scarred from storms, half the branches sheared away. The woods framed the east and thinned out and to the west the town did the same. Samuel had set his forearms on the fencepost and his head rested on them. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. He looked at some point between them both, face tilted slightly, and he breathed in. David waited for him to speak. The back door opened and he knew Helene was watching. Neither moved.

Time for dinner. Mom’s waiting.

Samuel nodded into his arms. They were still a while longer, then he lifted his head and dropped his arms from the post and David followed him to the house. He could see the fibers of the wood engrained on his arms. They went in and sat and Helene served them. David watched Samuel eat and their eyes met briefly and Samuel stared at his plate. They finished eating and David cleared the table and Samuel went to the sink to wash the dishes. Helene helped him dry and when they finished she looked at David and tilted her head toward the backyard. David shut
the cupboard and went outside. He sat down in the chair, watching the sun and sky change color. It was still hot. He took off his shirt and threw it beside him and he heard the door open and shut. Helene put her hands on his bare shoulders. The scissors lay cool on his skin. She lifted them and angled his head back and began to cut across his crown. He closed his eyes and his thoughts slowed and stopped as he felt her hands run over him and felt the hair tumble down his chest. She guided his head to one side or the other and she leaned over and crossed her arms around his neck and kissed him and her shadow and hair were cool.

All done. *** (Needs to bring him some peace to be shattered)

He opened his eyes and blinked into the sun. She took his shirt and brushed off his shoulders and he stood. She passed the scissors to him and sat. He lifted the hair from the side of her head and held it between his fingers like he imagined he ought to. How much?

Here. She pulled the hair to her face and held it pinched a few inches from the end. He took the strand from her and he cut. He drew her hair back again and his fingers traced along her jaw. There were long crescents of dark brown around the chair and when he stepped away to see better they were lit up by the sun. He brushed her hair with the back of his hand and spread it like a fan over her shoulders. When he set his hands on the slope of her neck he could feel her pulse slow and heavy. He cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her head back and she opened her eyes and smiled at him. She reached up and held his face. Her arms wrapped around him and he bent and lifted her from the chair and walked with her stumbling to hide behind the back of the shed. He let her down and she pressed him against the wood worn smooth by sand slowly they sank until they were lying in the grass. She was astride him and the sun was setting behind her. There were currents of color in the clouds that changed by blinks. She put her hands on his chest and he followed them back to her shoulders and breasts. The land fell away and there was nothing but her and the rocking of her hips. For a frozen moment she craned her head back to stare down at
him, as if fixing him in place. She lay over his chest eventually and he was there again on the grass and the vault overhead was distant and dark.

She rose from him and stood tottering. The evening air chilled the sweat on them and they went about picking their clothes from the ground and dressing. Helene held the backdoor open for him as he carried the chair up the steps and he set it down at the table. She fell into his back holding him and they stood in the kitchen for a while catching their breath. David brushed her arm and went upstairs to check on Samuel. He was reading on his bed and David paused for a moment before coming in, passing a hand through his hair and feeling the few blades of grass in it. He thumbed in the direction of the pasture.

You want to go out riding with me tomorrow?

Okay.

Be an all day thing.

Okay.

David put a hand in his pocket. We’ll be getting up early. Make sure you get to bed.


Night. David walked out of the room and shut his door behind him. He went downstairs and shut the front door. The water was running in the bathroom and he went into their room and lay back on the bed. Helene came in and sat beside him.

We didn’t blind him or anything, did we?

Not that he mentioned. I asked him to go riding with me tomorrow. Check fences and the like. Be out for a while.

She was quiet for a moment.

I get the feeling he wants to get away from here. He paused. Maybe a day away’ll do something for him.
She moved to lie down. She slid under the sheet and he crawled over her to his side. He lay down with his arm around her and the day came back to him. His limbs felt heavy and he wondered if he might be hurting her until her chest rose. Fields extended before him and Samuel’s lank face and Helene above him and they all came and went as if on a reel. He lay on his back and twirled a lock of Helene’s hair between his fingers.

XXII

The next morning Helene and he packed a half dozen sandwiches and a jug of water into a knapsack. They woke Samuel and he showered and David waited for him on the porch. It would be cooler than the day before. The air was still and the sky just light enough to see by, to give shape. Helene came out the door and stood beside him with a cup of coffee and they stood drinking quietly. One lick of steam from the rim of his cup. The door opened and Samuel stepped onto the porch.

I’m ready.

David nodded and picked up the knapsack by his feet. You might tell Phil to come over.

She smiled lightly. Okay. She hugged him and kissed his cheek then bent to Samuel. He shrunk away when she tried to kiss him. Be careful.

They walked to the barn. David helped Samuel with his tack and Samuel mounted up and David led his bay out to the gate. He let Samuel through and closed the gate after him and mounted. They rode toward the dawn as it paled the sky and broke over the woods. There was no wind, only the sound of the horses stepping and the creak of the saddles. David’s hand rested on the saddlehorn and he looked over at Samuel. His head and upturned fist dipped with the horse’s gait. The land sloped up gently and when they reached the crest they saw the cattle along
the creek to the south and they turned to ride by. The grass had grown tall deeper into the pasture and as they went birds flew from the cover and Samuel watched them rise. David pointed for him to check the cattle and he rode a circuit and came back.

I didn’t see anything.

David nodded and they went on. They rode across the creek and followed it west. When the cornfield came into view David guided them southward, looking over the fence at the stalks, light green, near dry. After a while the fence jointed east and they swerved with it. For a distance it was another farmer’s property and then it belonged to the mine. After riding east for several minutes David saw there was a sharp bow in the fence, the wire and the posts jerked inward and sagging. Huh.

What is it?

David shrugged. Probably a bull from the neighbor’s ran into it. They rode on and when they reached the damaged fence David dropped from the horse and examined the wires, pulling on them. There was a little black fur caught in the one of the barbs. Samuel stepped up beside him and David pointed back. Grab me that bag there.

Samuel jogged to get it and brought it to him. He went over to the nearest post and set it up and kicked at the dirt around the base to hold it fast. From that angle it seemed as though the fence was blown out in an explosion. The staples in the post had been torn loose and he pulled a remaining one and let it drop to the grass. He took a spool of baling wire and a fence tool from the bag and gave the loop to Samuel. Go on to the next post and hold the whole thing up against the far side. Up top.

Okay. He started walking and David held the tip of the strand and went to the other post. He pulled out a staple from the bag and set it against the post and threaded the wire strand through. Down the fence he saw Samuel set the spool by the post and David gave a thumbs up.
He used the tool to hammer in the staple until it was halfway embedded and he looped the baling wire around and hammered the staple flush. He walked the fence to Samuel and stapled the wire. He cut the slack with the tool and they traded posts and repeated the process. When they finished they walked to the middle and David pulled on the top strand of baling wire and let go. He put the wire and tool away.

That’ll do for now. He started for his horse and Samuel followed. They mounted and went on. The sun was high and the land around them bright and warm. They went deeper into the property and began to hear the hum of the high-tension towers as they neared. Samuel looked up at them when the wires ran overhead and David stopped the horses at one of the towers. There was a ring of green around it, brush and weeds. Rust lined the bolts and bottom rods of the tower.

How far do these go?

Clear across the county. David pointed along the wires and his arm went down to the horizon. Six or seven miles down there’s a power station, outside Banning.

That buzz is annoying.

David smirked. Now that you’ve heard it you’ll hear it a mile off. I’ve been hearin’ it for a while.

They sat in the grass by the nearest leg of the tower. There was a small tree growing beside it and they were partly shaded by a branch. David put the knapsack between them and they ate the sandwiches and passed the jug of water back and forth. When they finished they sat back against their saddles and crossed their hands on their bellies.

Your godfather and I used to ride out here, before you were born. It was dry then too. We took the cattle out past the property, out that way. He gestured south. Phil came with us a couple times, before his accident. Course, back then we had a lot more cattle.

There was a faint smile on Samuel’s face.
We’d set and eat just like this. David was staring at the sky.

Samuel said nothing. The wires hummed and a breeze came and went. A few starlings swooped into the bushes and began to chatter. They were quiet for a while longer until Samuel shifted onto a knee. What was it like fighting?

David raised up. Where’d that come from?

He shrugged. I dunno. What was it like?

Hard to say. I mean it’s hard to tell you. He paused. You remember that first dust storm, the one you got caught in?

Yeah.

It’s like that almost all the time. You didn’t sleep. There wasn’t a lot of water or food.

I mean what was it like to actually fight?

David’s face hardened. You mean to kill someone.

I guess.

He rubbed at his jaw. He was quiet until he dropped his hand. It takes something away that you can’t get back. It takes away this freedom you had. There’s always something you feel, like you have to worry about carrying it. Like you got one less hand because you have to carry this guilt.

Samuel was quiet. How many people did you kill?

I don’t know. I lost track. Sometimes you think maybe they got away or you didn’t hit ‘em at all. You end up not wanting to know. You oughta live with that number in your head forever. But you don’t.

Samuel’s face was downcast.

Why’d you want to know, bud?

It was a while before he looked up. I want to kill the guy who shot Mel.
David’s breath caught. Do you know who did it?

No.

But it was a man?

He was big. I just saw his shadow.

David had leaned forward. His hand was before him as if to race toward Samuel. You don’t remember anything else?

No. It was all dark. Then we ran and Paige hid.

What were you doing?

He was quiet. Just exploring.

David watched him. He breathed out slowly and stood. You okay?

Samuel said nothing.

You want to go home?

No.

The sun had shifted and with it the shade. David made a weak gesture toward the horses. Let’s keep ridin’ then. We’re about halfway done.

Okay. They resaddled and rode eastward, close. The land smoothed out and the creek ran far ahead. They passed an old row of fallen fenceposts, the wire removed, rings of rust in the gray wood. They were quiet for a long time. Samuel was sitting straight and high but his head was bowed and the hand that held the reins clutched them as if they were a rosary.

You alright?

Samuel turned to David. Yeah. His hand slacked.

It was mid-afternoon when the property went north. They followed the fence until they reached the creek and they rode west to find a crossing. Samuel went through first and David watched the horse on the slope and saw the favor of the right hind. He rode after and they
stopped to rest on the far bank. The horses grazed and drank. Not long after David and Samuel saddled up to ride on. The sun was sinking over their shoulders. The house came up on the horizon and grew out of it with their approach and Samuel stopped and they both sat looking at it.

Can we stay out tonight?

Camp out, you mean?

Yeah.

I suppose. David stepped off his horse and led it to the fence behind the house. He draped the reins on the wire and climbed over. I’ll go get permission.

Okay. Samuel smiled.

David crossed the yard and glanced back from the steps. Two horses and a rider, near full silhouette by the sun, the first time he’d seen his son truly smile in months. It seemed that was Samuel anonymous, that he was someone bringing news. The backdoor was locked and he waited on the steps for Helene. She tapped on the glass before unlocking it.

Hello father. Where’s Sam?

Out by the fence. He wants to camp tonight.

Ah. You had a good time? She shut the door behind him.

I don’t know if I’d say that. He put a hand on his back and stretched. You mind if we stay out?

She shook her head slightly. Not at all.

We won’t be far.

I’ll be fine.

Okay. He sighed and put his hands on his hips. Alright. We’re runnin’ low on daylight, better get movin’. He kissed her and went into the basement for the sleeping bags. He carried
them up by the elastic and set them at the door. Helene was taking the lid off the crock pot and
dolling out shredded chicken onto buns.

Missed dinner, huh?

Sure did. It’s good, too.

Did you have Danvers come up?

No. She smiled. He frowned at her as she wrapped the sandwich and handed it to him
and began to make another. When she finished she stood before him with it in her hands. How’s
Sam?

He talked a little about it.

Really? What’d he say?

David frowned. Is it alright if I don’t tell you?

It’s a secret? She smiled again and he could see its tautness. I don’t think telling his
mother is betraying anything.

It’s not some revelation. He doesn’t know who did it.

David. She stared at him and her eyes became hard.

He’s angry, is all. He said he wanted to kill the guy.

Helene’ hands recoiled, and she looked down. David stood up from the table. He put a
hand on her side and kissed her.

We’ll see what happens in the morning. He stepped back. Through the kitchen smells
there was her skin and hair. He stepped outside with the sleeping bags and food and crossed the
yard. Samuel held his hand out for the sleeping bags and David handed them up. He swung
himself over the fence and into the saddle. He took the sleeping bags and they rode southwest,
into the sun. They rode next to each other and the light was warm and still yellow. Samuel
shaded his eyes and turned.
Can we make a fire?

David nodded with the pace of the horse. If we’re careful. And find some wood.

They led the horses at angle until they crossed their own tracks. They rode back to the creek and the sun set and they rode on with the stars appearing overhead and the sky was fully cast when they reached the thicket where they’d first seen a coyote. They dismounted and dragged piles of brush in the dark and Samuel began scalping grass for kindling. David drew an old fencepost to the brush and threw handfuls of dry grass over everything. He pulled a box of matches from the knapsack.

We gotta be careful, now. It’s dry enough out here the whole field could catch fire.

Yeah.

Just watch for sparks. He struck a match and with the light found the grass and stuck it in. They added grass and David blew softly over the growing flames, watching the thin smoke rise above them, hearing the fire pop. The post began to smolder and David pointed for Samuel to get the sleeping bags. He snapped the first out and sand showered from it and rattled against the grass and ground. He spread them near the fire and brought their saddles to the heads of the bags and they leaned up against them watching the flames rise and spread across the posts. They ate the sandwiches Helene packed. The horses passed near the fire and went out of the light. By degrees he and Samuel slid lower against their saddles until they were both watching the fire from between their boots. The flames were even and quiet and put off little smoke without the grass. The stars quavered through the heat and David watched Samuel reach his hand out as if to grip something there. His hand dropped and he breathed in deeply.

What happened to Mel’s parents? Did they go back home?

Yeah. I know O H was goin’ home.

Just O H?
Well, I think Delia left before he did.

Samuel was staring toward the fire. His eyes were nearly closed. I feel bad.

I know. I do too.

I ran away.

There wasn’t anything you could do, son. He rolled over and crouched beside his bag. He saw Samuel close his eyes and the tears rolled from their corners.

I didn’t even try. His mouth bunched up and shook and he put his hands over his face and turned from David. He shook and sobbed and when David reached out for him he recoiled. David encircled him and pulled him to his chest. He could say nothing. He hoped the day and the fire and the stars were enough. He hoped as if he had created them and he realized this and he was humbled and if not for Samuel in his arms he would have fallen prostrate for anything to give to his son that was truly his to give.

He rose with the sky already light and the sun nearly over the trees. The fire was out and he stood and heeled the ashes with his boot to check for coals. The posts had been eaten in a rough oval. He rubbed at his face and smelled the smoke on his hands. Samuel was asleep in his bag. David went over and put a hand on his shoulder and Samuel sat up. He wiped his eyes and stood and they rolled up their bags. Samuel emptied the jug of water over the ashes and they sizzled and spiraled into the air. They rode toward the pasture gates and by midmorning they were in sight. David stepped down from his horse and opened them and they went through. They rode the horses to the barn and stopped when Danvers stepped out the door and yelled. David gave the reins over to Samuel and dropped from his horse and trotted over.

I thought it was you just came through.

David shook his head. Huh uh.

Somebody was pokin’ around in the barn and started ridin’ up your way.
David’s brow creased and he thought for a moment. Watch him. He pointed to the barn where Samuel was putting up the horses and he started to run down the road toward the house. A deputy was at the door and David slowed.

Miller! He walked into the yard and Miller pivoted around slowly. Helene was in the window. You’ve got about five seconds to get off my property.

Miller smiled and took a step down from the porch. David stopped at the foot of the steps and he stared up at Miller and it was all he could do to keep from flying the space between. Helene opened the door and Miller glanced back for a moment.

I’m doin’ my job here, Dave. If Sam was there I gotta talk to him.

And you picked a day when you knew I was out. You checked in the barn to see if my horse was there.

Miller said nothing. He leaned back slightly and he raised his chin. His eyes shifted to the road behind David. Danvers had his arm around Samuel and they were coming into the yard. David put his hand out to keep them back.

You’re not gonna talk to him. Just leave.

Miller took a step down. Hey, Sam. I got a question or two to ask you.

David shifted in front of him. Don’t say another word.

David, stop. Helene moved to the porch railing. Just come on in the house, we’ll shut the door and he can talk all he wants. She fixed her eyes on David to keep him still and he was until he saw Miller begin to smile.

You were there when that girl got killed, weren’t you, kid. He stood on the last porch step and was looking just over David’s shoulder. ‘bout how fast were you goin’ the other direction, huh?
Helene hung her head and Miller’s smile bloomed. He started walking and shouldered into David. Danvers and Samuel were in the corner of his eye as David pulled his fist back and then they were a whirl when he let go. The next thing he saw was Miller spin and land facedown on the porch steps. He wasn’t moving. It was all David could do to keep seeing, to keep himself upright, to keep from crushing the man’s throat. The weight in his forehead staggered him. His middle knuckle was laid open clear to the bone and the tendon was open to the air. Blood dripped by his boot. Helene waved Danvers and Samuel on and when they stepped over Miller’s arm it was as though a cloud of ink was pulled from David’s eyes. He looked around himself at the empty yard and he leaned down to roll Miller over and he reached to unbuckle the snap on his gun. He pulled the pistol from the holster and stuffed it in the rim of his jeans. He stood over Miller, bisected by the sun and the shade of the porch. There was a slit in his bottom lip where the tooth had gone through and David thought he might have broken Miller’s jaw. The blood was still flowing from his mouth and it ran down his neck onto the porch steps where it pooled. David stepped over him and went inside, passing Helene on the phone. Danvers was sitting at the kitchen table and he tipped his head when David walked in. David kept his eyes down until he’d put his hand under the tap and he let the cold water run and flush the blood from the wound and from his fingers. Helene was standing beside him.

I called the sheriff.

He grimaced. He looked at Samuel and their eyes met, both vacant. Helene took David’s hand and turned off the tap. She had a bottle of peroxide and she poured some over the cut and it bubbled.

Tell me what I need to do.

Huh?

Tell me what I need to do while you’re gone. They’re coming to arrest you.
He was quiet. He turned the water on again and washed out the peroxide. Weedin’ is the main thing. The grain bins need hosed out. Sam’s horse needs treated.

Helene took his hand and began to wrap it with a cloth. What else?

Hell. That damn fence. He glanced at Danvers and Samuel. Just gonna have to keep an eye on it. He leaned against the counter and shook his head.

We could have just gone inside and ignored him.

David nodded. I ain’t arguin’.

Why’d you do it? She opened a drawer and brought out a roll of tape.

He came out here behind my back and he made sure of it. He paused. It was the way he smiled. He knew what he was doin’.

You like being his pawn, then? She wrapped the tape over the cloth twice and pressed it tight. Now he can come right back out here as he pleases.

He was quiet for a moment. He’ll be askin’ with fewer teeth’n he imagined, I bet.

Danvers laughed and stopped at Helene’s glare. He rubbed a hand across his chin. You know I’ll help you out.

I appreciate it. David held his hand up and clenched it. The middle finger was still. He grimaced and went to the front door. The porch steps were empty, Helene’s reflection floating in the windowglass.

You took his gun?

Yeah. He can have it back.

Helene shook her head and she walked down the hall toward him. What kind of example have you set for Sam? Did you think about him at all? Of what might happen? She was staring at him and her eyes were inches from his and he could see all the weaving and threading in them.
He breathed deep. Whatever you think of anything I do you don’t ever have to doubt if I was thinking of him. He felt the urge to move again, to fly forward. It may not be the best or the smartest thing, but it’s for him and you. I will wear myself down to dust for the two of you and if I’m doin’ it wrong I’m sorry. He breathed in again and he straightened without realizing he’d bent toward her. He found he was out of breath just looking at her and she hugged him. He put his arms around her and crooked his head to hers and they stood there rocking against each other. She broke away.

You can’t do this again.

I won’t.

I mean it. I can’t watch you do it. There’s got to be a line, David, where you stop and just live with yourself, and with us.

I don’t know. I don’t know if I can.

She backed to the living room doorway. God.

They were quiet. Red flashed in his mind, and his knife, and the femur. David turned to see out the door toward the yard. You think I could get somethin’ to eat?

Yeah.

He followed her into the kitchen and Danvers started to stand.

’m I in your seat?

No. Siddown. He reached out his hand to keep him seated. I’d be much obliged if you’d stay here while I’m gone.

Sure, Dave. I’d be happy to.

Thanks. He thought. If Red would appear to take his place. If he were Red’s son. You remember those letters, Sam? In the attic?

Yeah.
You can read ‘em if you want.

Samuel looked at him with a question but it faded from his eyes.

Get mom to pull the stairs down for you.

I can do it.

Alright. David leaned against the wall by the doorframe and watched Helene open a jar of green beans and pour it into a pot on the range. She put porkchops in the oven and after a while of sitting there together Danvers put his elbows on the table and glanced from Samuel to Helene and David and back.

So. Hot, huh?

David put his hand to his eyes and smiled. Helene stood to check the food and she served them all. There was a knock at the door before they finished eating and David put down his plate and answered it. Sheriff Lucas stood there and he removed his hat. Two deputies waited in the yard.

You ready, Dave?

David stepped out onto the porch and shut the door. If I could have a moment to say bye.

Sure, sure. The sheriff gestured at the door.

Oh. I got his gun. David spun around and lifted his hands. The sheriff took the pistol from his jeans and David turned back.

That’s a little insulting, wouldn’t you say?

I dunno. I was insulted he came sneakin’ up while I was gone.

The sheriff sighed. Go on in, say goodbye.

David ducked his head as he opened the door. He left it wide for the sheriff to see in and went to the kitchen. He stood in the doorway. I gotta go. Helene and Samuel stood and they
came up to him and he held them. He pulled Samuel close and gripped his shoulder and stepped back. I’ll be back soon.

Take it easy, boy. Danvers raised his hand from the table.

Bound to. He looked at Helene. Sheriff’s bein’ pretty casual about everything. I don’t see any deputy at the backdoor. He must know better.

She nodded. Yeah.

He took another step back. Love you.

We love you too. Helene’s bottom lip lifted.

He took them in and turned and went out, shutting the door behind him. The sheriff was talking with the deputies in the yard and he met them. The sheriff tilted his head.

All set?

Yeah.

Let’s go then.

No handcuffs?

The sheriff raised an eyebrow. You plan on runnin’?

No.

Then no. He pointed to the road. Go on.

