

COX, JESSICA DAWN., M.F.A. *Of This Place*. (2007)
Directed by Lee Zacharias. 78 pp.

These stories are an attempt to explore the relationship between identity and place. They are concerned primarily with the characters' construction of identity through an understanding of place, as well as the construction of identity for the place, the landscape, itself. Finally, these stories are about the struggle for definition and clarity, the struggle to bring together incongruities between one's perception of self and one's perception of place.

OF THIS PLACE

by

Jessica Dawn Cox

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2007

Approved by

Committee Chair

© 2007 by Jessica Dawn Cox

For my grandparents, Phil and Marilyn Cox

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Lee Zacharias, Michael Parker and Craig Nova. I would also like to thank Jim Clark, Terry Kennedy, and the M.F.A. program at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
On The Diving Rock	1
Of This Place.....	16
Threnody.....	26
See Rock City.....	43
Fragments.....	57
A Slow Burning	69

On The Diving Rock

See, it was one of those hot days where all you want to do is hike up the mountain to that oak tree up there and perch like a bird on the highest limb. From up there you can feel the wind running wild over the mountain. From up there the whole valley stretches out in fields of hay and tobacco cut out of the land like squares of chocolate on a pan.

But my mom had me inside washing dishes, and my dad and Uncle Joe were on the mountain hunting, so it wasn't a good day for stalking through the woods.

My mom stood over the sink drying while I washed.

"That father of yours isn't worth shit," she said, running the dry cloth over the dishes fast and hard. "You grow up to be like that, I don't know what I'll do."

She was drying faster than I could wash.

"Swear to Jesus Johnny, you grow up to be like that I'll take you out myself."

Mom was mad because Dad had cussed her in front of me and Jenny and Uncle Joe. He had done it before. We had all heard him cuss my mom, but we had never seen him hit her, even though Jenny and I had heard it once – skin hitting skin, fist to flesh. But that only happened when he was drunk, after one of what mom called his all-nighters.

Usually, my dad and Uncle Joe didn't get into the liquor until they were already up on the mountain, but that day they must have started early because even before the

fight my dad and Uncle Joe were causing trouble, upsetting the hens in the henhouse and chasing J.R., Dad's gold-flecked rooster, all over the yard. It scared Jenny so bad she ran to her friend Lilly Jane's down the road and didn't come back.

My mom said she'd take me out herself because that's what my dad told me when I tried to stop him from hitting her. I was taller than him but it didn't matter. He slapped my mom hard across the face, told me he'd take me out with a quick hit top of the head before I even knew what was coming, I didn't mind my own business. And all that because Mom said he better stay off the mountain and get the hay in before it stormed. I figured she was right too, because there were those dark clouds to the west that mean rain, and I told my dad that. Didn't make any difference though. He just cussed me and Mom and stomped up the ridge with Uncle Joe.

Used to they would've taken me with them. Used to, when I was little, when Dad wasn't drinking so much, when it was Dad and Uncle Joe and Uncle Billy – Uncle Billy not drinking so the rest sober too – hunting would have meant a good day.

Instead I was in the house doing dishes and St. Lucius was in his pen because my dad said he wasn't any damn kind of a hunting dog anyway, just a scratching mangy mutt from the pound. Not even worth his weight in feathers, he said, even though I knew they weren't really up there hunting.

It had never been the regular kind of hunting with trained dogs and bird calls even when Uncle Billy was alive. They would just go up there and walk around the woods shooting at nothing or anything until they were tired. But at least they'd been shooting at

something, not just pretending to hunt. At least they'd been walking around the trails and not drinking.

I followed my dad and Uncle Joe the last time they went hunting and they didn't do any walking, or shooting. They just sat up there on a rock drinking.

My mom was still cursing, but I didn't listen. Instead I looked out the window and watched St. Lucius scratch around the edges of his pen. It was funny the day we got him. It was four years before that day, so Jenny would have been seven, and I guess I would have been thirteen. I had gone down to the pound on Arches Street to get him because I wanted a dog of my own, but I told my dad I found him down in Newland Holler, just a lost stray. He was madder than hell when Jenny let slip where I got him.

Jenny wanted to name my dog St. Lucius because her teacher had been teaching about strange things in school, saints and popes and stuff, even though the Sunday school women over at the Methodist Church didn't like it, and that day she had heard about this one, St. Lucius. She said he'd been martyred saving some Christians, which she said meant he was crucified like Jesus even though I already knew what martyred meant, and so a pope had been named after him. That was what she liked, that he was a martyr and a pope, so that's what she wanted to name my dog. Mom said St. Lucius was a bad name for a dog, but I said okay because I didn't care what my dog's name was as long as he had one. And it made Jenny happy.

The water ran hot over the dishes, steam coming up into my eyes and my hands swollen red, but I didn't turn the water down.

“I swear, Johnny,” my mom said, “no one thinks I’ll ever leave that man, but I could. Jesus knows I could,” she said, but I didn’t think she meant it. And no one else did either.

I had heard people talking, mostly the women at Church. They said my mom might’ve left us – before Uncle Billy’s leg got caught in the hay bailer and we all saw him go, she might have left. But not now. None of us would leave after that, they said. They said that, but I knew better.

Mom wasn’t swearing anymore, but she still ran the dry cloth fast over the dishes and I was glad for the distraction when I heard someone knocking on the door. Annie stood at the back porch, skin as brown as an Indian, saying she wanted to go down to the river and see the swimming hole, maybe swim a little. She wore her jean shorts with the ragged ends, white pieces of cloth hanging down against her thighs, and the blue tank top she’d been wearing the Friday before when it slipped so easy off her shoulders, hair clicking with static when she pulled the shirt over her head.

I didn’t even tell my mom I was going. Just shouted bye and ran out quick. But I should have known something was wrong because Annie didn’t bring her bathing suit.

I tried to hold Annie’s hand walking down the lane, but her fingers were limp inside mine and she let her hand drop the first chance she got. I tried putting my hand on her shoulder, over that blue strap and a piece of hair stuck underneath, but it was awkward walking down the hill and I couldn’t keep my hand in place. I tried the small of her back. Annie’s shirt was damp with sweat and warm from the heat of her skin. She let my hand rest there a second, then pulled away.

All through the walk down there, a mile or so give or take, I tried to tell Annie about Mom and Dad and Uncle Joe, but she wasn't listening. I kept repeating myself because I could see she didn't hear me the first time, but then she didn't seem to hear the second time either. I saw this after about half a mile but I just kept on talking.

When we got down to the river I looked at Annie. Her eyes reflected the blue off the water and I wanted to kiss her because the sun was bright on the river, tiny lights shining off the ripples like crystals and I'd kissed her before, but her face looked different that day and I could see she didn't want to be kissed. Instead I asked if she wanted to swim. She didn't say anything, just looked at the water running slow over the rocks and pooling in the swimming hole. She just kept on staring.

So I said, "Okay, I'll swim," and took off my shirt.

My shirt stuck to my back when I pulled it off, but the water was well-water cold, and once I got out past the brush I felt a warm breeze pushing over the river.

Halfway into the river, water running up around my belly button, I started to think that the water was moving so slow and the wind was moving so slow that it might just stop all together. Like maybe time itself would just stop and it would be me and Annie down on the river. Just me and Annie and nothing else.