They walked down the road to Danvers’ and the sheriff let him saddle his bay and they rode on together into town. He kept his head up and the few people out on the streets watched them pass and he paid them no attention. The deputies beside him were silent and rigid until they were beyond the west limits of Dixon and then they went slack in their saddles and the sheriff pulled forward to ride beside David. It was hot and the sun was powerful on him without the wind and by the time they reached Banning he was soaked through with sweat and his horse was panting. The deputies rode forward and sat high again until they had him at the courthouse. They
led him through the halls down into the basement and there was a smell like an old dampness in
the air. They passed through a heavy metal door with a fallout shelter sign on it and the deputy
on his right pointed him down the narrow hallway. At the end of it he could make out the cells.
There was barely any light. When they reached the cells one of the deputies flipped a switch and
two shaded bulbs popped on in the middle of the room. The deputy extended an arm and David
went in.

First on your left.

David went in and the deputy slid the bars closed. He locked the cell and left the room.

David appraised his surroundings. A steel bench sat against the wall and there was a trough for a
toilet and a spigot for water. He sat down on the bench and the sheriff came into the room and
stood in front of the cell. He scuffed at the uneven concrete floor with his boot.

If you got convicted, Dave, you’d be put away for a year. You aware of that?

David was still. No, I wasn’t.

When your wife called I just sat in the office twiddlin’ my thumbs. I doubt that woman
ever spoke a word of a lie in her life, has she?

David shook his head. Not that I’ve ever heard.

Well, I sat there for a while knowin’ she was telling it just how it happened. You’re got, by law. And I’m supposed to be a servant of the law, what law it is, these days. He leaned to see
down the hall. If it’d been me I would of drew my gun. But you don’t have the luxury of being a
hypocrite in this office. I’m not supposed to think that way. If I was in your shoes, I’d do this or
that. That ain’t even for the judge to decide. The sheriff shifted and he sighed. He started to
speak and stopped. I guess I feel like this isn’t a time for the straight word of law anymore. It
just doesn’t work nowadays. His eyes had wandered and he looked at David again. Am I borin’
you yet?
No.

If I was we’d just call it part of your term. He smiled and David tried to laugh. What it boils down to is that I think we all ought to be with our families as much as we can. Spending time where it’s important. I guess I signed on as sheriff to make sure that happened, try to ease us all out.

Out of what?

This world. He breathed sharply through his nose and hiked his belt. We’ll send a deputy your way soon as we’re able, get your horse home. He grimaced and turned his head toward the end of the hall.

When’s my court date?

I’m not takin’ this to court. The charges’ll be dropped or get lost somewhere. He had been avoiding David’s eyes and still was but his lips thinned and nostrils flared. I’d appreciate it if from now on you didn’t hide anything from me.

David said nothing.

Well. The sheriff hiked his belt again and left.

Samuel visited him that Sunday. A deputy led David out into a sitting room where Samuel waited. There was a small table in the middle of the room and two folding chairs. The deputy shut the door. Samuel got up from his chair and they hugged and David held him by the shoulders at arm’s length.

I don’t think I’ve ever spent more than a day or two away from you, you know that?

Samuel shook his head. Huh uh.

David took his chin in his hand and examined Samuel. You don’t look any different. How long’ve I been in here?
Samuel pulled away. Just five days.

Seems longer. He pointed at the chairs and they both sat. How’s mom?

Okay. She’s been working in the garden. She wants to start selling things with Becky, at the shop.

Why didn’t she come out?

I think she’s still mad.

He pinched a thin smile. Is Uncle Phil still staying with you?

Yeah. We got out riding sometimes. We fixed the fence.

David put his hand on the table. I don’t believe you.

We did. Samuel smiled. And I’ve been weeding.

I think you’re lyin’. Let’s see those hands.

Samuel put his hands palm up on the table. David leaned in and stared at them. They were red and worked dry in places. He flipped Samuel’s hands over. There was a blister on the side of his thumb and David smiled.

Well I’ll be. He put their hands together, Samuel’s smaller, smoother but growing. He sighed. You doin’ alright?

Yeah. I’m fine.

You like being man of the house?

I’m not. Mom’s in charge.

That’s different.

Samuel rolled his eyes. They were quiet for a while. It seems lonely.

What does?

Being the man. It’s just you if something goes wrong. It’s scary.

I guess it can be. But it makes you strong. If it’s just you then you can’t quit.
Samuel nodded. They were quiet again and David wondered how much time they had left. He glanced behind himself as if a mirror or a window might have appeared but it was just a blank wall. Samuel lifted his head slightly. I read your letters.

Yeah?

You’re missing some. There’s a gap in the dates.

David almost winced. There weren’t any. It got too bad.

Oh.

The door unlocked and opened. The deputy stood there and he jerked his head back. They both stood. Samuel came around the table and David hugged him. They went out the door together and hugged again in the hall.

Take care of your ma and Phil. Tell them I love ‘em.

Alright.

I love you.

I love you too. I’ll come back.

You better. He watched Samuel walk away.

Time passed. David saw Samuel twice more before his release. He was tan and his hands were callused. He told David about the work he was doing, about cleaning the grain bins. He and Danvers rode out to check the fences. Helene and his mother came with him and once she brought lunch for the four of them. Before Helene left she took his hand and traced over the gouge in his knuckle, mostly healed. She held it up and the middle finger rested lower than the others.

Most of the time he was the one of few inmates but there were nights that a drunk or junkie was booked in across from his cell. The drunk would be released in the morning and the junkies were taken away. His last night a Latino was brought into the cell across from him. He
was young and scrawny and his hands were blueblack with ink. The deputy left the jail and the
Latino sat on the bench and stared at David. Even after the lights were off he could feel the
man’s eyes. He was too young to have fought but a cousin or brother may have. He remembered
little Spanish and what he did was useless. How to say ‘freeze’, how to say ‘on the ground’. A
storm rolled in he guessed around three in the morning and thunder began to reach through the
bunkerlike walls of the jail. David strained to hear, halted his breathing. There was the altered
hush of rain, a different silence. It was impossible but he thought he heard hail and through the
dark he saw the shredding of the young corn, the plants toppling. He imagined Samuel in the
field picking up an ear of corn and dropping to the ground again, the crop razed. When the storm
eased David could hear shuffling from the cell across from him, murmurs, and when the lights
came on again in the morning it was as if the Latino had never moved. He sat on the cot, hands
between his knees, looking across the cell.

Hours later the sheriff came and walked him out and they stood on the sidewalk in front
of the building. The few trees around the courthouse had dropped smaller branches and leaves
were scattered, but nothing else. David was wearing the clothes he came in with and he noticed
the blood on his pants leg and the heavy wrinkles after he was given berth by the few people out
walking. The sheriff lit a cigarette.

I hope we never do this again.

Same here.

Sam’s comin’ out with your horse. Oughta be here in a bit.

Alright.

You damn near busted Miller’s jaw. The sheriff took a long drag and blew the smoke out
of his nose. If you have trouble with him again you pay attention to your woman. Go inside and
lock the damn door.
He smiled. Okay.

I hope you didn’t get set back too much.

David shook his head. I doubt it. But then, how bad was that storm last night?

Pretty bad. Lost power in the west side of town for a bit.

Was there hail?

Might have been. There wasn’t any here. I’m sure Sam’ll let you know.

Yeah. He pivoted on his heels to see down the street, then turned back. Thank you for lettin’ me out like this.

The sheriff put up his hand. Don’t bother. It was my choice.

He backed down the sidewalk a pace and stopped. I wanted to ask you. What was that Mexican doing in there?

Drug running. It’s gettin’ real popular. We’ve had it smuggled right here in town on trains, people ride it up on horseback from down south. Good money in runnin’. More than an honest job.

David nodded.

I heard you’d been runnin’ all around before this, looking for her killer.

Yeah.

Any luck?

If I had any I would’ve told you.

Mm. He snorted a breath. What’d your boy tell you he saw?

David kept his face blank. Just that it was a man. Nothing you wouldn’t have guessed.

That’s a shame.

I think he would’ve come forward if he’d known something.
David waved. He breathed deep and started walking east toward Dixon. The sky was clear and the air warm. Samuel met him at the edge of town and David mounted and they rode out. Samuel rode lead and David asked him nothing because they soon saw the corn standing tall and intact outside of Banning, and he was encouraged. After a while Samuel evened with him.

It hailed.

How bad?

I don’t know. Bad.

They rode on silently and the further they went the more corn was brought down in the fields. Once through town David hung his head and tried not to look to either side of the road. They put the horses up at Danvers’ and walked home. There was debris from the trees and from the corn in the yard and the truck roof was pocked with dents. They climbed the porch steps and Samuel took out the key to open it and when the door was wide he called in.

Dad’s home. He stepped aside for David to enter.
The harvest was halved. Winter and spring came and went colder and wetter than the year before. By summer the rain stopped and in the fall the next harvest was poor. His mother had enlarged the garden to take up nearly half the yard and the jars of tomatoes and corn and fruit preserves filled the basement. She took the extra to the flower shop to sell. It was winter again and the clouds were heavy with unfallen snow. Samuel went out before supper with a small cart and one of the mules. He carried an ax over his shoulder. He drove the mule into the woods a mile from the house and tied it around a sapling. The woods were dark and wet, the footpaths muddy. It had drizzled all day and stopped with the coming cold. The trunk of a young elm lay felled and drug just off the main path and the cut wood was like a yellow eye in the dusk. He set on it, hacking at the branches he hadn’t already broken off in dragging it out, and began cutting the trunk into pieces. He swung hard, raising the ax over his head and breathing a cloud of steam from his nose as the ax fell, living in the feel of the embedding blade and the slide of his hand.
from the axhead to the bottom of the handle. When he had the trunk in thirds the sun had set without notice and the sky seemed no darker to him. He dragged the thirds out by broken branch handles stopped beside the cart. Setting up the largest third he stacked the second and halved it, then the next. The last third wouldn’t cut without a base and only sank in the mud. He looked up at the clouds and back at the woods. His eyes seemed to pull and he realized the night had nearly come on. He threw the wood into the back and started home. The mule was breathing heavily as they came into the yard and Samuel hefted the wood from the cart and threw it into the shed. By the time he’d returned the mule to its stall and come out the clouds had opened in the dark and the snow settled in his hair and eyebrows. The light of the fire in Danvers’ house flung out the front windows. When he got home he pulled off his boots on the porch steps and opened the door. He smelled the stewed beans over the cloy of the burning corncobs and followed the scent to the kitchen. Danvers’ old black woodstove was radiating, the beans almost simmering over. There was a slight draft in the room and in the corner where the chimney angled out to the wall the newspaper packed in around the hole was coming loose. He went over to push it in further and his mother came in from the shed with an armful of dry shelled corncobs. Samuel reached out for them and she dumped half into his hands.

Thanks. I saw the wood you brought in.

Yeah. They bent side by side and dropped the cobs into a small wood box by the stove.

His mother wiped her hands together and stirred the beans. Did you see your father?

No. His horse was still gone.

She nodded. She stirred the pot of beans with a wooden spoon. Would you set the table?

Sure. He brought four plates down from the cupboard and laid them out. He brought out the glasses and silverware and turned at a stomping at the front door. His father and Danvers came in knocking the snow from their boots and coats before walking in. He saw their reflections
coming down the hall, and he took his plate and they lined up by the stove and his mother ladled the beans onto their plates and they picked up slices of cornbread. Samuel sat and waited on everyone and when his father sat they began to eat. Thin hunks of ham among the beans. His mother’s plate held little. When she finished she pushed back her chair to stand and Samuel stood with her and took her plate. He went to the sink and filled the basin and washed their plates as they came and set them in the other side to dry. The others went into the living room to sit while his mother and he cleaned up. He took the pot from the stovetop and dropped it in the sink. She was wrapping the remainder of the cornbread in paper.

You can leave that to soak, hon. Uncle Phil needs walked back.

Okay.

It’s starting to come down.

He looked out the window at the black. There were only the few lights of town and the silhouette of the fence. I’ll see if he wants to go now.

Come right back.

He went into the hall and to the living room. The radio was on and his father and Danvers sat across from each other on the couch and chair listening to the forecast. His father turned to Samuel as he came in.

Now’s when the coyotes’l hit hard, now that it’s cold. You want to ride out and set some traps with me in the morning?

Sure. He nodded to Danvers. Are you ready?

Danvers put his hands on his knees. Yep.

Why don’t you stay here tonight, Phil? His father lifted his hand from the arm of his chair.
I’ve got a fireplace. He grinned and stood up. He laid his hand on Samuel’s shoulder. Let’s go boy.

They walked to the door and put on their coats and boots. Samuel pulled a scarf over his nose and mouth and tucked both ends under the back of his coat. He opened the door and they went out and a wind came across the porch and cut at them. The snow was building up in the yard and was starting to stick on the road. Danvers shivered and held his coat closed at the neck and they walked out. On the road the wind came straight toward them and Samuel felt his cheeks dry and numb and his eyes stung from the snow. Danvers said something that was lost. Samuel shook his head and Danvers leaned closer to him.

Wind is somethin’ else!

He nodded deeply and kept his face down against the weather.

Think there’s some sleet in it. Feels like sleet.

They went on through Danvers’ yard. The early snow had been wet and it stuck to their boots and fell off in clumps. Danvers waited on the concrete steps and held the door open for Samuel.

Get in here and warm up a minute.

Samuel shook his head. I’m fine.

Come on. Get that fireplace goin’, you’ll be warm enough for the rest of the night.

No, thanks. He stepped back to the yard.

Suit yourself. Careful on your way.

Samuel pushed his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders as he went. The wind blew at his back and the snow passed by. He rounded the bend in the road and stopped for a moment to breathe deep of the cold air. There was the hole, the vacant lot beside the house, now covered with snow but he thought he could still make out where the borders of the shack were.
He thought of Melanie’s small marker in the cemetery and the snow piling against it. He thought of what flesh there might be and if it was as bitter cold as his, and if the coffin was rotten, if there were worms. The snow on the porch steps crunched underfoot and as he reached for the doorknob he knew it had not been long enough but the thought made it no warmer.

He got out of bed when his father knocked on the door. He put on a pair of longjohns and jeans and a sweater. When he opened his door he had to squint through the glare coming from the window at the end of the hall. He stopped at it and looked out at the bright morning and saw the snow fallen and crusted on the ground. Samuel went downstairs and passed the pile of snowboots and camouflage gear by the door. His father was pouring a pot of coffee into a thermos and he gestured toward a plate of eggs and toast with the pot. Samuel sat and took a piece of toast in hand and punctured the yolk with a corner. His father moved about the kitchen with the chest of his coveralls unzipped and hanging behind him. Samuel shoveled the remainder of the eggs into his mouth and put the plate in the sink and went to the door. He brought the pants with him to the couch and wriggled his legs into them and when he stood his father was waiting. Samuel leaned against the doorframe to slip the heavy winter boots on.

Not bringing the shotgun?

We’ll take the rifle from the old man. I don’t like leaving your mom without a gun, even if she wouldn’t use it.

Samuel slipped his arms into his coatsleeves and opened the door. They went out and walked to Danvers’ and Samuel waited while his father went in the side door and they shouted back and forth. His father came out with the rifle slung over his shoulder and they went to the barn. The horses came forward in their stalls and their breath spilled from their wide nostrils. They saddled them and Samuel opened the field gate for his father and the horses to pass through. They mounted up and his father handed Samuel the stakes and snares and they started across the
pasture. The snow was thin from the wind and it drifted in the shallow dips and gulleys and the horses stuttered often in their crossing. A low breeze lifted snow from the horses hooves and it whirled and spun down the field. They rode to the old fencerow where they’d seen the first coyote. They rode around until his father stopped and pointed at a path and through the brush. He dismounted and reached his hand out for a snare and Samuel gave him one. Samuel stepped down from his horse and watched his father drive the stake in the frozen ground beside the stalk of a weed. He pulled dead grass up to stand beside the stake and hooked the snare onto the stiff wire and took his hands away to examine how it hung.

Look good?

Samuel leaned down and said nothing for a moment. He moved back slightly to eye the path. The noose hung about three inches above the ground. Lower.

His father tugged the wire lower. Samuel nodded and his father got up and they paced around the trap to plant another. They found a smaller clearing that was worn almost free of snow and his father handed Samuel the mallet. Samuel was a while examining the narrow path and finally he knelt and set the stake beside a dead sapling and tamped it down. He strung up the noose and adjusted it. He closed an eye and bent close to the ground with his hand on the wire, bending it until the noose was centered. When he finished they went back to the horses and rode deeper afield. Closer to the house they saw the gathered cattle where they’d gone to ground in an old draw out of the wind. Passing on a while later they saw a cow standing alone and as they crested the small hill they saw a struck calf below it trying to nurse. His father stopped his horse and looked at Samuel and continued when Samuel rode on toward them. They saw that the calf had been raked out along its hindquarters and the snow around it was bloody and half-melted. They dropped from their horses and moved forward.
Keep back, Sam. His father held his arm out toward the cow and Samuel stood still. The calf began to bawl as he came forward and the cow turned to watch him. He stopped several feet from them and knelt to by the calf and he took several steps back. Hand me the rifle.

Samuel pulled the gun from the saddlescabbard and he gave it to his father. He chambered a round as he brought the rifle up and he sighted and fired and the calf stood propped for a moment with the snow kicking up and the blood spattering and the sound shocked past Samuel’s ears and the calf fell. Its mother stood dumb over it. His father held the rifle by the stock and started back for his horse. Gunsmoke hung in the air and though the sound had nothing to echo off in the pasture Samuel still heard the shot. They started out again and Samuel was askew on his saddle looking back at the cow. He pushed his horse forward to line with his father’s. Will she leave?

When she gets hungry.

Should we bury it?

We’ll pick it up on the way back.

We could use it for bait.

No. I think that’s part of our problem. Coyotes got a taste for ‘em.

They rode on. Toward the edge of their property they started south and rode until the woods touched the fence. They tied their reins on the fencewire and climbed over. His father took the rifle from his shoulder and held it angled to the ground and they walked between the edge of the woods and the fence. The snow was drifted deep and they lifted their legs high over the crust. His father stopped to point out a deer path and rubbings on the trees. They trudged on until they came to a depression in the snow where an animal had passed and started following it. The wind had worn the tracks to nothing but they could see the path and the broken plateaus of snow at its edge into the distance. They followed the depression back to the woods and ducked
low limbs and pushed through brambles until the snow was too thin to follow and they planted a
snare. They went back the way they came and planted the last at the side of a tree and started
back toward the horses. When they reached them his father stretched over the fence for the pack
tied to his saddle and found the thermos. He unscrewed the cap and poured the coffee into it and
drank. He looked at Samuel from over the lid and handed it to him. Samuel took it. He smelled
it and he breathed in a sip. It was bitter and hot but he stopped himself from making a face and
took another sip. He passed it back to his father.

You like it?

It’s okay.

His father smiled and drank what was left in the lid. He poured more and Samuel stood
scanning the woods and the field and he watched his father’s breath steam heavy from the coffee.
After a minute he screwed the top back to the thermos and they climbed over the fence and
mounted their horses. They rode back toward the dead calf and stopped at the rise of the wind
and turned to the southwest. In the stillness they heard the wind blow and it was a dry. He
looked back at Samuel to read his expression. The wind slowed.

That spook you as bad as it did me?

A little. Samuel tried to smile.

Well come on. He waved him forward. Wind’s bound to blow from time to time.

They rode on to the dead calf and his father stopped and told Samuel to wait. The mother
was gone already. His father dropped from his horse to slit the calf’s throat and he carried it back
and draped it over the horse’s rear. He tied it to the saddle and they went on together. They
stopped at the gate and his father opened it and they went to the barn to stable the horses. Samuel
brought fresh water and bedding from the other end of the barn and as he passed he saw his father
string the calf up. Samuel brushed down his horse and went to his father’s and its flank was stiff

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from the blood. When he finished he went back to his father and stood by. The calf was mostly skinned, hanging head-down. His father had spread a plastic sheet under the carcass to catch everything the blood tapped as it hit the plastic. He picked up the sheet and folded it overtop the innards and skin and bunched the slack in his hand like a bag. He spun it around until he had enough leeway to knot it and set it aside.

You wipe the horses down?

Yeah.

He stood and stretched. Doesn’t smell near as bad as a deer, does it?

Samuel shrugged.

They stood quiet for a moment and a drop of blood fell from the calf’s muzzle to the floor. His father wiped his hands on his coveralls and breathed in.

Well, I don’t feel like being in the cold anymore. Let’s warm up.

They left the barn. The wind had picked up slightly and they raised their collars and shrugged up against the cold. His father went to Danvers’ side door and knocked and they waited a moment and stepped inside. Danvers was seated by the fire and they joined him. Once they were warm they went to the wood pile and brought in a load for him and they all went outside. Danvers shuddered once he was clear of the door and turned his back to the wind.

Lord, could it get much colder? Danvers took hold of his father’s arm to get down the steps.

You say something like that and it might. His father looked across at him and the three of them started down the road.

That was rhetorical. I already heard it is. High of zero tomorrow.

Grand. Do we have enough wood?

Samuel nodded. I brought a lot in yesterday.
They went on to the house. Danvers walked into the kitchen and Samuel heard him sigh at the heat from the stove. His father and he stood by the door, tugging off their camouflage pants and brushing the snow off the cuffs of their jeans.

We’ll need to check those traps every so often. We might be able to sell the hides. You remember the butcher?

Yeah.

Found out he does taxidermy. They stood and went into the kitchen. Danvers moved to one side of the stove to let Samuel and his father stand by it. His father put his back to the stove and held his hands behind him.

Where’s your ma?

I dunno. Samuel shrugged and went to look out the backdoor. There was a light hammering from the shed. He got his boots and trotted over the beaten snow to the shed and opened the door. Mom? He saw his mother sitting on the stool with a hatchet, hacking the remnants of branches off the wood he’d brought in the night before.

She looked up. Hi, Sam.

Let me do that. He stepped in and pulled the shed door back to keep out the wind.

She shook her head and pushed the hair out of her face. You’re fine. I’m about finished. She leaned the trunk against her thigh and smiled. How’d the trapping go?

Samuel shrugged. Fine. We set ten or so. He thought of the calf and the blood on the snow. He crossed his arms in front of him and leaned against the worktable mounted along the wall.

Go back inside, you don’t have a coat on.

I’m okay.

You’re going to catch cold.
He pointed at her hands. They were white and red at the knuckles. What about you?

She sighed and set the hatchet on the table before standing the trunk up. Let me finish this and I’ll come in. You go wash up and set the table.

Samuel stepped forward and took the hatchet before she could turn. I’ll get it. He gave a slight smile and she stood. She stared at him and he stepped aside for her to pass and she went out. He sat on the stool and cut away the last limb on the trunk and stood the next up and did the same until he’d finished all of the new wood. He rubbed his hands together and blew through them. The sky was turning a darker blue all through the window as if the air was thinning between day and night. He took the ax down from the pegs on the wall and took two logs out to split and the backdoor opened before he could raise the ax. His father leaned his head out.

Get in here.

Samuel let his hand slip to the axhead. Okay. He carried the ax into the shed and threw the wood back and went inside.

You wake up sick tomorrow I don’t wanna hear it.

They were all sitting at the table. Samuel stopped himself from standing by the stove. He put his hands on the back of his chair and held back a shiver. His mother stood up.

Hungry?

Yeah.

We’re just waiting on the spaghetti to get soft. You can get the biscuits out.

Samuel went to the stove and pulled out a tray of biscuits. He split and buttered one and bit into it. His mother had come around the table to check on the pasta and she stirred the pot.

It’s ready. She took the pot over to the sink and dumped it into the strainer. She poured a jar of dressing over it and stirred. They all filled their plates and Samuel left the bread out. They sat and ate. The sun had gone down and the snow out in the yard was blue. Danvers stood
midway through the meal and excused himself. When he came back he shook his shoulders and rubbed his arms.

Boy, you get about ten feet from that stove and it is cold. He pointed at the window above the sink before taking his seat. You got ice on the glass, even.

The steam from the pasta had coated the window and frosted over. Samuel’s father stretched over his seatback and groaned.

You’d never think this house was cold ‘til you didn’t have a heater goin’.

Danvers nodded. I remember it used to get a little chilly even with one. Not enough windbreak up here, just sucks the heat clean out.

They finished eating and Samuel stacked their plates and washed them. He drew his fingers through the steam on the windowpane. In the living room Danvers had his legs stretched out onto a footstool and his hands clasped over his stomach. Samuel’s parents were sitting next to each other on the couch listening to the radio, covered with a blanket. The radio switched over to the weather forecast. Samuel went upstairs and opened his door and he stepped in and it was like being in the barn that afternoon. He took a novel from his bedstand with a letter in it to mark his place. He brought the book down and sat in the chair next to Danvers as he began to snore. His parents smiled. The announcer finished the broadcast and the music started again. Samuel read from his book for a while and glanced up when his mother checked the clock behind them. His father stretched his arms around her and they both stood.

She arched her back and looked at Samuel. You were out awhile. Aren’t you tired?

He shrugged. A little. My room’s really cold.

His father went into the hall and upstairs and came straight back. It is pretty frigid up there. You’ll probably want to bunk in the kitchen tonight. His voice was hushed for Danvers. Gonna be a tight squeeze with him in there too.
I’m not sleeping here. Danvers opened an eye. He braced himself on the arms of the chair and sat up, groaning.

You’ll freeze quick to the road, old man.

I will not. He patted his belly. Got insulation. You comin’, buck?


His father rubbed at his chin and yawned. If you’re gonna go, stay. I don’t want you slippin’ on some ice and freezing to death. Call home when you get there.

His parents went into the kitchen. Samuel went to the door and got his coat down from the rack. He handed Danvers’ coat to him and they put on their boots. His father stood in the kitchen doorway.

We got you enough firewood, right?

Danvers nodded. I imagine.

Alright. See you in the morning.

Samuel shoved his book into his coat pocket and they went out. The moment they were off the porch Samuel felt the full cold and he coughed on the air as if it were solid. They walked quickly and he took small breaths. His hands began to ache through his gloves and he felt his face stiffen. They said nothing as they went along. By the time they’d turned into Danvers’ drive Samuel’s back had started to cramp from shivering. They got in the door and stripped out of their coats and Samuel pulled his boots off. Danvers had gone on into the living room and Samuel followed beside the remnants of snow that had been tracked in. Danvers had a small can of fuel in his hand and he shook it over the logs in the fireplace. He looked back at Samuel.

I cheat.

Samuel smiled and stood behind Danvers as he struck a match and flung it into the pit. The fuel caught and the fire spread and they stood with their hands out before it. When they were
warm Danvers sank into a recliner facing the fireplace and Samuel got the book from his coat and leaned against the arm of the couch with the book tilted to the light. Danvers shifted in his chair and settled and shifted again and he stood and left the room. He was gone for a while and when he came back he sat in the chair and gazed off above Samuel.

Never get old. It’s nothin’ but trouble.

Samuel laughed once and dropped his book several inches. They were quiet but Samuel thought Danvers might say more so he waited to pick his book up.

Oh. We forgot to call your ma.

You’re right. Samuel stood. He stared at the fire for a moment and went into the kitchen and called. His father answered. They hung up and Samuel got his coat and brought it to the fire. He sighed. Dad wants me to go out and check on the horses.

He flipped the coat around and slid it on. He zipped it up and pressed it to his chest and trotted to the door and he could hear Danvers chuckle. He put on his boots and went out and ran to the barn. The heat faded from the coat before he got inside and switched on the light. He heard the hard clop of his horse stepping forward on the bare cement and it hung its head over the stall door. He rubbed at the bristles under its chin in passing and carried a bale of straw in and threw half of it into his horse’s stall and the rest into his father’s. He checked in on the mules and got them bedding. He glanced at the skinned calf with every pass and when he finished he stood by it in the cold. Rime furred the purple flesh and there was a frozen glom of fluid hanging from the unskinned nostrils. He stepped around it looking at the smooth curves of the muscle and he paused at the hindquarters. How the wounds seemed like nothing, not like wounds at all, only deviations. And how when he found the bullet hole by the shoulder it was just a hole, a depression. He’d forgotten it was cold out though he couldn’t feel his face or hands except for the pain in his bones. He heard footsteps.
Sam? You alright?

He walked around the corner to the door. Danvers stood a few paces inside.

There you are. I was worried you got lost or somethin’.

Samuel shook his head. Sorry.

Danvers waved him to the door. Well come on. You gotta be froze stiff. He started walking and Samuel followed him. Danvers had made hot chocolate. A mug was steaming on the edge of the kitchen table. Danvers pried off his boots and shivered. God, boy. What were you doin’ out there? You stick your tongue to something metal?

No. They went into the kitchen.

Your pecker? I’d have a hard time breakin’ that news.

Samuel laughed. No.

Danvers smiled and pointed at the mug. That’s yours. Take it on in by the fire. He walked into the living room and Samuel came in after him.

Thanks. He sipped the hot chocolate and set it down on a table and stood by the fire. His hands and face began to burn from the change and he backed away and sat on the couch. He got his book and opened it on his lap and sat back for a moment and closed his eyes. He drifted for a moment, and then what he couldn’t remember his mind filled in, magnified. It was the purple. She may have worn purple or it may have been the way the blood looked. At the shots he spun and his mind skipped and he saw closely the way she was twisted, half-turned, her face a blur now. Everything was so green and lush and the smell of the plants was thick. He stuck on that, thinking of the tunnel the trees made and the shade and the sunlight and her body laying there purple like a trampled flower because in his memory he did not want to turn around. Something dropped on him and he opened his eyes. Danvers had put a blanket over him.

Oh, sorry. I thought you was sleepin’. 
No, just kinda dozing. He pulled his arms out from under the blanket and stretched them along the back of the couch.

I’m goin’ on to bed. If I fall asleep on that chair a crane’ll have to pick me up out of it. Feed that fire all you want.

Okay.

Night.

He walked out. A faucet ran and stopped and Samuel heard Danvers walk and then nothing. He stretched out on the couch and pulled the blanket over his feet. He leaned his head against the arm of the couch and took out the letter that marked his place in the book and opened it.

Sam,

_There was a thing a friend told me once that your letter made me think of. It was after something real bad happened to me, after I lost someone. He told me that we pay for our free will by having to deal with evil. It doesn’t seem fair at all until you think of how it could be the other way. If you could take away all the bad things in the world it would mean never choosing to do anything yourself. You wouldn’t have the option. You would be happy but it wouldn’t be the happy that you think of now. You would be like a dog is happy when it gets fed. That’s all I can tell you. Things would be worse otherwise._

_So you got to deal with these bad things. Neither are too good options though, huh? But that’s how it is. You gotta work to make things good. Your Daddy and I fought for that even before we_
knew that’s what we were doing. It ain’t easy and it may not exactly make you happy but it’s the most important thing there is. You seem like you’re on the right track, Sam. Write back.

Your godfather,

Red

The letter had been folded in squares and the folds were wearing thin and cottony and there was a small hole in the center of the page. He put it back in the book and reached over his head to put the book on the table. He lay there a while listening to the fire with his eyes closed. He was tired and he tried to force himself asleep but his mind wandered and there was the green again and the warm sun before they slipped into the trees. There was the vague shape of the man beyond Melanie pausing in the road and lifting his arm. The daydream of Samuel flying out of the woods to the man and wresting the gun from him or stopping him altogether. The familiar daydream of slight difference, in which there was no convincing him or when Paige and Melanie grabbed him by the arms and carried him down the road he slipped free and ran instead of only dragging his feet. He was asleep until he twisted and kicked the couch and he awoke. There was nothing in the room and the fire hadn’t burned down far. He lay down again and turned his back to the room and slept.

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He had long dreams that left him when his father knocked on the kitchen door. Samuel sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The door swung in and his father stomped the snow from his boots and stood in the mudroom looking in.
You up in there?

Yeah. Samuel swung his feet to the floor and stood up and left the blanket on the couch.

He could hear Danvers coming from his room.

Let’s get some breakfast in you. We got work to do.

Samuel walked into the kitchen with his book. Danvers came in already dressed and showered.

Sleep well, boy?

Samuel nodded.

Danvers turned to Samuel’s father. Still cold out?

Yeah. He pulled his gloves from his hands. Radio this morning said today’s gonna be the warmest for a week. I figured we’d do our running now.

Danvers went across the kitchen to the coffeemaker. He poured water into the top and waited. Either of you want a cup?

Samuel’s father shook his head. Already had some.

Sam?

No thanks. He went over to the mudroom and got his coat and boots on. A draft seeped in through the door and he was already cold. He waited while his father put his gloves back on and they waved and went out. The air and light started him awake. He squinted against the white as they walked to the barn and got the mule and cart. They turned for the house and his father stopped and pointed toward the sun. It was low on the horizon and on either side of it were arcs of light like slivers of a rainbow. They walked on and Samuel put his hand over the sun and saw a halo around it. The sky was still dark blue.

Grandma called, said she’s about out of firewood.

Mm. Samuel put his hand to his face and began to yawn, caught on the air, and exhaled.
Did you not get enough sleep?

No. I’m fine. Samuel opened the door and they went in. Breakfast was waiting on them and they ate. Samuel showered quickly and dressed in layers and he went with his father back to Danvers’ to get the mule and cart. On the way to the woods they stopped for Samuel to get the axes from the shed and they went on. They stopped the cart at the treeline and went to work. After a while Samuel began to sweat and he could feel it chill against his skin as he swung the ax and his clothes breathed. He was warm so long as he was moving but when they stopped to catch their breath he felt the cold creeping into him. When the finished they loaded the cart and Samuel led the mule home while his father kept working. Samuel unloaded the wood at the shed and went back. He brought wood to the barn for Danvers and with the last load they went into town together and stopped at his grandmother’s. His father brought the mule around into the small backyard and he and Samuel stacked the wood at the back of the house. His grandmother opened up the backdoor.

You boys hungry?

Samuel looked at his father and shook his head.

I think we’re okay, ma.

She leaned further out the door. Lunch’s already made. You need to warm up anyhow.

His father leaned to set an armful of logs down. Alright. He stood up and wiped the bark from his coat and gloves. Samuel did the same and they went in the backdoor into the kitchen. His grandmother was at the stove dishing out plates of green beans, slices of ham and mashed potatoes. They ate at the table with their coats hung over the backs of their chairs and their gloves in their laps. His grandmother talked about the cold and about things she saw on television. When they finished his father stood.

We gotta get goin’. I’ve got to butcher a calf and maybe try and check the traps.
Well, alright. Thank you for the wood.

You’re welcome. You let me know if you need anything else.

Samuel stood and they put on their coats and hugged his grandmother and left. Outside Samuel pointed down the street. Can I visit Paige?

His started to hitch the mule to the cart. He looked at the sky. Yeah, I suppose. I don’t need you for anything right off.

Thanks. He followed him out of the yard and waved as they parted at the square. He went down the sidewalk. There was a hardened crust of snow and ice and the salt that had been spread over it was too cold to melt. He turned down the alley by the flower shop and knocked at the side door that led to the back. There was a breeze coming down the alley and a vent in the side of the building blew steam in front of the door. When it opened the steam was sucked in and Paige stumbled back. She came forward with her eyes wide and arms crossed.

It’s so cold! Get in here before I freeze to death. She stood aside and Samuel grinned as he went in.

You haven’t been out in it yet?

No. I’ve been stuck inside for the past few days. She reached her hands out to his face and felt his cheeks. You’re like ice.

Yeah. He was still and she dropped her hands.

It’s warmer upstairs. Come on. She pulled him along. The stairwell was cold and narrow. She opened the door at the top and they went in the small living room. The television was on in the kitchen and they stood in the doorway. Paige’s mother was sitting at the table facing the television. There was a dirty pot on the stove and a stack of dishes in the sink. When her mother noticed them she pushed her chair back and turned to them.

Hi, Sam. How are you?
I’m fine. You?

I’m good. Cold out there, huh? She had already turned back to the television.

Paige took Samuel’s arm. We’re gonna go sit in the living room, okay?

Okay.

She pulled him back through the doorway and they sat on the couch. Her legs were crossed and the propped foot bobbed and brushed his calf. They were quiet for a moment. He looked at her, into her eyes like the sky that morning, dark blue with fragments of white as if the sun frozen and shattered. She smiled. What are you looking at?

You.

I’d hope so. There’s not much else in here. She gestured at the empty room.

Yeah. He glanced aside to a bare wall and back.

So what have you been doing?

He shrugged. Working. Chopping wood. We set some snares yesterday for coyotes.

I wish you wouldn’t do that.

We have to. He lifted his hand from his lap. They kill calves.

I know. But it seems wrong.

They’d kill us if they could.

She sat back. I guess. They were quiet for a little while. A bell rang downstairs as she was reaching for his hand and she stood. Her mother shifted in her chair.

Paige, would you get that?

Yeah, mom. She glanced back at Samuel and he went with her down the stairs into the shop. Samuel stayed in the back doorway while a farmer asked Paige for a jar of preserves and loaf of bread. She went by to get them and he met the eyes of the farmer and nodded. Out the window a man passed, stopped, peered in. There was an awning over the shop and he was shaded
from the clear winter light and in it Samuel saw the same brightness of the woods. The man passed on. Paige brushed his arm coming back through and he jerked his head as if surprised to find her there in the memory with him. The silhouette of the man in the window stayed and he tried to piece from it the shadow on the road, tried to measure it. The farmer paid and Paige came back.

Your mom’s making us more money than flowers ever did.

He gave a weak grin. They went up the stairs again and sat on the couch. Paige leaned over to Samuel. She turned his head to meet hers and smiled and kissed him. He kissed her back and she put her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him and he couldn’t keep from closing his eyes. They leaned against the corner of the couch and she ran her hands through his hair. Quiet laughter from the television just over their breathing. She found his hands and put them around her back. Thin, he could feel her ribs as he ran his hands up, tentative, keeping from feeling the bra under her shirt. She tilted her head aside and he kissed her neck and they froze when she moaned over his shoulder. She sat up with her hand on his chest. There was no sound other than the television. Samuel looked out the window, a flash of purple crossing over him. His hands slipped to her waist and she frowned.

You haven’t been here that long.

I know. Dad’s working, though.

Paige moved over to her side of the couch. Alright.

He stood and leaned over her, his hand balanced on the couch arm. His head felt logy and he thought he might tip. I can stay a little longer. It’s a busy day, is all. Dad says it’s gonna get colder and he wanted to have everything done.

Okay. She gave a lopsided smile.

I’ll probably be able to see you tomorrow. I won’t have anything to do.
Okay. She stood up. I’ll walk you down. She took his hand and they walked to the
kitchen and he said goodbye to her mother and they went downstairs. They kissed in the dark by
the doorway and he saw the dim glow from the grates of the converted furnace. There was a
single row of thin store-bought logs stacked nearby. They kissed again and he opened the door
and she waved to him. When he was out of sight he turned around and walked to the cemetery.
The gravel road was snowed over and trackless. He followed along the hedges until the way
opened and the cemetery sprawled wide before him. He walked to her plot and found the tiny
stone his family purchased and he sat on his haunches before it and wiped it clear of snow with
his gloves. There was a small iron shepherd’s crook standing beside the grave with a windchime
dangling from it and the keys were frozen together. He cupped them in his palm and smacked
them with his other hand and the ice cracked and the keys rang mutely. He stared at the
gravestone and brushed at it again before standing and walking away. He stopped at the entrance
to the cemetery. The world below the sky was neutral gray and white and brown and the way the
road lifted up the soft hill away from town he thought he might walk to the top and reach another
place. He walked back into town and out to Danvers’ to the barn. His father’s horse was gone
and the calf was gone from the rafter. The mule was in its stall and he led it out to the cart and
hitched it up. He went out to the road and checked to be sure the axes were in the back of the cart
and went past the house to the woods. He searched for felled trees and cut and gathered as much
from them as he could before the sun set. He took the last armful to the cart in the near-dark. He
tossed the ax onto the pile of wood and led the mule toward town. When he passed Danvers’ he
heard a shout and saw his father come out of the barn.

Where’re you goin’?

Samuel stopped the cart and waited for his father to get closer. Paige and her mom’re
running low on wood.
His father got to the cart and leaned over the side. Cut all that by yourself?

Yeah.

They got enough to last the night?

I think so.

His took the reins from Samuel and began to turn the mule. You can get it to ‘em in the morning. It’d be pitch black by the time you got there.

I can make it.

I believe it. You’re not gonna, though.

Samuel jerked the reins toward the barn and his father took them back.

Watch it, boy. He walked the mule and cart to the barn and Samuel helped him unhitch the mule and bring it back in. They fed the animals and Samuel broke the ice across the mule’s trough and they went out. Danvers was waiting at the kitchen steps and joined them on their way to the road.

Anything in the traps?

Yeah, one. Managed to get itself caught around its middle. Must’ve worked itself to death cuz it was froze stiff by the time I got to it.

Huh.

I hung it up outside the equipment shed. Thought maybe it’d work as a deterrent.

I dunno about that. Danvers turned to Samuel. And what was you doin’?

Samuel shrugged. Cutting wood.

I wondered. I didn’t think you’d run away ridin’ a mule.

They were quiet until they reached the door. They went in and took off their coats and boots and went into the kitchen to warm up. His mother was at the backdoor, looking out the
window. Danvers faced the stove. He lifted the lid off the large pot simmering on the stove and smelled the roast.

Bless your heart, Helene. You didn’t have to make this just for me.

I thought I’d treat you. She walked over and took the lid from him. It’s ready. Sam?

Yeah. He went to the cabinet and got the plates down. When everyone was served they sat and ate. He thought of the calf propped on its forelegs under its mother and the blood around it, and he thought of it skinned, and the coyote hanging in the dark. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. What trap was the coyote in?

His father grinned. It was yours. The others weren’t even touched.

Samuel smiled, proud. When they finished eating they moved the cushions of the couch into the kitchen and brought in blankets and the radio and they all sat together. Danvers stayed in his seat at the table and when he stood up Samuel rose and got his things and they said goodnight and walked to his house. Danvers started the fire and left Samuel for bed. Samuel stood there in front of the fire and watched it. When he was warm he put his boots and coat back on and snuck out the door. He went to the shed and stood outside staring up at the dead coyote. His father had flung a rope over the light and drew the coyote up. He wondered if it had been the coyote that wounded the calf and if it was how perfect that would be. A roundness and balance that he could almost feel and almost palm in his hand like a stone. An order. It was cold and getting colder and the wind began to blow. The coyote began to sway slightly. He went back into the house and went quietly to the fire. He warmed himself and lay down on the couch and went to sleep.

Samuel woke to Danvers moving around the kitchen. He sat up and pulled the blanket off and stretched. Danvers was brewing a pot of coffee.

Can I have some?
Danvers considered him a moment. Sure. He handed Samuel a mug and poured it three quarters full. Milk’s in the fridge, sugar’s on the table.

Okay. Samuel took a sip. He burned his tongue on it and winced. He opened the refrigerator and got the milk out and poured a little in his mug. He watched it billow up through the coffee like silt in water. He put the milk back and drank it and saw Danvers watching him. What?

Nothin’. Danvers drank from his cup. Just funny to see you drinking coffee.

Samuel said nothing. He drank more and looked out the kitchen window. The sun was out and there were flakes of snow falling from the eaves shining like daytime stars.

I can’t remember it being this cold since probably before you were born.

Samuel nodded. It’s the coldest I can remember.

Well that ain’t sayin’ much.

He shrugged and gulped to finish his coffee. I need to get moving.

Danvers laughed. How much more like your Daddy could you be?

Samuel put his mug down on the counter. I dunno.

Both of you, serious as hell. About as quiet. He shook his head and smiled. Who was it told you Parrish men you have to carry the world around on your backs?

I dunno.

I mean it. You’re too young. He gestured with his coffee. Someone needs to head you off at the pass. I know you’ve had it harder than most but it only ever gets harder. You ought to be a kid while you can.

Samuel shrugged. I don’t know how.

Danvers took Samuel’s mug and washed it out under the tap. Quit drinking coffee, for starters. I’ll make you hot chocolate again.
Samuel backed a step. I have to go.

And do what?

Paige and her mom need wood.

See, now. Who told you to do that?

Nobody.

What are you doin’ it for?

They need it. Someone’s got to. He went to the mudroom and got his coat. Danvers pinched the bridge of his nose and Samuel stood in the doorway and got his boots. He looked up at Danvers as he slid them on.

What am I gonna do with you?

Samuel pulled his collar up. Beats me.

III

It was colder than the night before. His nostrils and cheeks stiffened. He walked to the road and went down it, pulling out the bunched up scarf from his pocket and throwing it across his face and neck and breathing through it, feeling the breath collected on his cheeks. The sun was bright and higher than he thought it would be. He crossed through the yard, over the packed snow, slipped and caught himself in front of the porch steps. He went into the house and climbed the steps to his room. He laid out clean clothes and went to shower. When he finished and came downstairs his mother had a few books on the kitchen table. There was a loaf of bread baking in the oven and the smell filled the house.

There you are.
He raised his eyebrows. Yep. He went to the cabinet and took down the heel of an old loaf of bread. He cut and put two slices in the toaster.

Up late last night?

Not really. He stood in front of the toaster and moved to get a plate.

Your Dad went out while you were in the shower. He wants you to meet him at the barn.

Okay. Samuel waited on the toaster. He took the plate of butter from beside the stove and got a knife out and the toast popped up.

You want me to make some eggs?

No thanks. He buttered his toast and washed the knife and dried it before eating. He took his plate to the table and sat down.

I’ve been putting a lesson plan together for you.

He blinked. For what?

What do you mean for what? For school.

He bit into his toast. Okay. He kept his head down but glanced up for her reaction.

You used to like school.

Not really.

You liked reading.

He stuffed the remainder of toast in his mouth and chewed. I still do.

She pursed her lips. It’s important, you know. So you can do what you want with your life later on. So you have options.