That's what I was thinking when I heard the first shot. I knew my dad and Uncle Joe were up there hunting so I didn't think much of it, just kept wading deeper into the water. But then I thought about the last time they were on the ridge and how none of us heard any shooting all day, how none of us had heard any shooting since Uncle Billy had been with them. I thought maybe that was a good sign. Maybe they were walking the

trails with the liquor wearing off. Maybe they would stay up there until they sobered up, then come back down and get the rest of the hay in before it rained. Uncle Joe would sit in the tractor pulling the bailer and my dad would walk ahead of him raking the heavy hay into rows, leaving round bails to sit like fat kings on the rolling hills behind them.

I was about out to the middle of the river, water running slow under my chin, when I turned around to look at Annie. She wasn't standing on the bank where I left her but had crawled onto the diving rock and sat perched like a hen on the edge of the rock, just where your feet would take their last push into the air if you were jumping. I waved to her but she didn't wave back. She just stared up the river, her long hair draped over her shoulders, brown skin against white rock.

She sat there like she was thinking about time too, looking far up the river like she could see the end coming. That, or she was thinking about Uncle Billy. She told me before how she thought about the day we heard him screaming from the house and looked out the window in time to see his boot disappear into the bailer, then all of us running and shouting at my dad to turn the motor off but his not hearing because he had his new radio turned up too loud in the tractor cab. Annie said that's what she remembered, how Uncle Billy churned around with the chains and hay getting all cut up while she ran through the half-plowed field, wind whipping her hair around her face and my dad listening to Patsy Cline on the radio. She said she wondered if Uncle Billy could hear the music playing from deep inside the hay and the chains.

I hoped she wasn't thinking about Uncle Billy, even though it was hay season again and we could both hear the whine of a tractor on the other side of the river, because

she looked nice sitting up there, nice in a strange way like those armless Greek statues you see in schoolbooks – those statues that look pretty and sad all at once. Annie looked just like that, pretty and sad up on the diving rock, when a second shot came ringing off the ridge. But this shot didn't sound like the first. It didn't have that fast zipping sound a rifle makes and I thought maybe Dad took his Smith and Wesson up with him because he sometimes did that, but I couldn't think why he would fire it.

“That wasn't a rifle shot,” Annie said, and I wanted to agree, but she still looked sad and I couldn't think of anything else.

And anyway I didn't have time to talk because then we heard a yell, not like the call we used to talk from ridge to ridge and ridge to river but a low devil-sounding yell. A deep animal yell. Like those feral cats that make so much noise fighting each other, their low moaning cries, and I knew it came from my dad.

“What the hell was that?” Annie asked, but I didn't answer.

The river was hot around me, even though a minute ago it was cold as ice. I pushed my feet up and down inside my sneakers, water squishing in and out.

Annie stayed quiet until I was almost back to the riverbank where the water ran cool again around my shins and dripped from my shorts. I watched the drops hit the shallows of the river, their rings circling out till they hit one another, and Annie still stood up on that rock. She didn't come down to me. And that's where we were – her high up on the rock, legs spread apart like a super hero, face blacked out by the sun shining around her – when she told me she wouldn't be coming around anymore. First I thought she meant coming back to the river.

“That’s okay,” I said. “We can go swim down at the Terrace or the Y,” but she said no, she didn’t mean that.

She wasn’t going to the river or the Terrace or the Y. She wouldn’t be around at all anymore.

I just stood there with this kind of numb feeling and I must have stood there for a while because all of the sudden my shorts weren’t dripping anymore. I took the last few steps out of the river and Annie took a little hop onto the dirt path leading back toward the house. She started walking so I followed her.

I asked where she was going, but she didn’t say anything, just kept walking up the first big hill, her eyes fixed on some spot up ahead. I thought maybe she would go to her brother’s place in the next valley over, because he’d left about a year ago – right before Uncle Billy died – to live with his girlfriend in Hancock County.

“You going to live with Sam, all the way over in Hancock?” I asked, but she said she wasn’t going to Hancock or Sullivan or even Amblin County on the other side of Elizabethton.

“I’m going far away,” Annie said to me. “I don’t know for sure where yet, but somewhere all the way out of Virginia. I’ve got to get away from these mountains and valleys.”

I tried to imagine somewhere like that but all I could think were words like flat, vulture, and Arkansas.

“What about your parents?” I asked her. “Don’t they care if you leave?”

I thought she'd say something about how she was almost eighteen and could leave if she wanted to, but she didn't. All she said was that she had to go.

We were past the big hill. All that was left was the small one, then the pond and we'd be back to the house. I had to think of some way to keep her out there. There were so many things out there that could make her stay. The trees, maybe. I would point out the trees, especially the big oak trees and how pretty they were, how they made things like Mom and Dad fighting and Jenny being scared just kind of go away. Or the creek that ran from the cow pasture down to the waterfall. I would remind her how we climbed that waterfall when we were little. I would tell her, in case she'd forgotten, about the time she put her whole hand in a bunch of stinging nettle and I sucked on her fingers, my tongue going numb from the stingers hitting it, until it didn't hurt her anymore.

"Look at the trees," I told her, pointing across the creek that ran alongside us, water running slow toward the river. "You're going to leave those trees? Look at that one oak tree. How're you going to go somewhere where there are no trees like that?"

Annie looked at the tree, her eyes squinty.

"It's just a tree, Johnny," Annie said, and my mind went fuzzy.

I should have told Annie to look at the hay field on the other side of the creek, to watch how the wind ran through it, rolled it like waves. I should have reminded her, because she could have forgotten, how we used to play in the hay barn when we were little. We'd play king of the hill and needle in a haystack and afterwards we'd be red and itchy, uncomfortable from hay running over our bare skin, but uncomfortable in a good

way. I should have told her these things because telling her would make her stay, but instead I started talking about last Friday night.

“Didn’t that mean something?” I asked her. “You’ve never done that before,” I said knowing it was true even if Steve Johnson had seen her in Mikey Parson’s car last winter.

She made a face like she was going to say something, but then she got this gleam in her eyes and her lips puckered up. She didn’t say anything.

“We could do it again,” I told her, even though I knew I shouldn’t. I knew it was the wrong thing to say before it left my mouth.

Annie was walking so fast we were almost running and her eyes were squinted almost shut. Her lips parted and I could hear heavy air flowing in and out.

“No Johnny,” Annie said. “It didn’t mean anything. It didn’t mean anything Friday and if we did it again it wouldn’t mean anything again.”

I wanted to ask her, if it didn’t matter, why she had wanted to do it, but her face told me asking wouldn’t get an answer. She had this face that said nothing would make a difference now.

“I thought it would make a difference,” Annie said. “But it didn’t. It won’t.”

When we got over the last hill I saw my mom standing on the front porch. Dad and Uncle Joe were in the yard and I could tell something was wrong before we were even halfway across the field.

St. Lucius was sprawled in the grass in front of my dad and Uncle Joe. He was howling and I wondered why Annie and I hadn’t heard it coming up that last hill, but then

Annie said she had wondered what all that noise was, so I just didn't hear it somehow. I thought it was strange that I didn't hear my own dog crying, but then I started to realize exactly what was wrong. St. Lucius squirmed and writhed in the grass and mud-red blood poured from a shotgun wound in his stomach. His fur was caked and matted. And then there was another hole top of his head, a stream of dark blood coming out of it.

I walked over to St. Lucius and I was feet away from my dad and Uncle Joe when I smelled the liquor. It was so strong I thought it'd knock me over. I looked down at my dog. He quivered all over. His eyes were closed.

Up on the porch I heard my mom make a heavy noise in her throat and somewhere behind me Annie shuffled her feet, sneakers running through the dried grass making a brittle, dead sound. My hands were balled up in fists and I thought what I would do with them, because I knew right away my dad had something to do with it, even if I couldn't see the how or the why. But then Uncle Joe said it was an accident, that St. Lucius must have gotten out of his pen and followed them up the ridge and nobody knew.

I looked at my dog and the two different shots, one from a shotgun and one from a pistol in his head. I wondered about those holes. I wondered about how neither of them had taken the shotgun with them. And I wondered about how I hadn't heard a shotgun fire all day. There was one rifle shot, then my dad's Smith and Wesson, then that yell.

My dad's Smith and Wesson was holstered around his waist and Uncle Joe's rifle was looped around his shoulder. But before I could ask about the shotgun Uncle Joe explained that someone else must have shot my dog with the shotgun, because they

hadn't taken one with them, and how they had tried to shoot him once in the head, to put him out of his misery Uncle Joe said, but then he didn't die.

"We figured he must have really wanted to live to have lived through all that," said Uncle Joe. But I knew that wasn't true because my dad would have been cussing a blue streak if he caught someone else hunting on his property, and Uncle Joe slurred his speech he was so drunk.

The whole time my dad didn't say anything, just stood there with his arms hanging down his side, fingers spread wide. I thought again about my fists, but when I raised my knuckled hand it was my dad's hand I saw – blistered, work-burnt.

It was Annie who said something. She told my dad he was full of it. Just like that she said it.

"Mr. Boyd you're full of it," Annie said and it surprised me so much to hear words like that said to my dad that I couldn't do anything. I just waited for him to blow his top, but instead it was my mom.

She was still on the porch, standing so still it was hard to believe all that noise came from her. She didn't wave her arms or anything, but curses flew out of her like I never heard. They were so bad Uncle Joe turned red. Or maybe that was from the liquor.

At first it was all noise and I couldn't make out the words, but then I got the gist of it. My dad shot St. Lucius; he shot him on purpose.

"I saw you out the kitchen window," she said, "get that damn dog out of the pen and then get the shotgun out of the shed. I've never seen anything like it," my mom said and I felt like I was losing ground, like it was just sinking away beneath me. "I knew you

were bad when I married you,” she said, “but I never thought you’d have done something like this.”

My mom had moved off the porch while she talked. She grabbed my dad’s Smith and Wesson from his belt loop and handed it to him.

“Now put that god damn dog out of its misery.”

At first my dad didn’t move, not an inch.

St. Lucius didn’t look like a hunting dog because he wasn’t a hunting dog. When I got him he was furry and white, like he was all fur and nothing else, and he kept licking Jenny’s nose and trying to eat her hair. Jesus was I glad Jenny wasn’t there. I looked down the hill to Lilly Jane’s but there was no one outside. I kept looking, past Lilly Jane’s as far as I could down the winding road until the mountains took it from my eyes. The road snaked through the ridges, yellow line racing the wind as it ran through the trees and quiet houses, running right out of the valley.

My dad stood still, holding the gun and looking down at the grass. Then he got this funny look on his face. His forehead wrinkled a little and he handed me the gun.

“Your dog, Johnny,” he said, “your responsibility.”

I looked at my mom and at first she just looked surprised, the same face she made when Dad hit her earlier, but then she seemed to just drain out of her body. There wasn’t anger or sadness or anything on her face. It was just empty. I tried to look into her eyes to see if they would tell me what to do, but she turned away from me and walked inside the house.

Then Uncle Joe was on his knees saying it was his fault.

“I tried to shoot him. I tried. But I missed,” Uncle Joe said.

Someone asked why Uncle Joe would want to shoot St. Lucius, and it must have been Annie, but her voice sounded strange and far away.

Uncle Joe said no, he didn't shoot St. Lucius. Up on the ridge, Uncle Joe said. Uncle Joe tried to shoot my dad up on the ridge.

“I shot at him,” Uncle Joe said, “but it was his fault. I shot at him because it was his god damn fault.”

Uncle Joe had shot at my dad with the rifle, but he missed. Dad had fired the Smith and Wesson straight into the air. Then he put his gun in Uncle Joe's hand.

“Put the barrel on his forehead,” Uncle Joe said, “and put my hand on the trigger.”

But Uncle Joe couldn't shoot my dad, and my dad couldn't kill his brother.

“I followed him all the way down here,” said Uncle Joe, “watched him pull that dog out of the pen. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't.”

My mind should have been racing with thoughts or fuzzy with confusion, but it wasn't. All I thought about was that road, that yellow line running fast out of the valley. The gun felt heavy in my hand. I looked down at my dog, the blood still slowly seeping out. Slow like night's darkness leaking off the morning fields in that endless kind of way, making it hard to tell when the sun is still sleeping and when it's up, taking its place among the clouds and the tall, tall trees. I pointed the gun at St. Lucius's head.

But Annie wasn't standing behind me, and I remembered what she said, how she wouldn't be living down the road anymore. How she was leaving. I thought about Uncle Billy and how if he'd heard the yelling my dad could have pulled him out of that bailer,

grabbed Uncle Billy by the cuff of his jeans the way he must have grabbed St. Lucius by the collar and pulled him out of the pen.

Annie walked down our long driveway toward the road, hair swishing across her back, and I thought I should stop her, or go with her. But my dog still lay at my feet, and the gun was still heavy in my hand. I looked at my dad. His face was turned down but his eyes looked right at me, and I thought I saw something there. I thought I saw my father's eyes searching.

I pulled back the hammer. But then I felt that soft valley-breeze on my back pushing time forward, and it was done. St. Lucius's eyes were closed. The grass around him was watered lush-red. I let my hand fall to my side, because see, there were still those oak trees by the river. And the river still sat back there cool and bright. There were square bails piled in the barn below the hill and wind running wild through the unplowed hay in the two-acre bottom. There was the creek and the waterfall. There was the pond full of fish.

Of This Place

I should say first that my grandson, Tommy, had never done quite right by me. He'd always been what Phil, my husband, his grandfather, would call indifferent toward me and this place, and Phil would say it was because when he was born he came out not breathing, his whole body blue as the moon from the umbilical cord cutting off his head from his heart. If Phil were still here, he'd say it was that separation from his brain and the feeling part of him, soul or whatever you want to call it, that made him not care about his grandmother and the farm we'd all lived on since the beginning. And that's what I would have said too, before that first day after two weeks of rain – coming down so hard I thought it'd knock my roof right in on me – when I sat on my porch telling Tommy that I didn't give a good you-know-what about what those people said.