He tried not to smile. He swallowed and pushed his chair back and stood. Okay. He washed off his plate and set it to dry. Out the window above the sink the air seemed very clear and the land sharp. Well, I’ll be back.

Dress warm.
He walked out of the kitchen and put on his boots and coat and went out to Danvers’. He found his father taking the coyote out of the side door of the house, wrapped in plastic. He nodded his head to the barn for Samuel to follow him. They went in and he laid the coyote down and pulled the plastic back.

I had Danvers bring it in to thaw. You want to help, or you want to get on to your girlfriend’s?

I can stay for a bit.

I’ll make the cuts and you can watch that.

Okay.

His father picked the coyote up by the hindlegs and held them up against the rail of the loft ladder. He pointed to a length of cord on the wall and Samuel handed it to him. He bound the legs and let the carcass drop to the step. Samuel stepped around and watched him cut around the hindpaws at the cord and along a back leg up to the hip and join the cut on the other leg. He made a slit by the tail and began to work his finger under the skin of the back legs. He turned halfway to Samuel.

Getting this?

I guess.

Once he’d worked the skin loose on the legs he began to pull at the hide. Samuel stood back as his father rose and pulled harder. He worked the tail free and the thin string of sinew crooked downward limply.

Hold this. He lifted the skinned tail up and Samuel took it between his thumb and finger. It won’t bite.

Okay. Samuel gripped the tail and his father began to jerk downward on the hide. It came peeling away and as he worked it down the torso the fur inverted and the hide went skin-
out. The hide became tough toward the forelegs and his father stepped over the coyote and brought it between his knees to steady it as he pulled. The skin flayed with a sound and it grew thicker until his father had to cut at the forelegs near the elbows. He peeled the hide to the head and cut at the ears and the eyes and cut the jaw and tugged the hide free.

And that’s it. He held the hide aloft and he reached into it to pull it inside out.

Okay. Samuel let go of the tail and stepped away. He stared at the head, the red meat at the temples and forehead and the bony snout, the cavity where the nose would be. He stepped back again. It was alien-looking and deader somehow than it had seemed before.

You alright?

Yeah.

Let me throw the carcass out and I’ll help you with the mule.

Okay. Samuel went to the stall while his father took the carcass down. He led the mule out and met him at the cart and they hitched it up and his father paused before he gave the reins over.

You’re awful pale. Did that bother you?

Samuel shrugged. A bit.

Well. It gets easier. It might help you to do it yourself next time. He brushed his hand toward the road. You can go on. I imagine you won’t be back for lunch?

Probably not.

He nodded and Samuel took the cart to the road. The eyes of the coyote glaring at nothing in his head, the image of its skin coming from the nose and the twinning of it in that moment, all through the ride into town. He stopped the mule at the nearest lightpole and tied the reins around it and took the first armload of wood to the door in the alley. He knocked with the
logs and waited. After a minute Paige opened the door and she looked at the wood and glanced
aside at the stove and woodpile. She smiled at him.

Thank you.

You’re welcome. He walked in and carried the wood to the corner and dropped it. He
came back to the door. There’s more.

Oh. She followed him and he held his hand up.

Just hold the door for me.

Okay. Paige went back to the door. Samuel went for the next load of wood and she
opened the door and he went back three more times. They stood together by the stairwell and
boxes of vegetables his mother had canned. You want to come up?

I’ve gotta take the mule back.

She took his hand and they stood by the furnace. At least warm up first.

Okay. Paige unzipped his coat and he took his gloves off. She turned him to the side and
kissed him briefly. She opened the grate of the furnace and they pulled a few boxes together and
sat on them. They heard Becky open the door to the stairs.

Who was it, Paige?

It’s Sam. He brought us some wood.

Oh. Okay. She shut the door. They could hear her walk to the kitchen overhead.

Paige stared into the fire. She hasn’t come downstairs in forever.

Samuel grimaced. He squeezed her hand. They faced the fire and she leaned against
him.

The cold broke after a week. It got warm enough for the snow to melt but most of it was
packed hard and shrank only slightly, revealing paths and footprints. Another coyote was snared
and his father skinned it without telling Samuel. They rode out together every other morning to reset the tripped snares and plant new ones. Before he left the house one morning his mother stopped him and he wondered if he’d done something. He shut the door and stood beside it and a smile flickered over her face and faded.

Would you like to go out and visit the graves this afternoon?

Okay. He put his hand on the doorknob.

Thank you for getting that wood to Becky. I went to visit her the other day and she mentioned you came by.

He lifted a shoulder. He waited long enough to hear her sigh before he opened the door and went out. At the barn he could hear his father rummaging through a toolbox and he looked up when Samuel came inside.

You wanna go out on your own?

Why?

He gestured through the wall of the barn. Saw the yoke was splitting on the cart when I was givin’ the cattle hay earlier. Gonna try and fix it up before it gets any worse.

Samuel nodded and went to his stall. He walked his horse out toward the door and saw the toolbox was gone. He went by the equipment shed and stuck his head in.

I’m heading out.

His father stood up from his work at the sawhorse. Get the rifle from Phil.

Samuel ducked back out. He went to the side door and found the rifle leaned up against a wall in the mudroom. He hung it over his shoulder and walked slightly tilted to keep the gun up. He mounted the horse awkwardly. Once up he put the rifle in his lap and checked the safety before riding out. The snow was trod down near the gate and flashed the sunlight back where it had turned to ice. He relaxed when it was and he loosened his coat and kept his rein arm over the
gun and his hand rested on the saddlehorn. With his other hand he scooped at the air beside his thigh as if he would gather it. As he rode on and the land leveled he let the horse set its pace. In the distance the woods were rising and the thicket where they’d first found coyotes came into view. He turned the horse to set out past the thicket and he watched it and watched toward the horizon where he could make out the thin forms of the high-tension towers. The horse went on by the end of the old fenceline and he didn’t stop it. His heart quickened and his palm began to sweat against the reins and every moment that passed was one in which he might not go back, in which he was closer to away. He could find Red. Could find the place where the sand had come from. He set his hand on the gun in his lap. Then he drew back on the reins and the horse slowed and he rubbed its neck.

Alright. Let’s go. He pulled the reins left and made for the woods. It was a while before they were near. When they reached the fence he shifted the rifle and sat up in the saddle to drop off. He tied the reins around the fence and climbed over. He cradled the gun under his arm and held it at the stock and started walking. The tracks of himself and his father were worn down and frozen and he followed beside them slowly. He saw the first path ahead and he brought the gun to his shoulder and went on. There was nothing in the brush and he could see the snare was still set and there were no prints. He went down the fenceline, checked the remaining traps, reset one, and came back to the horse. After he jumped the fence he patted the horse’s muzzle and stood beside it, looking south, looking west. It was flat land in either direction but it seemed to lift up and become vertical as though it were something for him to climb and overcome. He mounted up and put the rifle on his lap and rode back to the barn. After stabling the horse and feeding the animals he returned the rifle to the mudroom and left. Samuel walked back to the house feeling the pull south in his chest as if he was the sick needle of a compass. His feet wandered and switched over themselves until the house came into view and he ordered his steps and walked up
the porch. The heat inside struck him and he’d started stripping off his coat before he shut the door when his mother came out of the kitchen carrying a casserole dish.

   I’ve been waiting on you.

   Samuel paused. I was checking traps.

   You took a long time.

   He shrugged the coat back onto his shoulders. Well.

   Do you want to eat before we go?

   I can wait. Is Dad coming?

   She shook her head. I don’t think so. He’s off doing something. We need to stop by Becky’s first and drop off this dish. I’m sure you don’t mind.

   Nah. He held the door open for her and they went into town. The bell on the door rang as they entered the shop and they waited at the counter. Paige came tapping down the stairs, slightly breathless when she entered the front room. She smiled and locked eyes with him for a moment.

   Hi. Restocking or shopping?

   His mother rocked her hand in the air. You could say both. We’re going out to the cemetery.

   Oh. She looked at Samuel again. Her face fell as if pulled.

   Would you like to come out with us?

   Paige frowned. I can’t. I’m watching the shop right now.

   Where’s Becky?

   She’s upstairs. She’s not feeling very well.

   Is there something I can do?

   No, I think it’s just a cold.
Well, I brought you two some green bean casserole. You mind if I take it up?

No, go ahead.

His mother went around the counter and up the stairs with the dish. Paige turned back to Samuel. She glanced at the glass counter between them.

I haven’t gone out there in forever.

Yeah. Samuel put his hands in his pockets.

I just can’t do it. Between Dad and Mel.

I know.

They were quiet. It wasn’t long before his mother came back down the stairs and around the counter. She smiled softly at Paige and leaned against the counter.

I know you’re low on the real thing, but do you have any kind of arrangement we could put out for Mel?

Yeah, we’ve got something. Paige disappeared into the back. She came out holding a small bundle of flowers and handed them to his mother over the counter. She took them and Samuel saw they were fake. He reached out and felt a petal.

I learned how out of a book. You just take a nice piece of cloth and fold it and sew. Paige shrugged. It hasn’t been worth ordering the plastic ones in a little while, but we had some material in the closet so I thought I’d try.

Good as the real thing. We’ll take them. She took out a bill from her purse.

Thank you.

They went out. They walked north, up the sidewalk toward the cemetery. Samuel saw his mother split the small bundle of flowers and she gave half to him. The path in the cemetery hadn’t been cleaned but the wind had blown some of the snow away and drifted it against one side of the hedges. They stopped at Anna’s grave and his mother put the flowers in the small tin
pot by the marker. She cleaned the marker and reset a small display that had been blown loose. When she finished Samuel led her to Melanie’s grave. It was still mostly clear. He tied the flowers around the bottom of the shepherd’s crook with a piece of wire that had been left there. He brushed at the stone again and stood with his mother. She put her arm around his shoulders and held him close. She kissed his head and he kept stiff until she let him go. He could hear the wind blow through the few bare trees and over the hill and the gravestones arrayed there.

In the morning they all ate breakfast together. His mother made biscuits and gravy and they broke the biscuits up until they were mush and ate quietly. When they were finished they sat still and wiped their mouths. She looked at Samuel.

Ready to start school again?

He turned to his father. You gonna need me?

His mother put her elbow on the table and pointed. It doesn’t matter. School comes first.

His father had a thin smile playing on his face. You’re off until spring, bud.

Alright. Samuel stood and pushed his chair in. He glanced at his mother and picked up his plate and glass to wash them in the sink. His father called to him from over his shoulder.

You ought to see if you can convince the Moore boys to come here for some socializing. Those two were like spit in a skillet last I saw ‘em. They always just run all around town?

Samuel nodded. They run around out here sometimes, too. He shut off the tap. They’re a little weird, Dad.

I know. You would be too if you didn’t have someone payin’ attention to you. It wouldn’t hurt you to have ‘em around for school. Maybe take them out trapping.

We only have two horses. Samuel set his hand on the counter and faced the table.

The one boy’s small. They can double up. He stood and picked up his plate. You could probably do with the interaction, yourself.
Samuel shrugged and took his father’s plate. He washed it and left to shower. After he dressed he came downstairs and found his parents in the living room. Walking in he saw the drip of the melting snow through the window.

IV

Through the remainder of winter he went out with his father in the mornings to check the snares and in the afternoons his mother schooled him. Toward spring he caught Tyler and Brandon Moore outside and invited them to the house. They joined him for school for a week and quit. Samuel couldn’t get them to answer the door afterward and the cold weather began to break and the rain started. His father said nothing about the weather, only going out each morning just before light and readying the planting equipment for the work soon to come. There was a bustle in the house that Samuel had not known for years. His mother put a dish on the porch steps to measure the rain and she checked it daily until the ditches on the roadside began to fill and the fields became muddy. He would be fourteen soon.

They caught another coyote before the weather turned warm and they rode it back together in the early morning haze. There was a light drizzle falling through the gray and it settled cold on their hands. When they reached the barn his father laid the coyote out and hung it up and the smell of wet fur filled the air. His father held the knife to the coyote and stopped. He spun the knife in his hand and held it handle-out for Samuel to take.

You want to try?

Samuel took the knife and stepped forward. His father grabbed the coyote by the hind legs and Samuel began to cut. He paused after cutting in a rough v along the legs and up to the tail and his father pointed out where to cut next. When he finished the cuts his father held the tail
and Samuel pried under the skin on the legs with his fingers and began to peel and the feeling of
the flesh separating crawled into his fingers and arms and he stumbled back and shook out his
hands. I can’t do it.

His father grimaced. You already did the hard stuff.

Samuel held the knife out. Here.

He let go of the coyote. No. You can finish it. He stared at Samuel from down his nose.

His father took hold of the legs again and Samuel pulled down, held his breath and turned away.
The hide stopped at the ribcage and Samuel shifted his grip and pulled until he reached the
shoulders and he had to cut again.

You’re doin’ fine. Keep going.

Samuel pulled until the hide reached the head and his father guided his cuts and he
wrenched the hide free of the coyote’s snout and Samuel stood with the skin in his hands and
dragging on the ground. His father took it from him and pulled the skin out. He went to the front
of the barn and brought back a long sheet of plastic. He wrapped the wet fur and took the other
hides down from the wall and stacked and wrapped them. Samuel stood by and watched as he
rummaged through the tackbox and took out a length of rope and bound up the wrapped hides.
When he finished he picked up the bundle and held it out to Samuel.

I talked to your momma about it. If you want you can take these out to the butcher
yourself. Up to you.

When he reached for the bundle his father fixed him with a steady gaze as if he were
handing him more than what the plastic held. He tucked the bundle under his arm. I’ll go.

His father smiled. Good. He reached behind his back and pulled something from under
his coat. He held it out for Samuel to take. It was a knife, the sheath olive drab and the handle
black. Samuel took it and turned it over and saw the combat patch sewn onto the cloth. He
looked at his father before snapping the clasp and pulling the knife free. The blade was clean but worn, unpolished.

I had your grandma sew the patch on. I know it’s a bit early for your birthday.

Samuel blinked and hiked the bundle up under his arm. Thanks.

You’re welcome. He was smiling broadly. You like it?

Yeah. It was yours, right?

Mhm. And this is from my uniform. He pointed at the sheath. Figure I’m not about to wear it anytime soon, so.

Samuel smiled. He stepped forward and stopped. They were still for a moment.

Well, come on. Let’s get you some food before you go.

He nodded and set the bundle on the tackbox and they walked home. The haze had lifted and with it the rain, though the sky was still a sheet of gray. As they walked his father saw he was still holding the knife. He stopped and pointed at his hip.

What you do is stick it in your jeans. Either on your hip or your back. He pulled up his coat. The clip holds it in place.

Samuel lifted his chin. As they walked he tucked the knife under his jacket at his back.

Now that your mom doesn’t know about. So don’t go showin’ it off.

I won’t.

And it’s plenty sharp, so don’t be playin’ with it, either.

Okay. They reached the porch steps and stopped.

You gonna be alright?

Yeah. They climbed the steps and went in. They stood in the kitchen with his mother while she finished packing up his food, her back still to them.

I put plenty in here. There are some sandwiches and the thermos has soup in it.
Okay.

You’re not letting him take a gun, are you?

No. His father winked at Samuel.

Good. She turned to them with the bag in her hand. Is there anything else you want?

Samuel shook his head. I’m fine.

She crossed the room to him and gave him the bag. Hurry up, then. You can make it back before midnight if you go now.

Okay. She hugged him and kissed his cheek and they followed him to the front door. A thought passed through Samuel as he stood in the hall. He wouldn’t know if it was possible until he did it. He wouldn’t know what to do until he did it. The walls around him became wide and strange and he felt set loose in them for what had trespassed. He looked at his parents a little strangely before taking the bag of food from his mother. They were staring at him.

I’m not going to war or anything.

They both winced. His father stepped forward and opened the door. I’ll help you load up.

They went down the road together in silence. Samuel took his horse out of its stall and tacked it and brought it to the door. His father cinched the hides onto the horse’s rump and put the sack of food into a saddlebag. He patted the horse on its flank. They walked the horse outside and he stood up onto it and his father smiled tight.

Be careful.

I will.

Call once you get to the butcher’s.

Okay. Samuel nodded, patient. His father stepped away and raised a hand. Samuel started the horse onward and they trotted down the drive. He slowed at the road and waved and
he was out of sight. He pushed the horse faster and didn’t slow as they entered town until he
turned at the square and stopped at the flower shop. He tied the horse around a lamppost and
went in and waited on Paige to come from upstairs. The stairwell door opened and he heard her
coming down quickly and she appeared in the doorway. She made a move to go behind the
counter and flashed a smile before going around it and hugging him.

Hey. Why didn’t you go around to the side?

Subterfuge. He thumbed toward the door. I’m riding some hides out to a taxidermist. I.

He paused, put a hand on her hip and distanced himself with it. It’ll take me all day to get out
there and I won’t be back ‘til late. But if I push my horse and maybe make a story up. He lifted a
shoulder.

You want me to sneak out?

I guess so. The idea just hit me.

Paige was trying to read his eyes and he could see her peering in and if she found
anything she would know more than he. Where’ll we go?

He shook his head slightly. I don’t know.

She glanced over her shoulder at the back room. She smiled but kept her head low. This
isn’t like you.

I know. They were quiet for a moment. I should go. He swung his hand toward the
door. It’ll be late.

Okay. She came forward and hugged him and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. He put
his arms around her and his hands were shaking. He backed away and she took his hand and let it
slip. He opened the door and before it shut he could hear the ringing of the register. He went to
his horse and turned back to the square and headed west. A farmer was coming down the street
on horseback and they nodded to each other. Samuel found himself sitting up straight in the
saddle, the handle of the knife on his back. He passed the last few houses and the dry pumps of the gas station, closed since before his birth. As he left town and the houses dropped away he felt as though he were coming into something, owning it, the dismal sky and the flooded ditches on the roadside and the fields that extended on ahead into vapor. Or it wasn’t his at all, it was becoming no one’s. He took the knife from under his coat and set it on his thigh. The wind had picked up and the clouds began to run against him overhead. The horse had long gone into a slow rhythm and he sped it under him. They passed a sideroad and he saw along it through a thin stand of trees an old church house and in the lot behind it a car. He went on. The land sloped gently ahead of them and at the top of the hill stood a cell tower. One of the suspension wires holding it in place had snapped and the tower leaned slightly. The remaining wires sang. He wondered if his parents dreamed of running engines and cell towers and satellites and the world left behind.

Samuel pushed his horse into a gallop he guessed around noon to eat time. He bent low against the wind and held an arm back to keep the hides in place. He blinked the water from his eyes and watched the breath cloud out from the horse’s nostrils and dissipate before it passed his neck. He kept on for a few minutes and let the horse ease back. When the fences disappeared and the land leveled before him he took out a sandwich from the bag and ate on horseback. The clouds were beginning to thin and the land brightened slightly. He tried to gauge the time by the light but could make out no sun. Far back into a field he saw the barn from their last ride with the roof fallen in. Time passed. He dozed in the saddle and daydreamed of nothing he could put to words. The shape of the day, the things his father gave him and their weight. It was less than a week before his birthday but he felt as though he were older now, more time was bestowed now, than by any day that had come before. He felt old and complete riding the horse with his father’s knife and with food and a goal and a girl he would return to and at this his heart beat into his eyes. It beat harder when he knew he could turn at the next road and disappear into country and
find what he didn’t know. He rubbed at his face with the back of his hand and found a smile there and he laughed at himself. A pair of blackbirds flew out of the remnants of a hayfield and one cried before they lit on the powerline above him.

He stopped in the late afternoon and unscrewed the cap of the thermos and smelled the soup. He wanted to sit up against a tree or fencepost to eat but the ground was muddy and the pavement damp. The sun ribboned through a thin rift in the clouds and he squatted on his haunches watching it and tilting the thermos up to drink the cold broth and drop the squares of potato and beef into his mouth. The gap closed and the sun was shut out and he rose. He capped the thermos back and rode on and the butcher’s house was shortly in sight. Samuel frowned when he saw it for wasting time and he pushed the horse the last distance and the hard clop of its hooves drummed through him and he could hear the gravel scatter behind them. He crossed the butcher’s yard and slid down. He walked it to the fence at the rear and tied the reins over and knocked on the front door with the hides under his arm. After a moment he saw the butcher waving him in through a window and he opened the door.

Place of business, boy. You just walk in.

Samuel tried to smile. Okay. Samuel moved to put the bundle down on the counter and the butcher held up his hand.

In back. He motioned for Samuel to follow him and they went into his house. The living room and kitchen were as they’d been years before. The butcher pulled a rough curtain from a doorway in the corner of the kitchen and ushered Samuel into the room. It had been a pantry, all but the top shelves removed, and those held small mounts of ferrets and raccoons, the bleached skull of a coyote. In the back there was a wide desk and bucket of solution and an apron hung from a nail on the wall. The butcher took the bundle from Samuel and he sat on the bucket and wiped his face with a hand and pushed his thin hair higher onto his head before setting the bundle
on his knee. He took a knife from the pocket of the apron on the wall and cut the rope and started
to unfold the plastic. The smell of wet fur passed through the air. The butcher eyed Samuel
briefly.

Your Dad.

What?

The butcher lifted his hand and shook it to dismiss him. He laid the first hide out and
rotated on the bucket to lay it out on the desk. He did the same with the others until he came to
the last and he held it up to his face and smelled it. This one’s moldering.

I just skinned it today.

The butcher tilted his head and eyed him. Yeah, after it sat out in the rain. Then you put
it up wet and rode hard gettin’ it out here. I can’t use it. It’s cut bad, too.

Samuel turned aside. You can’t wash it out or something?

Now if only I’d thought of that.

Samuel stuffed a hand into his pocket and frowned.

I can’t use it. The butcher lifted the snout of the hide. It’ll split over a mount.

Okay.

These others are alright. He stood off the stool and let the wet hide drop. I’ll get your
money out of the drawer. He flicked the light off by the door and Samuel followed him to the
front of the house. He went behind the counter and opened the register and pulled out a few bills.
He counted them in his hand. How old are you, boy? Ridin’ all the way out here by yourself.

Almost fourteen.

I guess that ain’t so bad. How long’d it take you?

I don’t know. Samuel shrugged. What time is it?

Just before five o’clock.
About six hours?

The butcher nodded. He handed the money over to him. Here you are.

Samuel took the money and folded it into his back pocket. He touched the handle of the knife. Oh, um. Could I use your phone? I need to call home.

Sure. The butcher reached under the counter and brought up an aged telephone, smoke-yellowed. He set it on the counter and gestured to it. All yours.

Samuel thanked him and paused before dialing. He tried to think of a lie.

You forget your number?

Samuel looked up at the butcher, startled. Yeah, for a second there. He held the phone up to his ear and pressed the tongue down for a delay.

Not often you have to call yourself.

He dialed again. The phone rang and emptied into quiet and rang again and each interval seemed longer and he realized he could say nothing at all. He let it ring again and then his mother answered.

Sam?

Yeah. I’m here at the butcher’s.