By those people, I meant the men in suits from the government who said I had to sell them part of my land, for a straighter road. They said I had to go; they were bringing in their bulldozers; the road was coming through. But I wasn't moving. I didn't care about their mini-malls and super stores, I told Tommy, though I knew he was only half-listening. I didn't care about their SUV cars that needed a wide straight road. I wasn't going to let them tear down my house, the extra bedroom Phil added when Ruthie, our daughter, told us Tommy was on the way; the stone fireplace Phil's father built; my countertops and my oven that baked all those loaves of bread. I didn't care that I was old.

I didn't care that the only thing I had left was a not-caring grandson. I wasn't moving. Not an inch, I told Tommy.

Tommy just sat there in the shade drinking his tea – and it was what I expected – nodding his head back and forth like he was listening, his eyes shifting over the yard from the oak tree to Phil's old T-bird covered over in rust and dirt in the years he'd been gone, and my rose garden beside the porch, not even looking at me. So I asked him, what you do think your grandfather would say, I said, if I let them tear down his house?

Phil and Tommy had always been close, even though Phil always agreed with me about that disconnect between Tommy's thinking and feeling, so I thought it'd get his attention. He's probably rolling over in his grave just to hear me talk of it, I said to Tommy. And besides that, I said, what was I supposed to do with the horses and the cow? Tell me that.

Tear down the house, they told me, and they'd give me money – lots of money – to build an even nicer house on the back end of the property. But I told that little man in his suit and his nose with the glasses running down the tip, his fat finger pushing them back up. I told him, oh that's just fine. I move my house back there where I've got my horses and cow and what am I supposed to do with them? Should I just let them roam around the house eating my flower garden? Or maybe, I said to that man, maybe I should just put them in the house with me and wouldn't that be nice? One big happy family me and my livestock.

Tommy didn't say anything about what his grandfather would say to all this, though he and I and anyone else who'd known Phil knows exactly what he'd have to say,

but Tommy's eyes had changed a bit when I said Phil's name. So I asked him again, what was I supposed to do with all the livestock?

Tommy scratched his fingernails over his skin, a sound almost like slow-moving water coming over the porch to me and said that I know, well as he knows, that those animals don't do a thing but keep the grass short.

Which is right – he's right a lot with the thinking part – though keeping the grass short is a chore I'd not want and besides that I wasn't about to get rid of those animals any quicker than I would let those men bulldoze my house. And on top of that, Tommy wasn't looking at the tree and Phil's T-bird anymore but at the road in front of us, at the cars winding their way over that curving concrete.

I knew what Tommy had in his head, so I told him. I wasn't about to let those men come in and take what good was left of this place. I wasn't going to let them take it all away.

Tommy just rocked slow in his chair, his forearms straight by his side and his back too stiff. His head nodding up and down, up and down. And then he started asking questions. How much money exactly, he wanted to know, and when and how, and I swear those questions got me mad enough to spit fire because even if it is smart thinking, a man's got to have more about him than just what's in his head, and I knew what he did have up there had nothing to do with his grandmother and her concerns. I kept quiet though, because I remembered what Phil had always told me about holding my tongue and how I wasn't any good at it. How there might sometimes be more to things than what I saw right off.

So instead of talking I watched a big bumble bee floating over the roses, hopping from bloom to bloom, all the petals still wet and sparkling with rain. Tommy wasn't sitting in the rocker anymore but on the steps of the porch, the bee buzzing near him, and I saw that his hand was down in the black wet dirt of the roses, his fingers kneading the earth.

His hand in the dirt like that made me remember a time when Tommy was little, before his mother died and his daddy left, and he ended up with dirt all over his face after a neighbor boy made him eat a mud pie. He came running to the house with mud all over him, but he wouldn't come inside. He just pressed his face into my screen door, drops of mud seeping through onto my kitchen floor, his blue little-boy eyes in tears, tears making roads through the dirt on his face, and I'd tried to get him to come inside but he just cried all the harder. Later, after we'd gotten him cleaned up and settled down, Phil had pulled me aside and told me the reason Tommy wouldn't come in, that he was afraid of getting mud in my kitchen. I swear, I'd forgotten all about his little-boy face like a mud checker board, until I saw his hand in the dirt that day.

It got me feeling sort of bad. It got me thinking that there had been times, at least that one, when he did think of his grandmother, and that maybe it wasn't all him and it was like Phil said, that there was more to it, because of course I'd have let him inside that day. So I said to Tommy, okay, what do you think we should do?

Well, the first thing he says is that, for sure, the extra money would be good, that it could help me and him both out, and I guess I knew somewhere inside me that it might be right. I couldn't say that though. I couldn't think about help in days to come. All I

could do was remember days before when we'd all be sitting on the porch watching Tommy play in the yard, Phil telling stories and Ruthie laughing, the corn growing tall and my rose bushes getting bigger. Then, all of the sudden it was like that again. I could feel them there, Phil and Ruthie right next to me on the porch. But they were gone quick before I really had time to feel them there, so it was really more like I felt them leaving, than being there. Leaving all over again, and Tommy too. I felt him leaving me, like he wasn't standing there solid as a rock.

And I don't know why for sure, but I guess it was all of them leaving me again, and Tommy leaving too, because all of the sudden I was telling Tommy that just because he is my grandson and there isn't anyone left he better not think he can get the place and do whatever, that he can get all the money. I told him twice, he better not think that.

Tommy just shook his head and I started thinking, if not Tommy, then what? I guess I'd sort of thought about it before but not much because as far as I was concerned, I was going to be around to take care of the place for a while. But I started thinking that whether Tommy got it or those men and their dozers, it seemed it would be the same: my flowers would dry up or overgrow one another, the vegetables would rot going unpicked, the horses would go bone-skin thin and the cow's udders would swell from not being milked. Noise from the cars would surround, everywhere gray concrete would circle, cover everything.

I thought about what Phil said when he was passing on, that we should just burn it all up because this place wouldn't be used for any good once we were gone.

And I don't know why and the Lord and all else knows I shouldn't have, but I started telling Tommy what his grandfather had said. I told him Phil never wanted him to have the place, even though Phil never said anything about Tommy directly and he and Phil had always been close, and Phil was half-gone by the end anyway, talking to people that weren't there, people who'd been gone for years, Ruthie mostly.

I almost can't bring myself to tell this part, but since I'm telling I guess should tell all, because then I told my grandson he was worthless. Worthless, I said. Like a tiger with no teeth.

As soon as I said it I wanted to take it right back because it's no fault of his own he was born the way he is, because a grandmother shouldn't talk that way even if it is some true and even if her grandson didn't seem to care – even if sometimes, in our weak moments, we do think the worst – we should never say such things.

I was about to tell Tommy all that, that I didn't mean it, when I heard a rumbling grow through the valley. I thought it was the bulldozers come early and then I was sure Phil was right, could almost hear him say: better you tear it down than leave it to strangers. Better that than those rotted vegetables. I looked at Tommy and he was standing so still and I had almost forgotten in the noise what I'd said to him and his eyes were staring off down the gravel driveway, fixed on nothing, or on something I couldn't, didn't want to, see.

I ran across the porch and shook his arm because I could see then – though I'll admit sometimes I can't see much – that whatever it was to do, fire or dozers, I wasn't

enough to do anything on my own. So I said, Tommy we've got to do something, and I felt his muscle tighten and his back go straight.

It was then that I realized it wasn't bulldozers coming down the road. Up the mountain from the east was mud coming, far away still but headed straight for us. Now, there is that gully right before the garden and first I thought the mud slide might miss us because it's missed us before because of that, but then the shaking got stronger and I watched a rock jump right over that dip in the earth and roll to a stop in my corn.

Branches from the oak tree started to fall from the vibration and the rumbling made my legs wobbly so that it was hard to stand. I tried to think what do to because even if we could get into Tommy's car and away from the house there wouldn't be anywhere to drive but right into the rocks and mud.

But before I could think much of anything Tommy grabbed me and started pushing me into the house and I was struggling with him because anybody could see the mud was headed straight for us and we pushed and pulled at each other until I thought for sure one of us would break – and between the two I figured it would likely be me – until Tommy lost his grasp and I went sprawling off the porch into the yard.

I heard Tommy yell something about the cellar and I thought that right, but then I imagined the two of us trapped down there under the dirt and before I could think it through Tommy's hands were around my middle and my feet were in the air and he was carrying me out into the yard.

Now, in looking back, the cellar or tucked away somewhere in the house makes more sense than what I was doing, and really I don't know why I was struggling with

Tommy except to say that I didn't like the feeling of my feet with nothing beneath them and Tommy's arms felt strong around my waist but I wasn't too used to the idea of him carrying me, so my legs flailed and so did my arms and I was screaming at him to let me go.

But Tommy held tight. He didn't let go of me and I looked over his shoulder to see a big boulder roll into the side of the barn behind the house. I thought about the horses and the cow and if I had let them out that morning or not, but I couldn't remember. I remembered making coffee and I remembered walking in the cold morning outside with the cup in my hand but I couldn't remember what I was doing out there. It was like one of those moments when you've walked into your kitchen and you don't know why you've come or what you're doing and there's something on the edge of your mind and you're about to remember, but you just can't.

Tommy had made it out to the oak tree and he was trying to carry me to the side of the house but I guess he'd gotten tired and I'll admit I was probably a lot to hold onto, when there was a loud crack and a different shudder in the ground. I looked up and saw a big hole opening in the sky, the dark green fading to blue and I was thinking about Phil and Ruthie and I'd decided that if this was the end then so be it I was ready, and then stillness.

I looked east up the ridge and saw the path the mud had traveled, where it had turned at the gully. Then I looked west but all I could see was the oak tree's giant roots shooting up into the sky fat and wrinkled like an old woman's fingers. Like my fingers.

I thought, put a ring right there on that one root and that would be this hand, reaching up bruised and calloused into the sky.

I looked at my house and there was a man-sized boulder dug into the east corner. Tommy's hands were under my arms lifting me off the ground and he kept hold of me. He didn't let go because my knees wouldn't do it alone and I couldn't feel my toes, and then, right then, I was okay with that.

We looked at my porch and at the garden next to it littered with limbs and small rocks. The window above was smashed and shards of glass lay on the ground shining light from the sky back up to God.

And the roses. Not one had been broken. There were no twisted stems. There wasn't one petal lying in the dirt. And that bee still hopped from bloom to bloom to bloom.

I wanted to talk to Tommy because it seemed like now was the time to tell him things – things like the time his father jumped in front of a charging bull to protect him and his mother; things like how the last word his mother said was his name; like his father still calling every Christmas but too afraid to talk to him; like I'm sorry – but I couldn't speak for looking at the roses reflected in the shards of glass, the red mixed up with the blue light of sky. And there was one piece of glass propped lopsided on a stem of roses so that it looked like the roses grew out of each other, all twisted in the glass. Just a tangled mess of red and blue and green.

And I don't know much more to say about it, because I guess that's where the struggle stopped, looking at all those colors bright mixing into one another, me and

Tommy standing there. I guess I should tell it that we got the house fixed, didn't take much. I'm still fighting those men and that road, though in the end they'll win out. I know that now. I guess I can't say more than that, except to tell again, one last time, about those roses, dark red roses swimming in blue light.

Threnody

Rose had nothing but company. Her husband, Oscar, had died a month ago and that month had been filled with neighbors bringing food, offering to help with the farm, friends with gifts from town who showed up just to sit on her back porch. Around them, Rose felt clumsy. She dropped things, spilled things, laughed when she shouldn't.

Today it was her neighbor, Mary Shaw, driving up her gravel lane. Rose stood in the back yard – the trees around her painfully green in the last breath of summer – with the mail in one hand and a broom in the other. The broom was for the dogs, to shoo them away from whatever they were bothering near the garden, rooting their noses through the grass and snorting.

Rose heard the car door close as she pushed the dogs away and saw a dead Waxwing lying on the ground. It was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Your dogs get into something?” Mary Shaw asked as she came closer.

“Hey, Mary Shaw. Just a dead bird.”

“You think they killed it?”

“No, look at that cut. I don't think one of my dogs did that.”

A deep cut ran the length of the Waxwing's front, its belly torn open. Mary Shaw leaned closer.

“That is a very dead bird,” she said.

Rose struggled with the dogs, batting the broom at them when they inched their noses closer. The sun shone hard on Rose's shoulders, the last warm days before fall's chill.

"Let me call Russell to take care of that," Mary said. "You don't want to be bothered with it."

"I can do it."

"He won't mind."

"It's fine, Mary Shaw."

Rose went to her kitchen and grabbed the first thing she saw, a plaid yellow dish towel, and came back out into the yard, the mail and the broom still held awkwardly in her left hand.

"Oh, don't use your pretty dish towel."

Rose looked at the towel in her hand. The fingers of her left hand throbbed with the weight of the broom pinched between letters.

"I have plenty," she said and dropped the towel over the bird.

Rose leaned down, curled her fingers around the towel, tucking the edges under the Waxwing like bedcovers under a child, and clutched it in her hand. She carried it to the trash heap surrounded by a paint-peeled fence. Rose tossed the bird over the fence and looked at the plank with three nails half-hammered into the wood, remembering Oscar's thumbnail bruised blue a few days before they learned about the cancer. She remembered his graveled voice cursing softly. She remembered his hands clasped together over his best tux, his thumb still blue.

Inside, Rose washed her hands, the hot water painful on her cold skin, and put on a pot of coffee. Mary Shaw sat down at the kitchen table, asked Rose how she was feeling today.

Rose sat down, spread her mail out in front of her, and handed Mary Shaw a cup of coffee.

There was a bill from the phone company. There were three envelopes Rose recognized as condolence cards, so easy to pick out with their thick cream-colored paper; she had received at least one a day since Oscar's funeral. One card, with a purple flower on the front and gold swooping letters inside, she had received twice.

"Anything good in the mail?" asked Mary Shaw.

"No, just bills."

Mary drank from her cup of coffee. She looked at Rose, her lips open slightly, then her eyes wandered the kitchen.

"Rose, honey," Mary Shaw began.

"What?" Rose said her eyes fixed on the mail in front of her.

"Oh..." Mary Shaw said and looked at her hands, the ceiling, the kitchen counters.

"I think you've got a message," she tried, tilting her head toward the phone.

Rose looked at the red light blinking on her answering machine. Someone must have called while she was outside.