She asked him how the ride was and they talked for a few moments. He glanced at the butcher and down to the counter.

My horse is gimping pretty bad. I’m gonna be slow getting home.

Okay. Don’t rush it, then. I’ll let your Dad know.

They said goodbye and he hung up. He scooted the phone back across the counter.

The butcher picked up the phone and set it away. Trouble with your ride?

He’s got a bum hind leg.

Need help?
He shook his head. Nah. We’ll make it.

The butcher raised an eyebrow. You look squirrely. You’re not trying to fool someone, are you?

Samuel looked toward the door. No.

Did you just call nobody?

No.

I don’t abide liars, boy. It ain’t my job to raise you but I will not tolerate a lie.

I didn’t lie.

The butcher bent to get the phone again and stopped. Then why you actin’ like you got a hair up your ass?

I’m not. Samuel lifted his shoulders defensively. He stepped away.

This’s just your disposition.

I guess.

The butcher eyed him, his head askew. He backed from the counter. Alright, then. Get on. I guess you’ve got a long ride. He motioned to the door.

Samuel pulled at his jacket and went to the door and opened it. He said goodbye but the butcher did not answer. Samuel went around to his horse and rode out. The clouds were thinner. There were a couple hours of light left. He kept the horse at a trot as long as he could and he could feel it begin to favor its leg and he was relieved. The sun broke through the clouds at the horizon and the clouds were underlit and the land started to glow. Samuel slowed the horse and took a sandwich from the bag and ate. The glow faded and the land came blue and gray and he was left to himself in the dark.

The horse led him until a halfmoon rose through the broken clouds and he could see the fields and the road underfoot for a time until fog began to unbed itself and flow inches above the
ground. It rose around them and soon he could see nothing of the road, only the black ahead and
the moon and sky. The horse balked and its ears pricked up. Samuel took the knife from its
sheath and held it and closed his eyes, easing the horse ahead. He tried to hear anything outside
of the horse’s hooves and the shift of the saddle. The horse stopped and sawed and Samuel had to
pull hard on the reins to keep it from spinning around. He squeezed his legs and the horse went
forward and began to trot and Samuel looked back to see their wake. Eventually the horse slowed
and he put the knife away. Through breaks in the fog he saw the few lights of town and he wiped
his palms on the legs of his jeans and ran a hand through his hair. He breathed deep. There was
no one out when he rode in and only a few houselights were on. He kept close to buildings. He
turned the horse down a back alley to the side of the flower shop. He stopped the horse below
Paige’s window and waited. After a little while he saw her appear in the window and he took the
horse around to the side door. It opened and she was there in the moonlight, a heavy coat over
her dress. He felt a great coolness sweep through him as he reached his hand down to her,
rushing from his stomach out, and she grabbed his hand and he lifted her up onto the saddle
behind him and as they rode out of the alley he began to tremble in his chest. She put her arms
around his waist and leaned close.

Hey.

Hey. He smelled her perfume. He put his free hand over one of hers and turned the
horse back out of town. She was warm against his back and around his waist from her thighs
against him.

Where are we going?

I found a place. You’ll see.

Okay. She leaned her head against his back. I fell asleep once or twice. I was afraid I
missed you.
Yeah. He breathed in slow and tight. The fog was coming from the fields and at the square they could see it rise up and curl back as if repelled by the streetlights. They rode into it. It was thicker than before and he felt Paige laugh against him as it enveloped them. When they were free of the lights the fog was easier to see through. They came to the road and went down it and stopped in front of the church.

Here?

He smiled. We’ll go around back. He brought them to the entrance and dropped from the horse. He helped Paige down and threaded the reins through the handle of the door. He led her around the side of the building and they heard his horse nicker. The church shaded them from the moon and the ground was nearly black. She took his hand and they rounded the side to the back where the car sat abandoned. The rear window shone in the moonlight and the car was glazed in dew. They stood back from it and looked at each other. After a pause she dragged him to the car and he opened the driver’s door and she tugged him away and opened the door behind it and climbed in. He peered in at her and got in and shut the door. The windshield was broken to pieces and lay in scattered greenish gems across the dash and the front seats. Paige patted the seat beside her.

Well?

He shrugged. He watched his breath against the dark where the windshield had been. He swallowed. The world felt tight and timeless, contained in the backseat, the space between them. She edged closer.

Samuel.

He did not turn to her. His name brought the cold back into his limbs and he felt her at his ear, whispering. His arm was around her and she was kissing him and he fought their tilting and lost and they lay stretching across the seat with their legs overlapping. The knife pressed
against his back. Through her hair was the frosted window overhead and the blur of the moon. She ran her hands down his chest and lifted up his shirt and his breath came in a great shudder, then she threw a leg over him and sat up to shed her coat. He looked down at the bunched dress around her hips and the pink underwear and closed his eyes and when she touched him again he pinned her hands and held them. She stopped. She pulled her hands away and grabbed the passenger seat to haul herself off him and she sat against the other side of the car. She said nothing. Samuel sat up and straightened his shirt and stared out the open windshield. He could see a few stars, the feet of Orion climbing to the roof of the car. They were quiet for a little while and then Paige put her hand between them and he set his over it.

We should probably go.

She nodded. He opened the car door and went around and opened hers and after a moment she got out. They went to the front of the church and he pulled the reins from the doorhandle and they got on the horse. They rode back into town with the fog thinning through the streets. He stopped the horse at her door and helped her down and they stood together in the alley looking at each other until he turned his head and she kissed his cheek and went in. He stepped up onto the horse and rode with his head down until he got out of town and then he sat up and his vision canted back and forth by the jostling of the horse. Cows were lowing at him from the side of the road and they were dark against the gray earth and grass. He rode the horse into the barn and took off the saddle and tack and he watched it favor the lame leg as he led it into the stall. He fed and watered it and walked stiffly out into Danvers’ yard with the sack of food. He put his hand to the knife at his back and checked his pocket for the money and walked home. When he rounded the bend and the trees he could see the porch and the light coming from the living room window. He climbed the porch steps and heard his father walk to the front door and unlock it. It swung open and he stepped aside to let Samuel in.
How was the ride?

Samuel leaned against a wall and took off his boots. It was fine.

Have any trouble?

Some. There was a lot of fog. I had to go slow coming home. He hung up his coat and pulled the knife from his jeans. His father smiled.

You like it?

Yeah. Samuel went into the kitchen to set the bag down and he took the thermos out and set it in the refrigerator. His father followed him and stood in the doorway while Samuel unwrapped one of the remaining sandwiches. He put the knife on the counter and took the money from his pocket and handed it to his father and he peeled a couple of the bills off and handed them back.

Your share.

What for?

Delivery. Your birthday.

You already gave me my present.

His father grimaced for a moment then he folded the bills and put them away. How’s Don doin’?

Is that his name?

Yeah.

He was okay, I guess. He wouldn’t take one of the hides because it was wet.

That’s what your ma said. He called back a bit after you left, wanted me to let him know you got back okay.
Mm. Samuel felt the lie as if it were a piece of rope, cut and spliced, and the point where the truth ended and the lie began stood out and there were threads unused and worried in his hands. His father stretched his arms back and sighed.

Well, I imagine you want to sleep.

Yeah.

I’ll try not to wake you up too early tomorrow.

Samuel tried to smile. Okay.

He reached out and put his hand on Samuel’s shoulder and they walked to the staircase.

I’ll see you in the morning.

Samuel looked down at him as he went upstairs. He brushed his teeth and washed his face and went into his room and fell into bed. He hadn’t switched his light on and after a minute his father came up in the dark and walked in.

You forgot this.

Samuel saw him lean to his nightstand and put something hard down on it. Thanks.

Night. He went out, closing the door behind him. Samuel lay there in the dark, still dressed, his eyes open and searching out the dimensions of the room. They slowly built before him and he watched a corner lighten and darken as he stared into it. He reached over and felt the knife on the stand and below it a few paper bills. He lay back. He could smell Paige on himself and he wondered if his father caught the smell or knew anyway, or if her mother found her, or if the butcher had said anything, and on until he’d counted all the threads of untruth and in his mind the cord stretched on anew and before the splice it was white and now it was yellow. As far as he could imagine it was yellow, bright, and he wondered if the lie would ever turn back, if his life would always be yellow. The weight of the day pushed him further into the bed and half-conscious he saw the butcher and stretches of road and the church and car and Paige atop him and
her pale thighs and the white cotton of her underwear and he saw the day in the woods all green except for her thighs below her hiked skirt and the cotton around her ankles and the purple of Melanie’s blouse like a flower.

V

He helped his father plant all through the next several weeks. They had sold the draft horse the year before and so resorted to the mules. They planted the rows of corn nearly on top of each other to crowd out the weeds. During the latter half of the planting it got warm and it was always clear and both of them were sunburned on their arms. They came in from the fields hanging over themselves and they were of a mind from the work, never speaking, standing together at the kitchen sink to wash their hands and to make sandwiches or to eat leftovers for lunch. They finished and stood together and went back out. The day they finished planting his mother stood them side by side in front of the mirror. Samuel stood several inches above his father’s chin and he could see in him the aging of himself, where his forehead would crease, his smile deepen.

There was a late party for his birthday and for the end of planting. His grandmother came out, and Danvers, and Red’s mother. Paige was there but she could not get her mother out of the apartment. His own mother had gone into town to try with no luck. The weather was fine and the trees at the fence and in the yard were beginning to bud. There was a light breeze that was cold enough to keep their jackets on once the sun went behind the house. Samuel sat with Paige in the yard and they fended against a few of the children who had started to show at the house for schooling. Tyler and Brandon came and Samuel’s father got them hamburgers and they sat with Samuel and Paige. Tyler eyed Paige and Samuel noticed and when he put his arm on the table
Tyler sat back and picked up his hamburger. After a little while Paige pushed at her plate with her thumbs and looked at Samuel. He stood with her and they went up to the porch and carried their plates into the house. The doors and windows were all open and the low sun warmed the floors and they could smell the wood. They put their plates into the sink and stood for a moment to hear the people out front. There was a flock of sparrows in the tree in the backyard, singing. Samuel put his hand on Paige’s side and kissed her and she smiled at him. She pushed him against the counter and put her arms around him and leaned and he felt her stomach lithe against his own. He put his hands on her hips and held onto them until the front door opened and he spun to pretend he was cleaning their plates. He heard her open the freezer door and heard stairs creaking. When he turned back he saw Paige put her hand to her mouth and she leaned out and kissed him and her lips and tongue were cold and their kiss broke as she began to laugh. She dropped the ice cube into his shirt and ran out the backdoor. Samuel stood there for a moment before he pulled his shirt out and the ice cube dropped to the floor and broke on the linoleum. He opened the door quietly and scanned the yard. The sun was just above the horizon and the gold shot through his upheld hand. He stepped into the grass and went around the side of the house to the front. His table was abandoned, two plates and forks left on it. He went by the other table.

Paige come by here?

His father raised his shoulders. Haven’t seen her.

The rest smiled. Danvers darted his eyes to the other side of the house and Samuel saw and went on. He crept beside the house to the shed. He peeked in through the door and rounded the back. A cricket sprang from the side of the shed and he stopped and before he could turn Paige had dropped an ice cube down his back. He grabbed her hands and she was laughing and he pried another ice cube from her and she squirmed as he dropped one down her dress and she grinned and stood straight and it fell through to the ground. Samuel frowned.
That’s not fair.

Isn’t it? She leaned forward to kiss him and he met her and after a moment cupped the ice cube into the small of her back and she cried out and straightened. He held her tight and dragged the ice up to her neck and felt the downy hair that was loose from her ponytail. She ducked her head aside and the ice slipped from his hand. He grinned at her and put his palm on her cheek and he saw the water drip from her neck down to her shoulder and he kissed it and drank the drop of water and stepped away to stare at her. She was smiling softly and her eyes were closed. He put his hands back on her hips and he could feel the shape of her through the thin dress. He imagined running his hands up her chest and back and he could feel the slope under his fingertips even as he kept them still.

Sam.

He closed his eyes and backed away. He put his hands in his pockets and walked out from behind the shed. Danvers stood at the side of the house.

You find her yet?

Samuel held back a smirk. Yeah.

Just wanted to make sure. Didn’t want her to get lost somewheres. Danvers winked and Samuel watched him hobble away. Paige stood beside him and took his hand.

Walk me home?

Spring ended mild. It rained by days, a week or less between, and the ground drank and became rich. Abandoned fields grew tall crops of grass and weeds and the roadside ditches flourished with dandelions. It stayed cool and in the mornings when his father and he went out to work they brought jackets that were shed by noon. They weeded and mowed and checked the fences. The first cut of hay came in and they spent two long days getting up before dawn and
working with sickles. On the second day his mother came out with them and they fed the baler with pitchforks. In the evening Samuel brought the cart and mule out and they loaded the bales and he rode on the stacks while his father led the cart back to the barn.

Some days Tyler and Brandon would knock on the door and if they were in time Samuel’s father let them go riding with Samuel to check the fences and the few remaining traps. They rode the mules and Tyler carried their father’s twenty-two and they bickered back and forth over it but were quiet otherwise, deferring to Samuel and the thirty-ought-six he sometimes carried. They took short routes, checking sections of fence at a time or riding out to the creek to check the herd. He rode behind the brothers as often as he could and pointed them wherever they should go. One morning he came down for breakfast and they were already at the table. His mother smiled at him as he entered the kitchen and handed him a plate.

Your Dad already said you can go.

Great. Samuel took his seat and ate.

You and he get to build a chicken coop tomorrow.

Samuel raised an eyebrow. We’re getting chickens?

She nodded. One more thing to sell instead of buy.

Samuel set his fork down. He looked at the brothers. You ready?

They all stood. They stacked their plates and Samuel took them to the sink and washed them while they waited on the porch.

Do you have to let them in?

She went around the table pushing in chairs. Yes. They aren’t hurting a soul.

They hurt mine.

She set her hands on a chairback. Well, I just gave you the day off tomorrow. Unless they want to help build the coop.
Samuel rolled his eyes and dried his hands on a dishrag. Be back later.

He went out to the porch and into the yard. The brothers followed on either side of him. He got his horse and helped with the mules and they rode out into the pasture. Early on they rode in a V until Tyler brought his mule forward.

What’d you do to get a girl like Paige?

I don’t know. Samuel thought of outpacing them, rushing the horse ahead. It just sorta happened.

You gettin’ anything out of her?

He made his face dead and baleful.

So no. Why not?

Samuel went ahead of them. The fencerow thicket came into view and he rode toward it, putting his hand out for the brothers to keep going toward the woods. They began to ride after him but eventually corrected and went on. He circled the thicket, green now with shrubs and weeds, the young trees fuller than he thought they could be. A starling flew from out of the shade at his passing. He thought of bringing Paige out with a blanket and giving in. He thought of the car and of the shed and he thought of where she was now, at the counter of the shop. For a moment he wanted to ride away with her, ride out past the creek and the towers and beyond the fence and to keep going until it was night and he envisioned them sleeping under a tree, the sky brilliantine. Nearly white, so thick with stars, and the ground beneath them black. Even in his mind there was the pull, then, back. To the cemetery, to the creek, and to the green canopy of trees and the sunlight on the road. His thoughts darkened and went sour on the shadow of the man on the road. He traced his finger along the rifle’s cold triggerguard. There was nothing ahead of him but he imagined in the plain ahead the man walking or running away and he raised the gun to his shoulder and rested his cheek on the stock and sighted down the scope. The
satisfaction of the kick and the blood spray and the shadow toppling over. He lowered the rifle and breathed a halting sigh. The horse looped around the thicket and he turned it toward the woods. The plain ahead was clear and he checked behind to see if they’d followed him. Nothing rounded the trees. He rested his hand on the saddlehorn and let the reins lay limp in his hand. The horse closed the distance and as the treeline became clear and he made out the shapes of the mules at the fence he heard a shot. The horse quivered under him and he put his hand to its neck and broke it into a gallop. He dropped from the horse at the fence and flung the reins onto the wire and climbed over. Another shot racketed through the woods. He could see Brandon at the edge of the trees and he ran toward him.

Did you get one?

Brandon waved. There was another shot and Brandon jumped and laughed. He got him right in the face!

What? Samuel stopped beside him and he saw Tyler standing with the rifle to his cheek and Samuel looked along the barrel of the gun and beyond it there stood an old coyote with its neck in the snare and part of its bottom jaw shot off. It was nearly half as tall as Samuel’s silver bay and it was bald in strips along its side and the remaining fur was gray and matted. Blood poured from its mouth and its tongue hung free from the wound, its chops curled back and thick-rimmed with blood and slaver. It held a forepaw high, shot through. Samuel was still until Tyler tipped the rifle down and held it out to him, saying something as a red lid closed over the woods. Samuel leapt forward. The punch landed below Tyler’s temple and Samuel grabbed the rifle before it fell to the ground. He gripped the barrel in both hands and swung it like a bat and let go and it crashed through the trees. Samuel reached for his knife and strode toward the coyote, the thing crouching back and bubbling foam through its teeth. It jumped and Samuel slashed at it and fell with the coyote atop him. Its limbs worked at his chest and it snapped and growled feebly by
his ear. His grip on the knife became slick. He heard it pull in a breath and he heard it choke and spit as the breath left. His eyes were closed and when he opened them his head was tilted back and the brothers were gone. He looked up at the sky and the trail and the trees around him and eventually he rolled the coyote off his chest and sat up. In its leap the coyote had ripped the stake from the ground and the wire lay over Samuel’s leg. He took the handle of the knife in his hand and pulled and felt the scrape of bone. There were muddy clawmarks and strings of blood on his shirt. He stood and walked down the path to the fence, picked up the fallen sheath and put the knife away. The mules were still tied to the top strand of barbwire by their rope hackamores. He climbed over the fence and took their leads in hand and brought them on horseback to the barn, the coyote leaping over and over toward him, falling, as he walked home. He stood in the doorway and took off his boots and went into the kitchen to wash his hands. A chair rattled across the kitchen floor and he saw his mother standing with her hands cupped to her mouth. She said something through them.

I’m alright.

She came over to him. When he tried to finish washing his hands his mother turned him and he worried about the dirty water falling to the floor. She held his face in her hands.

Sam. What happened?

He shrugged slowly. They were shooting at a coyote. I punched Tyler and went to kill it and it jumped on me.

She led him to a chair and made him sit. She had a dishcloth and was wiping at his ear. It stung and when he touched it he realized a sliver of it was missing. She lifted up his shirt and he saw the raised tracks in his skin from the claws.

Oh, Sam. You scared me to death.

Sorry.
She shook her head and stood and went to the bathroom. She came back with a bottle of peroxide and she dipped a cotton ball with it and dabbed at his ear. Where are the boys?

I don’t know.

She straightened and threw the cotton ball away. I’ll take you to the hospital.

I’m fine.

Change your clothes at least. We need to get you checked out.

I’m fine. He stood and went into the hall. His mother called for him but he went on up the stairs. He put the knife away in his dresser drawer and went into the bathroom. He stripped and examined at himself in the mirror. He pulled at his ear. A thin line of dry blood led from the bottom of it to his shoulder and he picked at it and rubbed at the scratches on his chest. They faded to white when he pressed on them and slowly colored again. He got into the shower and stood under the water until the blood dissolved and he began to think again. He remembered in glimpses the shape of the coyote and its fur, stuck at odds as though it had been sleeping. And the muzzle. Its stance. Its tongue hanging and licking at the mouth denuded and the blood dripping. Things he knew he hadn’t even seen. He turned off the shower and dried himself and went into his room to change. He sat on the bed for a while with his hands on his knees. His mother came up the stairs and knocked on his door. Samuel stood and opened it. She leaned slightly to see his ear.

Your bleeding again. Come on, we’re going.

Samuel pulled at his collar and saw the blood. His mother went across the hall to the bathroom and came back with a bandage, pulling away the paper backing and sticking it over his ear. She took his arm and stood him up.

Are you okay?

Yeah.
She led him down the stairs and out the door, locking it, and they got in the truck. When they started down the road he caught her glancing at him. Her hands were tight on the wheel.

Why did you hit Tyler?

Samuel stared out the window. They were torturing it. I didn’t want it to suffer.

That’s alright.

Brandon was just laughing. And Tyler wanted me to try.

Well.

I couldn’t let them keep hurting it, mom.

Her lips went thin and she swallowed. That’s not the way to do things, Sam. You should know better.

They slowed when they got into town and stopped at the square, looked, and went on.

They sped back up.

How is that not how we do things?

What?

You told me punching someone isn’t how we do things. Dad hit that deputy.

That’s no excuse, Samuel, and you know it. Where did that get your Dad?

Samuel grunted.

He was wrong to do that. If the sheriff hadn’t done what he did your father would still be in jail, and I don’t know where we’d be. We would starve. Think about that.

We made it okay while he was gone.

We were lucky. She turned briefly as they passed a house. They drove by the sideroad and the church. The car was still there. They were quiet a long time and then she breathed in to speak. It’s not your place to punish Tyler Moore. I’m proud of you for stopping him but you shouldn’t have hit him. You’re fourteen years old. You aren’t his father.
You think their Dad would hit him?

That’s not the point. Whether he would or not, you shouldn’t have.

They rode the rest of the way to the hospital in silence. A nurse vaccinated him and a doctor checked him over. When they were checking out he stood by the door waiting on his mother and saw her bend near to the clerk and say something, passing her a check. He played the day over in his head on the way back, and when they got home he went up to his room and pulled out the box with all of his father’s letters, and the letters from Red. When he finished reading them he got out a notepad and pencil.

Dear Red,

We’ve been setting snares up here to catch coyotes for a few years, and I go out by myself to check them now. Me and a couple kids I know ride out sometimes, and today they found one that was caught. I was checking another set when I heard the shot so it took me a minute to get there. One of them shot the coyote twice. He wasn’t trying to kill it, just torture it. It was old and sick looking. I got mad and punched one of the kids and he ran, then I killed the coyote with Dad’s old knife. Mom said she was proud of me for stopping him but that I shouldn’t have punched Tyler. But it’s not right to just tell on him, or to do nothing. I wanted to ask you what would you do?

Your Godson,

Samuel
He tore the paper out of the notebook and folded it up. His mother called him down to
dinner and when he came into the kitchen his parents were already sitting. His father leered at
him and started to eat. Samuel sat and ate with them and when they finished he cleaned the table
and did the dishes. He found an envelope for the letter and put it in his pocket and went to the
living room where his parents were sitting, listening to the radio, his mother reading.

Could I go out for a ride?

His father lifted his hand from the arm of the couch and let it back. You could. You’re
not gonna.

His mother rolled her eyes from over her book. Oh, let him. He’s not grounded.

He kept his eyes on Samuel. You can take a walk.

Okay.

Don’t stay out long.