Rose pressed the button and a crisp voice filled her kitchen: *Hello, Oscar, this is Amanda Herring from PB Power...*

The voice stopped as Rose's hand landed firmly on the machine. Rose looked at Oscar's dirt-covered work boots still sitting by the door. She saw him reclined on his tractor with his boots propped on the steering wheel and a sandwich in his hand. Mary Shaw stood up and walked toward Rose. Rose moved away from her. Out the kitchen window Rose could see the wind farm that started halfway up the mountain, the wind turbines spinning – their sharp blades as white as clouds and as wide as the dirt roads that ran up the mountain between them. Over fifty turbines covered the sides and top of the mountain; they could be seen from the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Oscar had played an important role three years ago in convincing PB Power to build their wind farm on top of Allegheny Mountain; he had used words such as progress, industry. Rose remembered the day PB Power announced their decision when she had come home to Oscar's wind farm themed dinner with a spinach pinwheel and steak medallions, French fries radiating from them like blades. She had been proud too – a wind farm was a good idea – but once the windmills were built she felt differently: their white metal was too white and they towered over the trees and valley like unhumble giants, their sharp blades an ambiguous threat. Their metal rising out of the earth made the trees look awkward, as if they were the ones that did not belong. But Rose had never mentioned any of this to Oscar.

“Rose, honey...” said Mary Shaw. “Do you want to sit down?”

Rose flinched as Mary Shaw put a hand on her shoulder.

“No, I’m fine,” Rose said and turned the tape back on. Again the young voice addressed Oscar and told him that PB Power was finally ready to proceed with the plans they had been discussing and asked Oscar for a quick response.

The machine beeped and the tape rewound. Rose leaned over the machine, her elbows stiff-straight, and played the message again.

Through the window Rose looked at the wind turbines spinning heavily. She looked at the trash heap and her yellow dish towel sitting on top. There had been a disagreement about whether or not the wind farm was a good thing for the community; some people had said that it would be bad for the wildlife population, that the wind turbines would cause a decrease, especially with the birds. A park ranger had given a speech at one of the town meetings. Rose listened to the stranger’s voice floating through her kitchen and wondered about the Waxwing. She had never noticed anything out of the ordinary before, and Oscar had done his research. He had always said the farm would be okay.

Rose pressed her face to the window.

“Are you okay?” Mary Shaw asked.

“I’ll just call her back.” Rose opened the window, the wind farm’s noise, a deep constant hum, filling the kitchen as she craned her neck to see the top of the mountain where the wind farm disappeared onto the other side. “I’ll tell her I’m Oscar’s wife. Explain the situation.”

“Rose...?”

“I’ll just call her back.”

Rose stood in front of her telephone hanging on the wall. She had already called PB Power once and talked to a secretary who told her that Ms. Herring was out, that she could leave a message on her voicemail, or with the secretary, and she would call back. Rose, not knowing what she would say on the machine, had asked for a returned call. But now it was dusk turning dark, too late for a call, and outside the wind farm's red and white lights flashed in the sky. In the deep of night, from a distance, the lights were sometimes pleasant: the red lights in the center of the wind turbine blinking on and off while white lights swirled all around them. In the dark the sharp blades were invisible, the spinning lights in the sky unconnected from the world below them. But that was only from a distance, in the dark. Now, in the twilight, the machines' arms loomed in black shadow out of the gray sky, their steady hum deeper, louder at the end of the day. This had always been Oscar's favorite time for walks, the wind farm his favorite place. They had walked together often, Oscar humming random bits of songs – Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog and American Pie – as he walked, but Rose had not walked the mountain since the windmills were built.

Rose felt her house rocked by the nightly wind, listened as it cried around the edges of her house rustling leaves and pushing fall forward. Tomorrow it would be slightly colder, the leaves a lighter shade of green until fall arrived and they became bright again.

Rose picked up the phone, dialed, then pressed six for Amanda Herring's voicemail. She listened to Ms. Herring's outgoing message, not knowing what she would say, but when the other line beeped Rose started easily. She said she was Oscar's wife.

She said she had no knowledge of their plans. She said Oscar had died, suddenly, of pancreatic cancer and that her dogs had brought home a dead bird, a Waxwing, that looked to have been killed in an unnatural way and she was worried about her farm being so close to the windmills, and wanted to see statistics. She wanted to know if any damage had been done. She asked for a quick response.

The next afternoon, Rose turned her car onto her gravel driveway, her eyes fixed on the windmill's white blades spinning, their metal shining like shallow water, and the patches of orange and red that now dotted the mountain green. As she had driven away that morning, to a church choir meeting she attended only out of forced obligation – she knew the looks of sympathy she would receive, the *you are in our prayers* and *time will heal* and *it is part of God's plans* she would hear, and she did not want to miss the call from Ms. Herring – she had watched in her rear view mirror as more windmills crested the horizon, the tips of their spinning blades visible now from the other side. It had been strange to see their sharp arms appearing, as if they belonged not to the mountain but to the sky itself, and all morning she had tried to remember exactly what the park ranger had said: that the birds wouldn't see the windmills and would run into the sharp blades, or would be sucked in by the pull. She couldn't remember exactly.

Now she drove toward her house, those spinning blades disappearing again and her dogs running down the mountain to greet her. She stepped out of her car and saw the smallest dog, Pepper, drop something from her mouth. The other mutts crowded around Pepper, Oscar's favorite, and Rose thought of Oscar sitting on a porch rocker with the

dog between his knees, rubbing her shoulders like she was human. She felt the wind still strong from the night before pushing steadily over the valley and the leaves were a dull green in the afternoon light cresting the mountain, and the windmills whirred, their blades sharp edges in the light. Rose grabbed the broom from the porch, a towel from the kitchen. When she shoed the dogs away she saw a Waxwing with a cut across its abdomen. Rose felt her fingers weak around the broom's rough wood handle, the cloth heavy in her hand; she felt the wind running hard through the valley and the wind farm's spinning blades were a song behind her. Their noise was a constant one, but there was also a flux in their whirring, like a conch shell held to the ear – a noise that seemed to say something though, try as you might, you could never make it out.

Rose picked up the bird and took it to the compost. Her dish towel lay at the bottom and Rose leaned closer. It was possible, she thought, that the bird in her hand was the same bird from yesterday; it had the same black-masked eyes, yellow wingtip. It was possible that the dogs had gotten it out of the trash as they sometimes did. Rose didn't see the bird from the day before, but she still wasn't sure. The Waxwing in her hand seemed a bit smaller, its blue wings brighter.

Rose tossed the bird onto the trash heap and walked to her house, her dogs crowding around her knees and tripping her as she walked. Her kitchen door slammed soundly as she left her dogs to scratch and whine from the other side.

A red light blinked on her answering machine. Rose opened the window, the windmill's hum floating through the kitchen, and watched her dogs run back up the

mountain. She started a pot of coffee and listened to its constant beat, falling in syncopation with the windmills, another thread of their melody.

Rose looked at the blinking light, then walked into the living room and picked up the first book she saw – a large blue book with a picture of an old clock on the front. The book told about the different types of clocks, how they were made, how they worked; the living room was filled with books such as these. Oscar loved learning how things work, talking about how things work, and his handwriting littered the margins. Rose flipped through the pages and read Oscar's underlined passage: *everything we do depends in some way on going and coming, meeting and parting*. Rose ran her fingers over the black print, felt the words' slight lift off the page. The windmills hummed heavily.

Rose put down the book and went to the kitchen. She poured a cup of coffee and stood in front of her answering machine taking small sips. When she finally pressed play the first voice she heard was her pastor, saying it was good to see her *out and about*. Rose pushed the delete button and Amanda Herring's voice came through the machine. She said it was nothing serious and apologized for Rose's loss. She said she had talked with Oscar, a few months ago, about buying a few acres of the farm where their property met PB Power's property. They wanted to build a small educational center and tourist shop for those that were curious, but they needed more land. As for the birds, Ms. Herring continued, there had been some studies that suggested a minor decrease in bird population in correlation to wind farms, and there was some concern about migratory birds, but it was nothing substantial. Nothing to cause any real damage.

Amanda Herring asked Rose to call her back, and Rose thought about the phrase, *real damage*, wondered what real damage meant. She had said nothing about the Waxwing; she had told Rose nothing specific.

Rose picked up the phone and called Mary Shaw.

“Mary Shaw, it’s Rose. I have a question.”

“Hi Rose.”

“Do you remember what the park ranger, the National Park guy, said at the meeting that time about the birds? Was it that they’d get sucked into the windmills, or run into them?”

“I don’t know.”

“That woman, from PB Power, she called me back. They want to buy part of the farm, for a tourist shop. She said something about migratory birds but nothing about the Waxwing, and I found another one today.”

“Another dead bird? And you think the windmills did it?”

“Waxwings are migratory birds, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but how do they keep getting down to your house? Isn’t the wind farm too far away?”

“I think my dogs are bringing them down to me.”

“Hold on, let me ask Russell.”

Rose heard a muffled scratch, Mary covering the receiver with her hand.

“Russell doesn’t remember anything about the meeting,” she said, “but he says Waxwings are migratory. He says they are probably moving now because of the cooler summer we’ve had.”

“The windmills are killing the Waxwings,” Rose said, her voice distant.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s possible.”

“What else could it be?”

“Rose, honey, do you want me to come over?”

“No, no, I’m okay.”

“What about your land?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.”

“Are you sure you don’t want...?”

“No, I’m fine. I’ll talk to you later.”

Rose hung up the phone. She pushed the window open further and listened to the wind farm’s vibrations. She watched those spinning blades that did not seem all that far away.

The windmill closest to Rose’s house stood still. She had seen it out her kitchen window, not spinning. There was still the hum because all the other windmills spun slowly above the trees.

Rose walked outside. A few leaves fell fast from their branches in the wind. The dogs chased each other in circles and the hens clucked around their bare pen. She gripped the railing of her porch steps.

The still windmill's blades seemed sharper, its white steel whiter. They reached down toward the house, looked as if they could pierce her like an arrow. Rose walked toward the tree line. Another Waxwing with that same long cut lay at the edge of the garden.

It was not the same bird as before; it didn't have a black mask around its eyes and its wings surrounded its belly almost covering the cut. Rose bent toward it. She cradled the bird in her hands. It was soft and light, its wing feathers silky as Rose ran her fingers over them. She looked up the mountain at the windmill sitting still. The day was bright and fall's colors had begun to spread over the trees. The wind farm buzzed in her ears.

Rose had not called Amanda Herring, who had called twice now, but she had made a list. At the top was written the word Waxwings with a question mark in big letters. Below that, the price Rose would ask – Ms. Herring had not named a figure – for the land, more than it was worth. Under that she had written Oscar's name.

Rose ran to her house, placed the bird on the kitchen counter. Its beak was tucked to its breast, wings folded, tiny feet curled into them. The doorbell rang.

Rose went to her front door and saw Mary Shaw standing behind it. Mary Shaw waved through the glass.

"I'm sorry to just drop by like this," Mary said as Rose opened the door, "but you weren't answering your phone and I was worried."

"I haven't been answering," Rose said, standing in front of Mary Shaw, keeping her half-in, half-out of the house. "I thought it might be PB Power. She's called twice. She wants five acres. I don't know what to say."

“Five acres?”

“A tenth of the farm. For a tourist shop.”

“Rose, honey,” Mary Shaw started, trying to place another foot inside the house.

“She still didn’t name a price. And I found another Waxwing. I don’t know what to do...”

“Why don’t we go in the kitchen? I’ll call Russell and you can talk to him about what a good price would be, if you decide to sell.”

“No, thank you, I don’t want to talk to Russell. I’m fine. Really.”

Rose put her hand on the front door.

“All right, well, I just wanted to tell you that we saw that one of the windmills wasn’t working, and we called PB Power. I don’t know if you noticed, but I wanted let you know that we called. They’re on their way out now to fix it.”

“Okay, fine, I hadn’t noticed. Thank you for stopping by.”

“I brought you some cookies,” Mary Shaw started.

Rose took the Tupperware container, said thank you, said goodbye, closed the door. The lock made a satisfying click. Rose went to the kitchen, sat the cookies on the counter – the Waxwing still lying near the sink – and watched a red PB Power truck make its way up the dirt roads to the still windmill. Next to the bird and the cookies sat the mail: a credit card bill, pizza coupons, a flyer from the church. Rose ran her hands over them, and watched as a man in white got out of the truck and entered the base of the windmill through a door Rose had never noticed before.

Rose found Oscar's binoculars then dragged a chair from the kitchen table over to the window, its heavy wooden legs scraping against the tile. They made small grooves in the floor. Rose sat with her elbows on the counter, binoculars to her eyes, legs spread apart against the kitchen cabinets, knees pressing into the wood, and imagined Oscar walking the wind farm dirt roads. She imagined him appearing through the tree line in the back yard, stopping to wash his hands in the creek like she always told him not to. Rose trained the binoculars on the still blades. A platform, almost like a diving board, hung in their center. She had never noticed the platform before.

Rose looked across the yard at the compost heap and thought she could see a broken wing rising up from the trash, pointing toward the sky. She sat there so long it seemed she could feel time slowing, the seconds and minutes stretching out into some palpable thing making ripples in the air as they moved by. She listened to the wind farm's constant hum, tapped her foot to its shifting rhythms.

It was almost dusk when the man in white appeared at the top of the windmill. The empty Tupperware container sat on the counter littered with crumbs. Rose stood from the chair, her knees scraping against wooden cabinets and popping as they straightened. Then she was in the yard, the air so still that Rose couldn't tell where her skin ended and the empty space around her began.

The man looked no bigger than an ant to the naked eye, but Rose could make out his form – white legs, white arms and a white cap on his head. He was so covered in white Rose thought he might disappear entirely into the white sky behind him.

The man in white began to wave. Rose touched her hand to the binoculars, as if just then remembering their presence, then put them to her eyes.

In the scope of the binoculars the man was still far away, his features difficult to distinguish, except for his smile, which was as white as the steel blades behind him. He seemed to be looking directly at Rose.

Rose took the binoculars from her eyes, the man in white still waving. The dogs gathered around her – Pepper pushing her snout against Rose’s legs – and Rose raised her hand, high and straight, into the air.