He shut the door behind him. He stood on the porch and stopped at the sound of the
crickets and the first of the year’s cicadas in the trees. There was no moon but the night seemed
light. It was still warm and the air was dry. He went down the steps and across the yard. A
breeze blew the cornstalks about, already above his knees. He felt soothed by the plants in a way
he could not name and he wondered how it made his father feel, and his mother. He wanted to
not be soothed. He wanted to pass the land by though he went no further than the empty lot
beside the house, just beyond the fertile square of grass that was the shack Melanie lived in. His
father never replanted over it. The grass there was thick and he knelt in it and passed his hand
over the blades and wondered what of her may be in them. He wondered if blood could burn and
turn to ash. He stood and pictured in his head what part of the square would be her bedroom and
where her bed would lie and he laid himself over it and crossed his hands behind his head.

Imagining her there, he wondered if he would be taller than her now, if their limbs would match
and if their fingers would line up. He wondered what would have happened if it had been her in the woods and Paige on the road.

His mother gave him a stamp in the morning and he walked into town to take the letter to the post office. Once he dropped it off he went up the street to the shop. He stopped for a moment before passing the window and held his breath and went in. Paige was behind the counter and she smiled at him. He saw the dark circles under her eyes crossing the room and he leaned against the glass counter.

What’s wrong?

I didn’t get much sleep. Mom was up crying half the night and the other half she was trying to clean the house.

Samuel frowned. Can I do anything for you?

Get me lunch? We don’t have any food.

He tried to keep his face still and to keep from looking up toward the ceiling, to where the kitchen was, where her mother was sitting, watching the television. He reached across the counter and took her arm. Come on.

Come on what? She wriggled against his grip and pulled back.

We’re goin’ to the grocery. Put up the ‘will return’ sign.

She smiled a little sadly. I don’t have any money.

Don’t worry about it. He drug her a few steps before she followed him to the door. She flipped the sign in the window and they went out. They went up the street, past the square, and walked through the vacant parking lot to the grocery. They passed the short row of carts and the dogfood and bags of salt and went into the store proper. They stopped by the check-out counters and he turned to Paige.

What do you want?
I don’t know.

Well, pick an aisle, start walking.

She took his hand and squeezed it and took him down a center aisle. She picked up a package of toilet paper and dishsoap and Samuel said nothing when she handed them to him. Down other aisles she picked up a box of cake mix and a loaf of bread and in the dairy section butter and half gallon of milk. She weighed the things in her hand and looked them over and when she squeezed the bread something in Samuel opened up and he smiled to himself. He took the items from her and she picked up a box of noodles and package of chicken breasts and a can of broth. She apologized and they went to the counter. The woman there greeted them and rang the items up. Samuel took out his wallet and paid and the woman bagged the groceries. He and Paige took them and walked out and Samuel walked in the street to stay beside Paige as they went back to the shop. They passed a farmer leaving the diner and he nodded at Samuel and asked after his father. They went on and the bell rang as they entered the shop. Paige put her bags on the counter.

How’re we gonna do this?

Samuel shrugged. Carry them upstairs, I imagine.

She flattened her eyes at him. I mean, how am I supposed to tell mom?

I dunno. Does it matter?

She leaned against the glass. I don’t want her to feel bad.

He lifted his shoulder again. Maybe she ought to. He went around the counter with the groceries and she followed him. They climbed the stairs and he let her pass him at the door to go into the kitchen first. The television was on and her mother was watching it, sitting at the kitchen table.
Hey, mom. Paige glanced at her as she set her bags on the table. Her mother leaned around her to see the screen.

Hey, sweetie.

Paige turned back to Samuel before opening the refrigerator. It was bare save for a small pat of butter and a few stalks of celery in thin plastic, a bottle of mustard. Samuel passed into the room and put the milk up and they went through the bags and put everything away. When they finished Paige crumpled up the bags and threw them out and she stood by the trash for a moment looking at her mother before going back downstairs. She stopped Samuel and backed him to the wall at the bottom of the stairwell. She kissed him and leaned over to see into the shop before coming upright. She kissed him again.

Thank you.

You’re welcome.

She hugged him and rested her head against his shoulder. I don’t know what to do about mom. It’s just getting worse.

He grimaced and put his hand on her hair, above the ponytail. The phone rang in the shop and he let her go and followed her into the light.

Yeah, he’s here. I’m staring right at him. There was a pause. Okay. I will. Bye. She hung up the phone and frowned. You’ve been found out.

I figured.

She sounded a little mad.

I better get goin’, then. He put his hand on the counter and she came toward him. She put her arms around him and kissed his cheek. He turned his head and they kissed.

You need to find a way to sneak out at night.
He pulled back. I’d have to learn to fly. Dad’s got good ears. He watched her grimace and he grabbed her hand and let it go before walking to the door. Go eat.

Sam?
Yeah?
What happened to your ear?
He touched it. Nothing. Got cut. He smiled a little brashly, opened the door and started home.

VI

He could hear hammering around back of the house as he walked through the sideyard. His father was bent over with two planks of wood between his feet. He stopped mid-swing when he saw Samuel and he reared up and pointed with the hammer.

Go tell your ma you’re home.

Okay. Samuel went inside. The door to the basement was open and he walked over and went down a few steps. He saw the bottom of the machines and his mother’s feet. I’m back. A sheet whipped out of the washer. His mother walked over to the stairs with it folded over her arm.

What took you?
I was with Paige.
I know you were with Paige. What were you doing there?
Nothing.

She came closer. Her head blocked out the bare light in the ceiling. It took you an hour to do nothing?
He didn’t say anything. He stayed still.

We’re going to have a long talk, Sam. You’ve gotten awfully unruly since you got to take that trip to the butcher.

Samuel opened his mouth and paused. They were out of food.

What?

Paige and her mom. They didn’t have any food. I took her to the grocery and bought her some. He dug out his wallet and opened it to show her. See?

She shifted her arm.

I was just going in to say hi. She looked bad and I asked her what was wrong. Her mom doesn’t do anything anymore.

She nodded and drew in a sharp breath. Alright. I’m sorry.

He tucked his wallet back in his pocket. He stood there for a moment and went back outside. The thing in him that had opened before became solid and he felt like he’d come on something about the world, that what he’d done was rare, and he felt alone. His father stopped sawing at a two by four when Samuel came around the shed and he pointed toward the frame of the coop.

You can finish nailing that corner together. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm. Ma lay into you?

No. He picked up the hammer and fished a handful of nails from the jar set against the back of the shed.

Why not?

I told her why I was late.

And why was that? His father shifted, switching knees.
Buying groceries for Paige. He looked at the other corner of the frame base and saw how his father had positioned the nails and he did the same. His father was staring at him and he checked the nail in his fingers and tapped it gingerly with the hammer and swung harder. The nail went in slowly and when he cleared his thumb he swung harder and it bent. His father stood and came over.

That’s fine. We don’t need to be perfect. He held out his hand for the hammer and Samuel gave it to him. The other nail lay in the grass and he found it and took it up and he squatted by Samuel. Like this. He swung. They worked for an hour or so and when they were nearly finished his mother came out and weeded around the garden. Samuel and his father finished hanging the chicken wire an hour before dinner and had fastened the plywood roof over the coop before she called for them. Samuel went in the coop to gather the tools and he handed them out and carried the jar of nails and the handsaw and they put everything in the shed. They stood taking in their work and Samuel toed a pile of sawdust in the grass. His father patted him on the shoulder.

I really don’t want to use the last of my tarpaper on this.

Samuel looked at him.

If you happen upon some shingles or something let me know.

Okay.

In your wide journeying.

He raised an eyebrow.

There were those houses on the way to the butcher. They still standing?

Yeah.

Maybe we’ll ride out and see. Samuel turned to the backdoor. His mother was standing there and she motioned them in. They went and stood at the sink together and his father swung
the tap over for Samuel to wash his hands. They sat and ate quietly. The radio was playing in the living room and it began to crackle and cut out and a cool wind blew through the doors and across their backs. His father stood with his empty plate and set it on the counter before going to the front of the house. They heard him exclaim something and they stood and went out to stand by him on the porch. A massive white cloud sat on the northwestern horizon and to Samuel it seemed blown out, as if a bomb had just been dropped inside it. He thought of pictures he’d seen in books. Everything of the storm was ridged and complex like a hive or nest. His father looked aside at them and back at the storm. He breathed in and stopped himself, exhaling slowly. They watched as the storm approached. The sun was behind the house and casting directly on the clouds. Eventually his mother went back inside. Samuel stood by his father on the porch railing and kicked his foot up in between two posts. His father sat his elbows on the railing and crossed his arms over each other.

Haven’t seen a storm like this in forever.

Samuel nodded. I know.

Used to love watchin’ ‘em.

Used to?

He said nothing. The wind blew cooler over them. Samuel opened his hands to the wind and felt the sweat blister forming in the web of his thumb. His father went in and Samuel heard him tune the radio. Samuel walked off the porch and stood in the grass and he saw the leaves in the trees going gray at the approach of the storm. The wind was constant now and the cornstalks bent and rustled and as he watched a clutch of swallows flew out over the fence and bobbed in the air and rose and were gone. He rubbed at the blister and pulled the knife from his jeans and leaning against the house to hide from the windows popped the blister with its tip. The sweat ran and he wiped it against the leg of his jeans. The storm had already come on far while he’d turned
his back. Samuel went to sit on the porch steps to watch. There was a rippling feeling in his chest and he wanted to get back up and pace but he kept himself still. Behind the gray underbelly of the cloud he could see the sky turn green and he saw the first thin fuses of lightning. He heard footsteps at the door and saw his father.

You gonna come inside?

Soon.

Radio says it’s gonna get bad. Grandma already called twice.

Samuel smiled. He turned back to the storm. After a moment his father walked away. Now the storm filled the northern sky and the underside of the cloud was visible and broad, nearly flat, and the green behind it was bright and sick. The first tremors of thunder shook in the boards under his fingertips. He stood up and took several steps to the road. A gust of air shut his eyes and blew his shirt open and it flapped against his arms. He had to cover his mouth to breathe against the wind and he craned his neck to see the top of the stormcloud and he thought he could see something flash and moil. The underside of the storm was rolling and the front rose straight above him. Lightning struck behind the trees across the field and the thunder followed in a seizurous boom. He saw the bolt against his eyelids.

Sam!

He spun. His father was coming down the steps toward him.

Get your ass back here.

Samuel backed toward the house and kept his head up to the storm. He heard his father behind him and felt the hand on his shoulder as another bolt struck and he saw this one wire down and brighten. It flashed and the thunder hit them and the bolt disappeared and flickered back. His father pulled him to the porch and Samuel stopped at the steps and watched as the clouds overtook the house and the sky above them turned dark with seams and wrinkles of cobalt that
glowed as if the whole cell were charged with a constant lightning. His father yelled from the door and Samuel climbed the steps and went in. He shut the door and went to stand in the living room to watch. The air grew darker and little of the clouds were visible for the porch roof but under them the horizon was a thick, hazy green that looked as though it could be swam through. The wind bent the trees in the yard and the wood creaked. He went to see out his parents’ bedroom window and saw a black cloud the shape of a slug twist downward from the sky and rising to meet it was a plume of dust. He yelled for his father and met him in the hall. He pointed east.

There’s a tornado, Dad.

His father put his hands out. Alright. Get down to the basement. He guided Samuel to the kitchen and his mother passed them to go see.

Did I hear right?

Yep. He opened the door to the basement and ushered Samuel on. When his mother came back they all went down together. He leaned against the banister, his mother and he sitting on a stack of boxes. They were quiet, heads lifted toward the ceiling. There was little to hear except the wind and the rain and the threat of hail. After a few minutes the telephone rang and his father started up the stairs for it.

David. Let it ring.

He went upstairs. They heard his footsteps overhead and the phone stopped ringing. There were more footsteps, toward the front of the house. The door popped open and then closed after a moment and they heard him come back and it opened again. He stood staring down at them.

It was the old man. He turned to the window. I think you can come up. It didn’t look so bad now. He stood aside and they filed past him into the kitchen. Samuel went to the back door
and opened it. The air was wrapped in rain and the land was indistinct beyond the fence. There were diffused flashes of light and rumblings in the distance. The wind shifted and the rain cut back against the house and he shut the door. The phone rang again and he went into the hall and picked up.

It’s grandma.

His father sighed as he came through the doorway. You tell her we made it?

Samuel handed the phone out. I think she knows.

He took it and leaned against the table. He hung up shortly after. Tree fell on the house next to hers.

Anyone get hurt?

Nah. Shook up the old fart livin’ there. But he’s okay. He began to smile and it grew. I’m about to make you and your ma mad.

How?

We’re gonna help fix the place.

Samuel sighed. They went back into the kitchen and Samuel stood by the back door. The sky was lightening and the rain was beginning to slack. Through the window he could see the leaves and small branches scattered around the yard. He opened the door and went out into the rain, looking south.

VII

The summer dried as it dragged on. It had rained enough for the season and the corn was growing high. There came storms every so often that would linger on the horizon long enough to throw down heat lightning and bring everyone inside. Samuel’s father and he split their time
between the fields and town, repairing Stephens’ house. The days after the storm were hot and damp and the rain had soaked into the house through the hole in the roof and ruined the front. They gutted the interior and ripped out the carpeting and knocked down the drywall. The last day of July they stopped for the third cut of hay. Tyler and Brandon came out for it and Samuel’s father gave them sickles and let them go. Samuel used the scythe and when swinging back he caught glimpses of his father watching him, standing beside Danvers at the baler, Danvers holding a cane carved from a length of the felled maple.

Samuel took to riding in the evenings. After dinner he would walk to the barn and saddle his horse and ride out into the pasture or into town. He rode south, beyond the mine, and took the country roads around town to come back through. People waved to him on the streets and he would nod, they would stop his horse to talk. He met Skillman on his way to the bank once and they spoke briefly. On the weekends he picked up Paige after the shop closed and they would ride together for a few hours.

One evening he rode to the shop directly and called to her through an open upstairs window and she came down in a summer dress decorated at the shoulders with the cloth flowers she made. He helped her up onto the saddle and they rode to the old schoolhouse. He let his horse go loose and they walked to the playground together and stood outside the fence staring at it, all of the equipment lost but for the bare poles rusting over the chest-high weeds. The slide top looked miniature and the merry-go-round took the shape of a spider, its handles peeking over the top of the weeds like crooked legs. One of the doors at the back of the school had been torn off its hinges long ago and they went inside. It was all varnished wood that he remembered as gleaming but the sand from the dusters was never cleared away and there was a thick coating of it that crunched underfoot and the sound echoed off the bare walls. There were smashed bottles at random on the floor, glass glued still to the labels, cans of beer set and tipped on the stairs. They
walked into the empty classroom. There were fallen and half-fallen posters and faded paper borders along the floor and ceiling. Samuel sat at a desk and Paige stood by the chalkboard and wrote their names with a nub of yellow chalk the size of her fingernail. She drew a heart around them and put the chalk back and lifted herself onto the teacher’s desk and crossed her legs. She cast her head down and gazed at Samuel through her hair before throwing it back with a flick of her wrist.

Is this how they do it?

Do what?

Paige rolled her eyes. She slipped off the desk and came toward him. Samuel straightened in his seat and looked out the window for the sun. Sam.

He turned back at her. Yeah?

What am I gonna do with you?

Hard to say. He stared up at her and watched her jut her hip out and put a hand on it.

She reached out for his face and pinched his cheeks together.

I could just slap you sometimes. She dropped her hand.

What for?

She shook her head. It should be against the law to be so ignorant.

He glanced down at his lap and began to pick at his nails. She sat down in the desk beside him.

Am I not pretty?

No.

Do you just not like me?

No.

Then what is it?
He put a hand on the desk, tracing his finger over a name carved there. He said nothing. After a while she stood up and walked out. He went after her but she didn’t turn around, and when he found her on the road after collecting his horse she wouldn’t take his hand. He rode beside her with the sun beginning to set and when they reached the square he went home.

A letter came for him the next day. His father gave it to him at the kitchen table during lunch and Samuel stood and opened it and walked out the backdoor.

Sam,

Sorry I wrote back so late. I don’t know if my advice will be any good to you now or not but probably it’s no good anyways. At your age I wouldn’t of done any different than you. Hell, at my age I might of hit the kid a couple more times to make sure he got the message. But that’s me and there’s a reason why you’re your Dad’s boy. Then again maybe he shouldn’t of named you after me if he didn’t want any trouble. Listen to your Dad. He knows what’s best for making people happy and I don’t know a nicer guy in the world. You start acting like me and you won’t make anyone happy including yourself. I don’t know, Godson. I don’t have things figured out yet either. I know how you feel though. I know that feeling real well. All it ever did was get me in trouble and I don’t want that for you. You shouldn’t feel bad about what you think is right though either. I don’t think I made much sense in all this, but I hope I helped you out somewhere in here. Take care, bud.

Red
Samuel had walked to the tree by the fence and he leaned against it and reread the letter. He put it back in its envelope and watched the cattle move from the edge of the pasture toward the creek. They had never recovered the carcass of the coyote and he imagined it flattening out as the ants and worms crawled in through the hole in its chest until it was only bone and ragged hide. He felt justified, unburdened. He went inside and his mother was coming up from the basement with a clothesbasket. The kitchen table had been cleared. He took the clothesbasket from her.

Outside?

She smiled at him and nodded. Mhm. What’s got you so bored?

He shrugged and let her go past him to open the door. They went out to the clothesline and he set the basket down in the grass. She took the bag of clothespins down from the pole and picked a handful out.

So you got a letter from your godfather?

Yeah.

What’d you two talk about?

Nothing much.

She pulled a towel from the basket and threw it over the line. You don’t write a letter to say nothing these days.

He shrugged again. I don’t know. I just asked him a question.

About what?

He plucked the other clothesline to hear it hum.

You don’t want to tell me?

He pinched the string between his thumb and finger and watched the wavering line pull together. You remember when I punched Tyler?
She raised an eyebrow. You what?

His face dimmed. I asked him about that.

She hung a shirt up and pinned it. What did he say?

Samuel stepped away from the clothesline and put a hand in his pocket. He said I shouldn’t feel bad about doing what’s right.

She let her hands drop to her sides. Is that what you think you were doing?

Yeah.

She shook her head slightly. She had a tight smile at one corner of her lips. Let me ask you this. Do you think you changed anything? Would Tyler behave differently if he saw another trapped coyote?

Samuel looked down. I don’t know. Probably not.

It’s more complicated than just doing what’s right. If you’re going to do something like that you have to know you’re changing things. She bent to pick up another shirt and stood. Otherwise it’s a waste. Your godfather had the very same problem.

He said nothing. He was shaking slightly though it was hot and there was no breeze.

And a fourteen year old shouldn’t be deciding what’s right and wrong. You shouldn’t be worried about it.

He backed another step. He put his hands in his pockets to still their trembling. I guess.

She pinned a pair of jeans and dragged the basket down the line. They were quiet for a little while and she went on hanging up the clothes. Staring isn’t going to make them dry faster, if you’re waiting on a change of clothes.

He shook his head. No. He rocked on his feet and put a thumb over his shoulder, toward town. Can I go see Paige?

I don’t see why not. Are you gonna ride?
I think I’ll walk.

Okay. Make sure your Dad doesn’t want you for something.

Yeah. He went into the house. His father had his feet kicked up onto a stool, reading in the living room. When Samuel came in he put his thumb on the inside of the spine and shut the book.

Feels like I haven’t just sat in the daytime in years. ‘specially in summer.

Samuel nodded. I’m gonna go into town.

Okay. You want a little pocket change?

No, I’m okay.

I think you’re too old for a Skillman allowance. Why don’t you just take a few dollars?

He put his book aside and pulled his wallet out from under him. He handed Samuel a five. That’ll get you both a meal, at least.

Samuel glanced at the money and came forward to take it. Thank you. He left the house and went down the road. He saw Danvers walking back from the barn as he passed and Samuel held up a hand.

Hey boy! Hold them horses. Danvers came down the drive and Samuel met. You got no time for an old man?

I’ve got time.

You better. He raised his cane to prod at Samuel, and Samuel batted it aside. Lord you’re gettin’ big. Or I’m shrinkin’.

I think you’re just hunched over.

Well I can’t help that. He rested his hands on his cane. Goin’ to see your philly?

Samuel paused. Yeah.

You get her a ring yet?
Samuel narrowed his eyes. What?

He grinned and lifted his cane and set it back. Can’t do it too early, I swear to you. I asked Anna to marry me when I was ten years old. You know what she did?

What?

Said no and chucked a rock at me.

Samuel smiled.

I don’t blame her. I was all teeth and ears back then. He stood looking off and he leaned his cane forward and back.

So I’m old enough now?

What’s that?

You told me a while back I need to act more like a kid.

Danvers scratched at his hand, shaking his head. I never felt younger than when I was chasin’ Anna around the house. He glanced away and back. I don’t know what I’m talkin’ about. Go on, boy.

Samuel pointed past him. Did you need help with something in the barn?

Nah. Just went in there to check around. Your horse kicked his stall. Think he broke wind and surprised himself.

Alright. He grinned. I’ll see you. Samuel returned to the road. He felt the bill in his pocket and when he got to the square turned toward the cemetery. There was cut grass along the roadside and the air was thick with the smell. He went to Melanie’s grave and he sat beside the stone for a while thinking of her and her parents. He wondered if they were dead and he wondered if there was anything he was paying respect to anymore or if he was only hiding his fear with the gesture. He put his hand in the grass beside him and he tried to feel how far she was below his palm. As if the ground would tell him. He closed his eyes and rested his head against
the stone. He could still see the trees and the hill against his eyelids and the image expanded until he was seeing beyond the cemetery and the town and the land was vast and green to be trod on and all he wanted was to leave and to have left nothing behind. He stood up and read her name and the dates and he pressed the heel of his hand to the simple graven flower at the top. When he took it away the skin was white and patterned, bloodless as the moon.

He brought a small sack of groceries into the flower shop and Paige ignored him while waiting on a customer. He went to the counter and she gave change to the woman and he nodded at her as she went by. Samuel set the bag on the counter.

It's not much. Just some stuff for sandwiches.

She was staring at him. I’m still mad at you.

Okay. He put his hands on the glass countertop and breathed in and went around it and he took her in his arms and felt her hands at his chest just before he kissed her. She pushed for just a moment and her arms went slack. The kiss broke and she patted her hand on his breastbone.

What was that for?

He was still holding her. Does it have to be for something?

With you? Yeah.

He smiled. I dunno.

Something’s gotten into you.

He pulled her close by the hips. Well make use of it before it gets away.

She looked toward the door. I can’t. I have to work.

You work harder’n I do.

I know. She glanced up at him and grinned. If I make you wait ‘til this evening will it be too late?
I couldn’t say.

She shook her head at him, still smiling. Can you sneak out?

I can try.

Try. She checked the door again and then stared down between them, where their hips met. Meet me in the alley?

Okay. He kissed her and his eyes were closed tight. She pushed him away.

Now get out of here. You’re gonna drive me crazy.

He dropped his hands and stepped back. Alright. I’ll see you tonight. He went around the counter and to the door. He pointed at the bag before stepping through. Eat.

She was smiling to herself, warmly, and it broadened to a grin.

When he got home his father and Danvers were sitting in the living room talking.

Samuel stopped in the doorway and his father looked up at him.

Back early.

Yeah.

Phil said he ran into you.

Yeah. He told me to marry Paige.

His father cast his eyes sidelong at Danvers. That is a damn fool thing to say. Ignore him. Marry her when you’re thirty.

Danvers laughed and he put his hand up to hide his mouth. I’ll float you the ring money.

Hush up.

But you’re on your own for the honeymoon.

Samuel smiled and went on to the kitchen. He made himself a sandwich and stood at the counter eating and watching his mother in the garden with a basket at her feet. He finished his sandwich and got a drink of water and he gulped at it and went upstairs, remembering where his
feet went and the noise they made. The way into his room and the door were mostly silent, and
he stood in the room a moment before going back downstairs. He opened the backdoor and went
outside listening to the hinges creek when he opened the door wide. He shook away the feeling
of intrusion and of his transparency. His mother waved at him.

Do you want to ride this into town? She lifted the basket.

Taking it to the shop?

To Mr. Stephens. It’s just some tomatoes and sweet corn.

I can. I just got back. He walked over and took the basket. He thought he might be
flushed and that she would see.

It can wait if you like. Did you eat?

Yeah. He picked up the basket and took it inside. He set the basket on the counter and
went to the living room to sit beside his father. The two men had paused in their conversation as
he came in and Samuel paid it no mind.

They all went into town together with the basket for Stephens and another for Samuel’s
grandmother. There were hours of daylight yet and Samuel, his father and Danvers stood with
Stephens in his yard examining the repairs they’d made and talking about what they would do
next. Most of the tree had been cut up for firewood, but the uprooted stump was in place and
Samuel stood on it and looked over the fence toward the square, the shop out of sight. He left the
men and went next door. The television was on and snowy. He passed through to the kitchen
and saw his mother and grandmother sitting in chairs on the concrete patio out back. His
grandmother beckoned to him and he came outside.

Come on and sit a spell. She waved him on over to him. You’re next door about every
day and I still don’t see ya. Why is that?

He bent to hug her. I dunno, grandma.
You just too busy for me? Want me to tell your Dad to quit runnin’ you ragged?

That’d be nice.

She turned to his mother. Shouldn’t be workin’ my grandkid so hard. I only have the one.

His mother pushed herself back in her seat.

I don’t really mind it that much.

Keeps you out of trouble?

His mother waved a hand in the air. He gets into plenty anyway.

Oh, really?

I guess. Samuel shrugged.

A little’s good for you. His grandmother put her hand out to touch Samuel’s arm. You don’t know half of what your Dad’s done. He raised plenty of hell in school.

That reminds me, Sam. It’s about time you started again.

Can’t it wait until harvest or something?

She shook her head and smiled. Samuel groaned. He sat listening to the women talk and eventually his father and Danvers walked around the house to sit with them. His father grilled chicken and they had corn and baked beans. They stayed out past nightfall and Samuel watched the moths and junebugs orbit the porch light and every so often his heart would pound when he remembered what he was to do. Danvers mentioned the hour and that he was tired and everyone began to rise. They said goodbye to his grandmother and walked home, parting with Danvers and going on. The house was quiet and settling in the cool evening and his parents went around shutting the downstairs windows. Samuel went upstairs and brushed his teeth and washed his face and said goodnight to his parents. He kept his light on for a while then shut it off. He sat against the headboard of his bed and checked the clock and the numbers seemed to freeze and
each minute took a thousand breaths. His door was left open partway and through it he waited to see moonlight come into the hall but it never came. He dried his palms on his jeans.

He’d fallen asleep. He hadn’t moved from the headboard and his neck was stiff and hurt when he looked at the clock. It was later than he meant to leave. He slid off the bed and touched his feet to the floor and was quiet. There was nothing to hear. He stood and crept to his door and slipped sideways through the gap he’d left in it. The sky out the window was oddly bright and colored and he imagined the moon was hanging orange on the horizon. He padded at his clothes and pockets to be sure he was composed before he went to the stairs. Their door was shut and he could hear nothing, barely his own movements. His legs were wide-gaited to keep his jeans from rubbing together. At the bottom step he paused for a moment and bent to pick up his boots. He went down the hallway with them, sliding along rather than stepping. The back door was shut and locked and he set his boots down to ease the bolt back with both hands heavy on the lock to absorb the noise. He opened the door and then the screen door and he stepped outside before turning to shut the first. The screen door closed quietly and he took a deep breath, looking up. The sky was red.

God. He barely realized he spoke. It was red and bright and the light came across it in broad furls like a windblown sheet or the whirling of snow or dust across a road. It fell over the sky and he could see the shape of the sky by it, the vault, domed. He tied the laces of his boots and stood. The grass and the corn and the trees were all reddened. He went around the house and walked down the road and his shadow fell short before him the color of wine. The powerlines along the road were humming. When he rounded the bend he began to run and he passed Danvers’ house. The light on the barn was glowing brightly. He ran into town and slowed by the first houses. The streetlights were buzzing and flickering and he could just make out the red for the glare, flowing in the black above the lights and buildings like a river. Paige was coming out
of the alley when he got to the square, arms crossed, and he pointed up at the sky. They met in the middle of the street and he guided her eyes directly above them.

It’s an aurora.

She was squinting and she took his arm. We’ll see it better outside town. She stepped back from him still holding his arm. How do I look?

He took her in. She was wearing a thin sheer dress and it took the streetlights in stripes around her hips and her hair was pinned up behind her head and seemed darker. He smiled. You look good. Pretty.

She reached for his hand. So let’s go.

Okay. He’d forgotten the purpose of the night when he saw the sky. They started walking and he snuck glimpses of her beside him. As they went out of town the lights fell away and the aurora became brighter. They watched it as they walked and the keys of light seemed to curl and unroll and fly back away from them. The church was ahead and they turned down the road Paige began to walk faster and in the lot she started to lead him and she was pulling him along until they reached the back of the car and she leaned against the trunk and dragged him to her and they kissed. She pushed him a few inches back and stared at him with her face still tilted.

We haven’t danced. We’re supposed to dance before we do this.

Are we?

Yeah.

I don’t know how. He shrugged.

Neither do I. Paige smiled sadly before pulling Samuel back to her and they kissed again. He put his hands on her waist and felt her hips through the thin material. She turned her head aside for him to kiss her neck and he leaned down and brushed his lips by the cradle of her jaw. He breathed deep and felt a heat spreading through him and into his arms, a heat with mass and
shape and it seemed he could see from beyond himself, the light of the aurora washing over them, Paige’s neck, and he lifted her from the trunk and they rolled along the side of the car and tumbled themselves into the backseat with no memory of opening the door. She lay down across the seat and he balanced himself over her with the door still open. He slipped his arms under her back and they kissed and he found the zipper of her dress without meaning to and pulled it down and she let it drop off her shoulders and caught his eye before he began to pull it further. Her chest was flushed and warm to his lips as he dragged them along her collar and moved lower. He felt his heartbeat from throat to jaw before he kissed the small rise of her breast and kissed the other as if it were a ritual, or a ward.

She said his name and drew him up with her hands. Samuel.

He looked at her. His eyes had been closed tight and he saw her hair had come loose and had fallen over the seat and he brushed at it with his hand. She was smiling deeply and he felt like laughing. She circled her arms around his back and pulled him down to her again. When her hands were at belt he lifted his hips for her and she began to undo the buckle. She fumbled with it for a time and he leaned aside and pulled it free and unbuttoned his jeans and rolled back on top of her. She was pulling down at them and he let her struggle and went on kissing her neck until she moaned, exasperated, and he pulled them down with his underwear. He felt strange being half-naked and he sat on the edge of the seat and shucked off his boots and tossed them and his pants out onto the ground and took off his shirt. The grass was tinted and through the back window the aurora was deep red with green ribboning through it. He leaned down along her legs and put his hands on her thighs and ran them up, dragging the dress high with them. Her underwear was folded up on the floor. She pulled him toward her again and he felt her hands all along his back and bringing his hips close. They faltered and she took him in her hand and
guided him and they both gasped. His eyes opened and hers were closed tight. She nodded to what he didn’t know and her hands brought him closer.

Just slow.

He laid himself down to her and pressed his cheek to hers. He sucked in breaths through his open mouth and she was pulling at his hips and then pushing him back. He smelled her hair. He spoke her name by her ear and she moaned. His mind was full of the flowers from her hair and the green of her dress and the waves of the aurora and he felt like he wasn’t any place at all. Her hands dragged up from his hips to his back and her legs tightened against his sides. He heard something rushing and the colors in his eyes grew brighter. She was saying his name with every breath until he could no longer move and he held her tight to him until long after he could see again and move and breathe. She was looking at him and she put a hand to his cheek and brought him down to kiss her. They lay together for a while, saying nothing, stroking each other’s arms and Samuel pressing his lips to her hair. Eventually the cool came over them from the door and the broken windshield. Samuel stood barefoot in the grass and dressed and dried his feet of the dew before putting his socks and boots on. He turned away while she dressed. His legs were shaking and he leaned against the side of the car to stay upright. The aurora seemed to have faded and there was only a faint red to the west of them. Samuel pointed to the front seats and Paige climbed over the console and he shut the back door and opened the driver’s side. He brushed grains of glass and dust from the seat and sat down and she leaned across the console to put her head on his shoulder. They watched the red become faint in the black. Eventually she climbed into the driver’s seat with him and he put his arm around her. They dozed against each other.

When they woke the sky was light in the west ahead of them and Samuel forgot where he was. Oh, hell.
He shook Paige and pulled his cramped arm from around her shoulders and opened the car door. The aurora had started again and it was set on the horizon red and yellow like a fire. He sighed and Paige looked at him from the seat and was smiling.

You thought we were in trouble, didn’t you?

He put a hand to his head. I did. He leaned against the car. Paige held her hand out and he helped her up and she stood beside him, stretching.

Do we have to go?

I dunno. The sky to the east was still dark. We have time.

Let’s just sit a little longer. She got into the backseat and patted beside her. Samuel climbed in after her and she curled up against him again. He watched the aurora flickering through the open windshield and soon she was asleep again. The smell of them both was still in the car and the flowers had faded. He was thinking of nothing, just holding her. When he began to close his eyes he stopped himself. He seemed to have been dreaming. He began to stand and woke Paige and they slid out of the car. They stood beside it and she put her arms around him and rested her head against his chest.

I love you.

He held her and tilted his head down. Love you too. He glanced east and hugged her tight and they turned and started walking. The aurora behind them had died away and when he checked over his shoulder toward it there was only the weakest brush of red. The car seemed untouched and walking away from it he wanted to go back and carve their names or to leave something, a sign of their passing. They reached the road to town and were walking for a short while before Paige pointed.

Sam. There’s no lights.
They stopped. Dixon was directly ahead of them and Banning behind and neither glowed. There was nothing but starlight. It was familiar to him, he thought from the dream, and he remembered moving away, the passage of trees and grass and the dark overhead and he saw no one else.

David

There was nothing when he tried the switch in the bathroom. He flicked it twice and gave up and he opened the door slightly to let in a little light and searched for the rim of the toilet. He finished and flushed and the water gurgled away but did not refill. In his half-sleep he thought little of it until he tried to wash his hands. He left the bathroom and shut the door and stood against it looking at the white slope of Helene still covered by the sheets. In the kitchen he found a book of matches and went into the basement for the breaker. He popped a match against the book and held it up to light the switches of the breaker and he reset it and took the steps to turn on the light. There was nothing. He shook the match out and watched the blue flecks in the dark of his eyes as he walked up the steps. He sat at the kitchen table until there was a little more light to see by and then he poured himself the remainder of a pot of coffee and drank it cold. For a minute he felt panicked and he had a moment’s vision of the world outside black and gone and then it passed. He shook his head and smiled and he put the back of his hand to his mouth. Out the window he could make out the barest beginnings of a dawn. He stood in the hall for a moment to hear if anyone awake in the house. The phone was dead. He put it back in its cradle and went out the back door and headed for Danvers’. The barn light was off when he went into the yard and he rapped on the side door and tried it. The door was unlocked and he let himself in and tried the lightswitch. He heard Danvers curse in his bedroom.
Don’t bother with the light. It ain’t workin’. David stood in the mudroom for a moment and went into the kitchen, hand on the wall. He heard the rubber knock of the cane on the hardwood floor coming toward him.

What’s that?

I said the lights’re out.

I figured that much. Danvers grumbled. I can’t see a damn thing.

Just wave that stick of yours around. David felt in his pocket for the book of matches and he lit one and held it out. He saw Danvers in his wrinkled undershirt, wincing at the light, leaning over his cane.

Was there a storm?

Not that I was aware of. Everything’s just out.

Well shit the bed.

David pinched the match. Do you have a lamp or something?

I might have a antique one down in the cellar. Don’t have any oil for it.

That idn’t any help. He could hear Danvers moving to the kitchen table. He pulled a chair out and sat on it and David could almost see him.

What’re you gonna do?

Ride out to the power company, I suppose. The phone’s dead too.

Danvers exhaled. You know it’s gone for good, right?

It could be a raccoon got in the transformer.

You know better.

David was quiet for a moment. Yeah. One less bill, I guess. It’s kinda funny, really.

If you say so.

Maybe funny ain’t the right word.
It ain’t a funny idea for me. You know what goes with electricity? Indoor plumbing. I don’t want to get up in the middle of the night in my underoos and walk to the outhouse. I’m an old man.

Yeah. Out the window he could see the lawn and the gravel drive. I’d better get back.

Danvers began to rise and David put his hand out for no one to see. Siddown. You’ll fall and bust your head open. I’ll see you later. He went out and back to the house. Walking east he could see the horizon whitening in a band and the clouds above it looked nearly like daylight. He unlocked the front door and went inside. He went into their bedroom and sat on the side of the bed and put his hand on Helene’s thigh.

Hey. He shook her slightly. Hey.

She turned over. What’s the matter?

Power’s out.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Was there a storm?

No. It’s just gone.

She sat there beside him for a moment and she let her head down and threw it back. He could hear her hair slap her nightshirt. She rubbed her hands over her face and laughed softly.

That’s what I did too.

She held her hands up. What else are you gonna do?

Nothing. Keep on.

Yeah. She took hold of his hand and gripped it. There was enough light through the window now that they could see each other clearly. She was smiling at him and she shook her head just slightly. God, life.

I know.

It just doesn’t quit.
I know. But this isn’t anything. He squeezed her hand. The corn out there’s taller than me. This—

Hush. You don’t need to solve it for me. She lay back down and pulled on his hand.

She brought him down and kissed him and began to slip out from under the sheets. He pulled away and stood.

David. You had better get back here.

He shut the bedroom door. He smiled and climbed over her into bed.

They woke up sometime later and went into the kitchen. Helene opened the refrigerator and David saw her feeling around at things. She frowned at him.

I don’t know what to do about some of this.

David shook his head. I guess we’ll eat well for the next day. We’ll have to do a lot of canning.

A lot more, you mean.

He nodded and looked aside. What did people use to do? Salt things?

Yeah. Keep things in the pantry, use ice blocks and sawdust.

He raised an eyebrow. Well. He went to sit at the table and stepped on something. He held it up to his eye, a pebble of green glass, and threw it away. Samuel appeared in the kitchen with circles under his eyes. He stood in the doorway for a moment.

My clock broke.

There’s no power. David sat at the table with a huff. You look beat.

I didn’t sleep well.

Did you hear a storm or anything last night?

No. But there was an aurora.
An aurora? David sat back in his chair. Well. I guess that solves it. I’m gonna ride into town and see about things after breakfast. You can nap if you want.

I’ll come with you.

He shrugged. Alright.

Helene served them and sat down and they ate. When they finished she went out to collect eggs from the coop and David and Samuel rode into town. People were milling about, coming into town on foot or horseback or coming out of their homes, and they hailed David from the sidewalk and they all exchanged the same news. When they reached the square Samuel stopped.

Can I go see Paige?

David smiled. I shoulda known. Yeah, sure. Samuel raised his reins and turned the horse down the street. David rode up to the town office and there was a sign on the door that said they were checking the local power stations. He peered in through the glass door and saw nothing inside and he rode down the street to the railroad station. The clerk said all the trains were delayed. A crew had come through afoot and told him their train was dead on the rails. David thanked the clerk and headed out of town. Samuel’s horse was tied up in front of the flower shop and as he passed it he heard someone calling to him. He stopped his horse and saw Skillman coming up the street riding a blue dun. David lifted his hand and let the horse take a few steps forward. As Skillman got closer he touched the brim of the gray Stetson on his head and David pointed.

Find your hat?

Came in the mail about a week ago. I feel like I’ve been walking around naked for the past however long.

I bet. You know I’ve never seen you ride a horse.
He’s new too. He stopped the horse and they both looked off away from each other.

How do you stand?

Skillman grinned. Couple miles up shit creek. We got a lot of coal-driven equipment, but all our conveyors and such were hooked up to generators.

Generators? Those aren’t working?

Skillman grimaced deeply. Fried. We cracked the casing on every machine we got. Everything’s burned out. I’ll probably have to lay everyone off until I can figure out what to do.

David winced. Sorry to hear that.

I imagine you made out okay.

Well as can be expected. Lot of work ahead if we don’t get power back.

They were both quiet, nodding. Skillman put out his hand. Well, good talkin’ to you, Dave.

Same. They shook hands. Good luck with everything. David turned his horse and Skillman doffed his hat and rode away. He rode slowly past the flower shop and went back out of town. On the way back he watched the sky, the cattle he passed near the fence. The silk on the corn had gone gold. He put his horse up and walked home.

He’d already started digging when Samuel came around the side of the house. David saw him smiling a deep inward smile. David stuck the shovel in the earth and he stared as Samuel came near and his smile began to fade.

Boy.

What? He was turning white.

Oh, do I know that look. He rested a hand on the shovel. I know that look from a hundred yards.

What?
You know what. Don’t even try and act like you don’t. He grimaced and raised a finger to point at him and he dropped it. Get your mother out here.

Why?

So we can talk.

Samuel shifted and sighed.

Wait. I’ll get her. She’s liable to beat you upside the head. He dropped his hand from the shovel and started to the back door.

I still don’t know what you mean.

David stopped and he stood in front of Samuel, lips tight. You do. You’re trying to save your own skin.

Samuel opened his mouth.

Don’t. If you lie to me again I will put a clean end to what you thought was your life. I wasn’t mad until now. Out with it.

Samuel turned away. He nodded. His face was straight white and his eyes were wide and lost. He was still staring off into the backyard.

Alright. David stood by for a moment. He put his hand on Samuel’s shoulder. He put weight on it but didn’t move. At his age it was the same but he had no father for this. He looked at the ground, at their feet in different directions. He dropped his hand and glanced at the house and the windows. Sam.

Yeah.

Quit what you’re doin’ until I can get in to Banning.

What?

Don’t go near Paige until I get you protection.

Samuel faced him.
You’re gonna find ways just like I did. You did already. I’d sooner not have to watch you all the time and worry about you sneakin’ behind my back. David looked at the house again. So wait until you can do it safe.

He hadn’t moved. Alright.

Promise me.

I promise.

David stared at him a long while. Days ago he was a little boy who came just above his hip and was all eyes and awkward arms and legs and he came out to help David bury his dog without saying a word. He saw his son’s face now, his ear and the cheekbones from his mother and how they were pronounced and strong and how his brow furrowed and how beautiful he was. Still a child. David breathed in and sighed and turned back to the hole in the ground. He pointed to the shed. Go get a shovel. God help us both.

I

Over the next week they dug a deep cesspit and built an outhouse over it. They built one for Danvers and they dug new wells and David rode out to Banning and ordered hand pumps. It was mid-September before they had finished work on everything and they returned to town to work on Stephens’ house. At night they brought home the blades on the small reaper and David and Samuel sat out in the yard sharpening them. They sharpened the sickles and David showed him with care how to hone the knife he gave him. They sat together in the dusk with the smaller blades in their laps or leaning over toward the ground to lift the larger ones up. They talked like peers about the tassling corn and the cattle, about old hunts and trapping. About Red. Stories from David’s youth of things Samuel would never see, snowmobiles and movie theaters and
concerts. When the light was too weak they came inside, hands streaked silver. The nights were getting cool and the corn had begun to dry out. The leaves on the young maple in the front yard had already started to turn.

One morning David woke Samuel early and they brought in the water from the well and ate breakfast alone. The sun hadn’t risen but the moon was up and nearly full. They walked to the barn together listening to the corn rustle in the dark. David picked up the lamp from inside the barn door and lit it and he set it on a bench between their horse stalls and they readied their horses and took them out. They went to the equipment shed for the cart and David began to hitch his horse. Samuel grabbed the toolbelts from the table and he put the hammers in the loops and poured the pouches full of nails. They rode into town for the granary. There was a thin line of clouds coming in from the west and the growing light was gray. They stopped at the granary office and David got the price of corn and they went out to the train station. He signed the ticket for the pallet of shingles that had arrived and they rode up to Stephens’ house and unloaded the pallet and Samuel cut the lining on it and they began pulling the sheets apart. David set the ladder up at the edge of the roof and Samuel went in the front porch to see if Stephens was awake. David began hauling the sheets of roofing up the ladder and setting them by and then Samuel was back out and handing them up to him. He handed up their toolbelts and climbed up the ladder and they stood together on the incline.

Just a few minutes. We want to be civil.

Samuel smiled at him. We’re gonna wake everyone up, aren’t we?

David shrugged. I never did anything productive with a day that I didn’t get up before eight o’ clock. He set his hands on his toolbelt and they watched the line of clouds come on. David checked his watch again. He pulled the hammer from his belt and looked at Samuel and they started.
David’s mother came by with sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade around noon. Samuel ate up on the roof and David sat on the porch with his mother and Stephens. The sun was breaking through the clouds on occasion and it was warm. Skillman was riding up on horseback and he stopped and raised his hand high to Samuel. He said hello from the side of the fence and David waved at him and Skillman doffed his hat to Samuel and rode back down the street. There was a thud from the roof and he could hear something rolling and the lemonade glass fell from the eave and broke on the brick walkway. The sun was shining at that moment and he could see lemonade dripping from the roof as he stood and went into the yard.

Sam? He backed a few paces into the grass and he saw Samuel grab the rails of the ladder and climb down. His mother stood and came to the open screen door. Samuel took off his toolbelt and it dropped to the ground. David took a pace toward him. What are you doing?

Samuel stepped up onto his horse and his face was drawn hard and as ashen as the clouds. He pivoted the horse and rode it out past the fence before David could step in his way and David watched him put the horse into a gallop and he was gone. He could hear the hoofbeats and then they faded and he turned toward the porch and roof. His mother came to stand in the yard beside him.

What was that all about?

David said nothing. He glanced at the roof again and walked out into the street. Skillman was distant, headed south to the mine. David jogged to the square and he stood in it looking toward the road out of town. The sunlight vanished and the streets were thrown into a pall. He felt cold. His legs were held fast and his arms were hard and pulled to the ground by his fists and he could not move them until Samuel came into sight and he and his horse passed David by and the galloping stopped to make the turn south and then David registered the slobber at the horse’s mouth and the rifle clutched in Samuel’s hand. He spun so fast he nearly fell to the
ground and he ran back to the yard. His mother had been beside him all the while yelling distant and tinny into his ear. He leapt onto his horse from the porch railing and rode after Samuel. In his mind he had already caught up and he was already beating Skillman to death, choking him, and he had to hold himself back from wasting the horse and from leaping off and from going blind and empty. The land dipped past the square and rose by the granary and he could see Samuel already riding up and level with him before he could push his horse to gallop. The horse cried sharp as he clutched at its mane and he was twisted sideways on it with his shoulder back. The shops passed and the silos of the granary passed and the creek passed and the road leveled and narrowed and in the distance he could see Samuel and the broken gait of his horse. The gravel equipment rose up ahead of them at the edge of the mine. Samuel tilted with each fall of the lame leg and he moved his horse out to flank as he neared and Samuel looked back and jammed his heels into the horse’s side but gained no ground. David nearly matched Samuel’s horse and he reached out for Samuel’s collar and missed and he reached again and missed and saw the horse half-mad and walleyed, slavering onto its neck and he was the same, Samuel was the same. He shouted and swatted the horse’s rump and it skidded and began to rear up. He slowed his horse and sawed it back around. Samuel was holding tight and leaning forward in the saddle and he held the gun up for balance and David leaned out as he rode back by and snatched the rifle out of his hand and rode on toward the mine. He did not look at Samuel as he passed but only lifted the rifle and fired into the air and Samuel’s horse reared again and kicked and David rode on, ejecting the cartridge as he went. He slowed on the mining grounds and rode over the path toward Skillman’s cabin at the far end of the mine. The dun was tied up outside and it nickered and tossed its head. David dropped and climbed the steps to the cabin door and opened it swinging the rifle up. Skillman was sitting at his desk with a sheaf of papers in front of him. David kicked the door shut and Skillman put his hands flat on the desk. David felt for the lock on
the handle and twisted it home. He took three paces toward the center of the room and held the rifle waist high. He was waiting on Skillman to speak or react but he did neither. The revolver was still mounted on the wall. He thought Skillman might stand and reach for it. There was a clock ticking between the roar of blood in his ears.

My son is on his way here to kill you.

Skillman shifted in his chair. He wet his lips and turned his head slightly. You know I had no idea how this would turn out. I really didn’t.

What?

Skillman lifted his hands from the desk and brought them palm-up. This. Everything.

What’re you trying to pull?

He shrugged. Now that I think of it, I guess I always did know it would be you. I didn’t know it was Sam back up in the weeds back then. I still knew it’d be you. Or I guess I wanted it to be.

David took a step forward.

I just had a feeling. He put his hands back down on the desk and glanced aside for a moment. David’s eyes followed his and Skillman smiled. He drummed the fingers of one hand and then the other on the desk. What are you waiting for, exactly?

For you to explain yourself.

Why?

David said nothing.

Wouldn’t it kill you if I didn’t say a word? For you to walk out of here not knowing a thing?

I’d know you were dead.

His smile shifted. He looked content. I wouldn’t do that to you.

I always liked you. From when I first heard who you were. Soldier, wife and kid.

Skillman brought his hands together over the papers on his desk and leaned forward. Have you ever played a game with no rules? Honest question.

David shook his head. No.

It’s boring! You’d think it would be fun. It is for about fifteen minutes. But after that? He batted his hand in front of his face. You start playing by the rules just to find yourself a challenge. So I did. I piled my life high. But now I’m back to where I started. Bored again.

David had stopped listening to him. He was far out of his head and he was away to before everything, to the draw and to his hand around bone, to when he first held Samuel, to the harvest party in Spangler’s field, O H hiding in the corn and Samuel and Melanie running out. When Samuel first battered at the door to Skillman’s cabin David raised the rifle to his shoulder and half of him was with Samuel and the other was all rage that remembered and exhaled and squeezed the trigger and the rifle bucked against his shoulder and he levered out the cartridge and stopped to see Skillman slide back in his chair and watch the blood trickle down his lips from the hole where the philtrum used to be.

David’s mouth seemed full of metal from the gunsmoke. His ears were ringing. He held onto the rifle by the stock and he stood straight, watching Skillman’s body settle, the blood dribbling onto the chest of his dress shirt and rolling over the bulge of his waist and into his lap. The wall behind was coated in matter. Samuel was pounding at the door and the wood was splintering and when David turned his knife was stuck through by the doorknob. David unlocked the door and opened it and Samuel was nearly pulled into the room by his grip on the knife. David grabbed the handle and held the door fast by his heel and pulled the knife free. Samuel was staring into the cabin and David pushed him back and shut the door. He watched Samuel
stumble and fall to the dirt. He was still staring through the door. David stepped between and helped Samuel to his feet. He went around the side of the cabin and led his horse to the front and he climbed on. He held out his hand and lifted Samuel up onto the horse, behind him, and Samuel put his arms around David’s waist. They went out. At the road David reined the horse for town and Samuel’s grip tightened.

Dad. Go the other way.

I’m not hiding this. He put the horse forward and they kept the same course. They were quiet for a while.

Are you sure you killed him?
Yeah.
He killed Mel.
I know.
Samuel shifted behind him and David thought he felt Samuel’s cheek on his back. Did he say anything?

He might have. It wouldn’t mean anything to me or you.

What did he say?
David said nothing. Samuel’s horse was ahead of them, grazing in a ditch. He pointed for Samuel to get it and he slid off. Just give me the reins.

Samuel went over to the horse. It shied at first but when he took hold of the reins it followed him. He gave the reins over and David wrapped them around the saddlehorn and helped Samuel back up. They passed a farmhouse near town and the family was standing in the yard watching them ride by. Samuel turned back.

They’re going to go see.

David said nothing. He exhaled.
Samuel held himself against David’s back. What did he say?

He sat straighter in the saddle and he looked briefly at the gun in his lap. He just said like he thought life was a game. He wasn’t right.

That’s it?

He breathed in very slowly and he held his breath and was glad Samuel was behind him.

They were approaching town and he thought about throwing the rifle in the creek. Not to hide it.

He set his arm over Samuel’s as they crossed the bridge and came to the edge of town. The clouds were getting thicker and he thought it might storm in a few hours. Coming down the street was Helene, riding one of the mules, and they met in front of the granary and they stopped their animals. Her hair was blown back, her eyes dark. She began to speak and David started the horse forward again.

Let’s just get home.

They rode on together. The town was quiet and he saw people looking out at them from storefront windows and front porches. He heard the mule clopping behind him and they rode to the square and went east. People were still watching and before they made it out of town one of the granary workers approached from his yard.

Hey, Parrish.

David’s hand went to the rifle and he saw him step back at the gesture. They rode on past. When they were out of town Helene brought the mule forward to pace with them. She stared at him and he waited on her to speak but Samuel did first.

We could find Red. We could go live with him.

We can’t. Everything around him seemed to dim.

We’ll get the cart and go find him. We have his address. Samuel shifted to the side for David to hear better. I can’t harvest on my own.
They were nearing Danvers’ yard. The barn showed through the gaps in the trees. They cut through the drive and David handed back the reins to Samuel’s horse.

Go put him up. Quick.

Samuel pushed himself back and off the horse and David watched him take his horse into the barn. The side door opened and he glanced at Danvers coming down the steps. He turned to Helene.

I shot Skillman.

She rocked slightly and began to shake her head. David. You can’t do this to us.

There wasn’t any other way.

She stopped. You can’t leave us. Samuel can’t work the farm on his own.

He won’t be. He’s got Phil and he can get the Moore boys to help him. It’s gonna be a good haul. There’ll be plenty of money.

David. You’ll be picking his life for him. He won’t have any say.

They won’t put me away forever. He almost smiled. Danvers was looking at him and David gestured toward the barn for him to get Samuel. Helene covered her face. He dropped from the side of the horse and he helped her down and he held her. I’m sorry, baby.

Don’t. Oh, god. Don’t. She pushed him away. Her cheeks were blotted wet from crying into his shirt. She pointed at him. You think this land is so damned important and it doesn’t mean a thing. You’d sooner Sam have it than a father. He doesn’t want it. He never has.

You’ll kill him. You’ll leave me and you’ll be killing him.

David shut his mouth. Danvers came out of the barn with Samuel. He thought of Samuel walking through the barn doors innumerable times and each time a little older and more hateful, and he thought of him free, walking fields he’d never seen. Danvers brought Samuel to them and he looked at David.
What can I do, Dave?

He put his hands to his face and he gazed at the barn and the thin swath of pasture he could see between the buildings. Help me get the mule hitched up, would you?

Sure.

He turned to Helene. Take Sam and go pack. She began to protest and he held up his hand. I won’t be but a minute. Get started.

Okay.

He began to step away. He stared at them both. They went to the road. Danvers hung his head and shook it.

Jesus Christ, son.

I know. David took hold of the reins on Helene’s mule and they started for the equipment shed.

Sam told me. I saw him run by before and then Helene came through. You’d of thought the world was comin’ to an end.

David said nothing.

You okay?

Yeah. They got to the shed and David led the mule around and Danvers got the tack down from the wall. They hitched the mule in silence and when they finished David helped Danvers onto the cart and led the mule out. He ran into the barn to retrieve the saddle scabbard and he clasped it to the saddle of his horse. He led the horse beside the mule and he glanced down the road toward town. He watched the ground pass underfoot. He made his way back through all the forked paths of his life and he saw the one right thing he knew he’d done. He was unsure of everything after until the moment he heard Samuel at the door of the cabin and he knew he’d done right again. Because of his voice and because there was no relief, no joy. They
rounded the bend and the porch already held a stack of blankets and boxes. They brought the cart into the yard and he stopped the mule by the porch steps and helped Danvers down. They stopped at the sound of someone jogging and his mother rounded into the yard. David breathed and nearly fell back as she came up to them.

Oh, David. She met them at the steps and she hugged him. You’re tryin’ to kill me.

He had to smile. I don’t mean to. How’d you get here so fast?

I started walkin’ soon as I saw you all leave town.

He held her tight. I’m sorry. Would you help us pack?

She stepped back. Oh, lord. She twisted away and went inside.

David looked at Danvers and he nodded.

Don’t worry.

Thank you. David climbed the porch steps and began to load the boxes on the cart. Danvers stood by the door and held it open. David’s mother came through again and Samuel came down the stairs with a small box. He sat it in the cart and turned to David.

I’m done.

That’s all you’re takin’?

Yeah. I already packed some clothes. He pointed toward the road. Can I go say goodbye to Paige?

David grimaced. I’m sorry, bud. No.

I figured.

Go on and help your ma.

He went to the steps and paused and went inside. David loaded the rest of the things gathered on the porch and went to the kitchen. He heard Helene in the basement and he went down the steps.
Babe?

I’m just getting some food.

Okay. He stood beside her at the shelves as she took down the jars of vegetables and fruit. We gotta get goin’.

Alright. She didn’t move. Would you get the picture albums?

Yeah. He waited a moment and went back up the steps and got the albums from the living room. He saw his mother through the open door to the bedroom and she came out with an old purse of Helene’s and she lifted it.

This has all the jewelry and money.

Okay. Thank you.

What else is there?

He shook his head and held the albums against his hip. I don’t know. If you could help Helene, she’s gettin’ some food together.

Alright. She handed the purse to him and he took it and the albums to the cart. He passed Danvers, still holding the door.

You about done?

He set everything in the cart and pushed some boxes forward. Should be.

I wouldn’t wait any longer.

I know. He put his hands on his hips and faced the house.

Stop. Get a good look when you’re ridin’ out.

He smiled faintly and turned to the bend in the road.

They’re comin’ whether you see ‘em or not, Dave. Just move it.

He grimaced and leapt the porch steps and went inside. He called for everyone to stop and Samuel came first and David put a hand on his shoulder and let him walk out the door.
David went into the kitchen and met his mother and Helene at the basement steps. He took an armful of jars from his mother.

We gotta go.

I know. She pressed her lips tight.

He let them pass and followed Helene out into the hall. He listened to their steps and he gazed at the walls half-bare now and the empty table. They went out onto the porch and he breathed deeply once past the threshold and he looked at Danvers. Okay.

Danvers let the door shut. Samuel picked the jars from David’s arm and set them in the cart. Danvers came down the porch steps and they all stood silent in the yard for a moment before David’s mother hugged Samuel and she went down the line to embrace them and she started to weep. David held her up and finally he stood back. She pulled him down and kissed his cheek.

Oh. Her chin quaked and she turned away and found Danvers and he put his arm around her for a moment before setting her hand over his on his cane and covering it with the other. He stared at David with his chin tilted up.

Dave. He stopped. Boy, I wish you built a bigger goddamn cart. He laughed and took his hand from David’s mothers and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed at his eye.

Me too. David motioned for Helene and she climbed onto the seat of the cart. Danvers pointed to her with a crooked finger.

You keep these boys in line, now.

I will.

You’re the only one of ‘em with any sense.
They all smiled. Samuel got onto the back of the cart and David stepped up onto his horse. He looked at his mother and Danvers and at the house. The sky above it was still heavy gray and it seemed unfitting and he wished just for a patch of blue. Then he took the horse toward the road and he heard the wheels of the cart beside him. They stopped once they were on the gravel and David lifted his hand. He heard Samuel call out over the goodbyes and all the voices were crushed by the boom of the shotgun.

It seemed a long while before David leaned to the side on the horse. His hat fell to the road. He gripped the pommel of the saddle, leaning as if he would be sick. The blood ran from the side of his head and swept by his eye before dropping onto the white brim of his hat. He breathed for the first time since the shot and he felt in his back and head and shoulder grains of fire crawling through him and he heard Helene yelling. His eyes were wide and his heart jolted and he turned back to see Jacob Miller afoot with the shotgun leveled. David’s right arm was still up to wave and he felt the back of his head with it and his hair was sticky with blood and there was a small rise where the shot hit him. His hand came away bright red.

Keep that hand up, Parrish! Get off the horse. Miller smiled and it split into a gapped grin as he came nearer. He jerked the shotgun aside. Get down.

David twisted in the saddle to see Helene. She and Samuel had their hands up. David turned away long enough to step down from the horse, eyes locked on the rifle in the scabbard as it came level over the saddle. He backed from the bay and stepped on his hat, bent to pick it up and swayed. His shoulder was stiffening and he felt the blood weighing down the back of his shirt.

The hell are you doin’? Get over here. Hands up.

He knew that he was already in shock or that he was concussed somehow. The chills began and he felt himself sweating. He raised his arms and closed his eyes to the pain. Miller
stood ten feet behind the cart and David walked toward him. Samuel was standing in the rear of the cart.

Right there. Stay right there. Miller pointed at the ground with the gun. He looked toward the cart. Get off that rig. I saw that rifle, Dave. Don’t even look back.

Helene and Samuel climbed off the cart and stood ahead of him in the road. David didn’t move. The blood that had run down his arm dripped back and he was getting cold. The shot in his shoulder ached through the bone like ice water and he thought his scapula may have cracked. He felt as though he were underwater and everything in his periphery was black.

Come ahead, by your little killer, here. Miller jutted his chin to Samuel. Down on the ground. Facedown. He took his hand from the gun long enough to point. David came forward and tried to meet Samuel’s eyes and sank to his knees. He dropped his hands and his blood throbbed all through him and the pain with it. Blood on the road already in drops and small splatters. He leaned down onto his elbows and Miller kicked him across the face before pushing him down with his booted heel. He had the shotgun on Samuel and he tipped it.

You too, boy.

David saw Samuel kneel and then his vision was jerked aside as Miller wrenched David’s hands behind his back. He could see the barrel of the shotgun hanging from the crook of Miller’s arm while he reached for something on his belt and David reared back. Miller let go of his hands to go for the shotgun and David felt the weight come off him as Samuel crashed into Miller. The shotgun clattered to the road and David pushed himself up and staggered toward the ditch where they’d fallen and rolled and Samuel lifted back his shirt and pulled the knife and drove it into Miller’s ribs. David fell back onto the grass and he heard the crunch of gravel as Helene stood over him and he was so dizzy with his head back. A line of stars fell across his eyes dragging the night behind them and he heard voices that came soft and then were gone.
He woke up in bed. From the open window it seemed the middle of the day, the sky blue and he thought he could hear the corn and trees rustling until his eyes cleared and he saw he was in the hospital. The curtains were open wide for light. He was stiff and bandaged tightly and he thought he woke because of the trouble breathing. His left shoulder ached deeply and when he lifted his hand to feel behind him he saw the bandage over the stub of his right ring finger. He must have made a sound because the sheriff stepped into the open door and David’s breath seized and he shut his eyes and turned away.

Hey.

David looked. The sheriff was at the foot of the hospital bed, holding onto his hat. He held a hand out for David to be still.

It's alright.

Where’s Sam?

The sheriff thumbed over his shoulder. I’ll let your wife answer that. She just went out for somethin’ to eat.

David stared at him. He couldn’t form the words for a question.

You remember when I told you about my philosophy?

David shook his head. I can’t think too well.

The sheriff nodded. He glanced out the window behind the bed and began to pay the brim of his hat around in his hands. If the law ain’t servin’ the best interests of its people, I figure it ain’t worth following. He paused. Your boy killed Mr. Skillman.

No.

I didn’t hear that.

I killed him.
I didn’t hear that either. The sheriff shook his head. And anyway it’s too late.

David’s lips parted, dry. What. The word barely came out.

It’s been a full day since everything.

He looked away again.

It ain’t my place to tell you all this, Dave. I came here to make sure you’re okay and to
tell you not to breathe a word of anything to anyone. I put the murders on Sam. It was all I could
think to do, since he could get away.

He gripped the bedside and stretched his head back. He was breathing fast and he felt so
tightly bound he might crack open.

You need to calm down. Breathe slow.

Go to hell. He tried anyway. There were lights in his eyes.

You’d have been put away a long time.

It wadn’t your choice.

You’re right. It was his choice. And he chose it.

David tried to see how it had been. The sheriff coming and Samuel in the road or the
house waiting for him. Waiting to shoot him, maybe.

Why don’t I get Helene. The sheriff started to the door.

Wait. What about Miller?

I fired him a couple weeks back. You must not’ve seen he didn’t have a badge on what
with the shotgun and all. I imagine whoever saw you ridin’ saw him next. I don’t doubt he was
comin’ out just for the excuse to blow your head off. The sheriff spun his hat in his hands.

Sheriff.
He looked at David. I know it ain’t how we’re supposed to operate. But I just don’t see any good coming out of putting you away. I may not be doing the right thing. Figure I’ll answer for that eventually. I guess this makes me feel a little better about failin’ you all before.

David had closed his eyes again.

I’ll go get Helene. The sheriff put on his hat, shifted his weight and left the room.

David kept his eyes shut until he heard her walk in. She sat in the chair next to the bed and the life flew out of him. She was pale as if she had been the one shot and her face was drawn tight. He put his hand out for her to take and she did and told him to sleep.

Home, the next day. He woke before first light and thought of Samuel. Riding down a dirt road in the dark with trees surrounding him and the birds singing louder than they ever did in the daytime. The sun coming up on his left, stopping for breakfast, watering the horse. Afield later, riding under silent powerlines. David wondered if he envied him or if he only wished to be with him. He lay unmoving, facedown in bed and thought of getting up to water the plants or to repair the fence Samuel cut. He could feel the dew wetting through his boots and the rough grease and bloodstained gloves on his hands, the feel of the wire against his palm. In the dark he could make out his bandaged hand. He couldn’t lift his left arm.

You okay?

He lifted his head. He could see Helene’s eyes and her hair framing her face. Yeah. Did I wake you?

I don’t think so. Can I get you something? She rolled onto her side. Her voice was thick with sleep.

No.

She draped her arm over his lower back. They both lay awake for a while.

Could we go after him?
Yes. When you’re healed.

How long is that?

A while.

He closed his eyes. When they woke again the sun shone through the window. They hadn’t moved. The light swept across the room by hours and they said nothing. The room warmed.

Danvers came late in the morning to check on them. David and he stood along the fence in the backyard facing the pasture. Helene was behind them, tending the garden and watching them. The day was hot but a breeze was coming from the west and there were rainclouds gathering over the town.

How’re the wounds?

David dropped his arm from over the fence and flexed his hand. You want to see about the funniest thing in the world, come watch when I wash my face. I keep forgettin’ I’m out a finger. He sighed and the long breath made him dizzy. Is it a gettin’ old thing when you wake up and feel about drunk?

He nodded. Could be.

You must wake up absolutely out of your head, huh?

I wish it, sometimes.

They were quiet. David was staring out over the pasture. The cattle were grouped together for the storm. He looked toward the woods in the east and back. Danvers turned.

So just about everybody you expected to stick around has up and left you someways.

David smirked. Yeah, and you’re still here.

Ain’t that a bitch.
The cattle moved in. Danvers pointed out a flicker of lightning beyond town, soundless. David heaved up and let out a long shuddering breath and Danvers patted his back.

He’s a good kid, Dave. He’s smart and he don’t take shit from anyone. You couldn’a done better than that.

I feel like I failed him.

You tried. He don’t blame you. God knows we don’t.

They were quiet. The breeze went cool and constant and the grass flattened and the leaves in the tree beside them turned silver. You were the last one to see him.

Yeah.

Was he okay?

Danvers glanced toward the sky for a moment. I’d say he was ready. He rode your horse off lookin’ like you did back before you got old. He looked good.

Did he say anything to you?

Just goodbye.

David nodded. The storm was growing up over the town and was going dark on its underbelly. He’s gonna be alone when it hits him.

When what hits him?

That he’s killed someone.

They were still. They said nothing for a while, then Danvers turned and put his hand on David’s shoulder and they watched Helene leave the coop with a small basket of eggs and set it down to come over to them and they saw the corn tall and green swaying and the trees in the side yard and Helene’s dress beating around her knees and her hair flying. She stood in front of them and spoke against the wind and told them to come inside. The clouds overtook the sun as they crossed the grass and went in. Danvers sat at the table and David got a sheet of paper and a pen
from the cupboard and sat beside him and Helene watched over his shoulder while he wrote.

When he finished Helene took the letter and folded it into thirds and put it in an envelope. She slid it on the table to him and he smiled at her. He had felt warm while writing and he hadn’t wanted to quit but it was good to hold something his son might see and touch. He held the letter like he might impart something into the paper and as he set it back on the table the first spats of rain began to rap at the side of the house.