The man stopped waving and when Rose returned the binoculars to her eyes she saw that his back was turned from her, his face toward the still blades. A cold wind ran over the valley, chilled her skin, and Rose thought of Oscar in the winter licking frost from blades of grass. She took the binoculars from around her neck, placed them on the porch. The dogs followed her as she started walking up the mountain.

She did not take a straight path toward the mountain’s top but walked south first, slightly away from the wind farm toward the edge of her property. Rose found a small, worn path littered with deer tracks, and followed it until she came to an old barbed wire fence that marked the boundary between her farm and PB Power’s land. The dogs slipped quickly under the fence, chasing each other, nipping ears. Rose sat next to the barbed wire, now hanging level with her chest, then swung her legs under the fence. The sun hung low in the sky, small rays of light shining through the trees. The tips of Rose’s feet extended toward the leaves. The ground felt cold on her back and dead grass clung to her hair as Rose rolled to the other side of the fence.

When she stood up she stood on a gravel access road that led to the top of the wind farm. The dogs were already a hundred yards ahead, their tails wagging. Rose walked behind them and the gravel crunched under her feet. Through a break in the trees Rose could see down the mountain to her house, small and far away. She had forgotten how tall the mountain climbed. Rose thought of Amanda Herring, nothing more than a formless voice in her kitchen. She thought of the birds in her trash heap, the bird still on her kitchen counter. She heard Oscar humming church hymns.

And when she reached the first wind turbine it was bigger, taller, whiter than it seemed from her house. The blades were sharp, just as they seemed from below, and at first Rose could not make herself continue. She stood still and listened to the machines whirring in the sky, stood still until the whirring was no longer loud or harsh. She listened until the blade's music was not something heard but felt, its vibration another chord of Oscar's songs, and she was able to keep walking.

Rose walked between the wind turbines, the hum changing as she moved toward and then past each machine from a murmur and a hush to a whoop and swing, and back again. It was not that she now understood their song – it was as strange and distant as it had always been. It was not that those sharp blades were no longer menacing. It was not just the absence of the cream-colored envelopes in her mailbox today or the voice now distant in her kitchen.

Rose had not made a decision, but when she reached the wind turbine closest to her house and saw that its blades now turned through the air and that the truck was gone, she was able to lay down. The dogs lay down around her, Pepper's head on her knees,

the blades spinning steadily above her. For a long time, Rose rested underneath the windmill, the blades becoming points, then lines, then points again as they circled above her. The sun began to set and the blades' strong steel became shadows in its light.

When Rose returned to her house, pushing through the tree-line foliage thick at her ankles, blue dress catching the moon's light like a star in the trees, the wind farm lights floated in the black sky and a light shone in her kitchen.

Inside Rose picked up Oscar's book, heavy, blue, and fanned the pages through her fingers. They fell on a diagram of a clock tower, all its wheels and gears usually invisible behind stone drawn in dark lines, the clock's face, three thick arms, frozen equal distance from one other. Rose walked outside and sat on the back porch, the dogs around her, and the rocking chair swinging to the beat of the wind farm's song. She remembered Oscar dancing alone on the porch, his arms holding the air when Rose had refused to dance because there was no music. She remembered sitting in a rocker laughing as he hummed and spun. She remembered the moon hanging low and full in the night and the wind farm's red and white lights a flashing river flowing below. Pepper lay at Rose's feet. She bent down and kneaded her fingers into the dog's thick fur.

See Rock City

It was ten minutes before closing time – the fall night air about to breathe new life into the dusk – when David Hob and Andrew Bowman rushed into Moore’s pharmacy with ski masks on and rifles in their hands. Dinah, the girl who worked there in the late afternoons, the girl David Hob had called his “friend” though the most he’d done was buy her beers at Jack’s and dance with her once, sat behind the counter with a glossy magazine lying over her crossed legs.

Two hours before, when Andrew Bowman sat listening to his friend’s plan – down at Jack’s after work, for happy hour they both said but the drinks were only a quarter cheaper – there had been nothing but plastic cups of beer in front of him and Andrew had imagined the look that would appear on Dinah’s face; he’d imagined that she was afraid, but also impressed. That she would recognize them as different men, more than just the guy who works at the chemical plant and can’t even dance to slow songs. David Hob had said as much: she would recognize them, then she would give them what they wanted.

Dinah started off her stool as David and Andrew rushed through the back door, and her cheeks did flush red. But then she looked closer at the eyes behind the mask.

“Bowman?” Dinah said. “What are you doing?” She dropped her magazine onto the counter. Andrew looked at Dinah, then looked at David. His pupils were sharp

points from the Ice he'd smoked, and Andrew could feel the coke rolling with whiskey and beer. David Hob pointed his rifle at Dinah.

It was an English Fowler, an antique that an hour ago had rested on the wall in David's basement – one of a four-part set David's father owned – and now rested on David's shoulder because he and Andrew hadn't been able to find the key to the gun locker, because David had said they shouldn't use their own guns. Andrew's was a Poor Boy long rifle. They were the type of guns favored by Boone and Crockett. Andrew wasn't even sure they would fire.

“Shut your mouth, get down,” David yelled at Dinah, moving closer with his gun, but it came out more like a question.

“Hob?” Dinah said, then laughed. “You're robbing me, really?”

Andrew looked at David but David Hob just stared straight ahead, his blue eyes bullets through his ski mask.

“Come on, Dinah,” Andrew said. “Just get the money.”

“And tell us where the Xanax and Oxycotin is.”

They needed the money *and* the pills, David had said, because there wouldn't be enough in the draw to cover what they owed Trenton. And they needed to pay him soon; broken kneecaps, David had said. But this was Carter's Valley. No bones were broken unless it was from falling off a horse.

“We don't have any Oxycotin,” Dinah said.

“What? Bullshit.”

David Hob looked at Dinah and raised his gun toward her.

Dinah scoffed. “What sort of gun is that anyway?”

“Don’t you lie to me,” David said and Dinah laughed again and David was around the counter with his gun against her chest.

Dinah stutter-stepped backwards, her hands palming the pharmacy wall. Here eyes were wide now; her pupils small black pearls.

“We don’t have any, really.”

“Bowman, check the back,” David said. “And get the Xanax too.”

Andrew looked at David and his arms were pushing the rifle into Dinah’s waist.

“She said they didn’t have any,” Andrew said, his gun hanging parallel with his legs.

“She’s lying. Go get it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get the money.”

Andrew looked again at the pair behind the counter: Dinah’s eyes were slits and her arms flexed just like they had the night she danced with David and their bodies moved together; David stood still, nothing moving but his lips, which were pursed and quivered slightly.

“Do what I say,” David said without turning away from Dinah.

The back of the pharmacy was nothing but long rows of bottles and boxes. Andrew tried to read the labels, but he saw nothing but black lines on a white backdrop. He rummaged through a box, thought of a picture: he and David, young, nine or ten with their arms looped around each other’s necks; behind them, to the right, a big red barn

with a black roof and white letters that said *See Rock City*; behind them, to the left, the smoking stacks of the chemical plant. Andrew threw the box to the floor, then heard Dinah scream help.

“Fuck, oh man fuck,” David said and Andrew shoveled several small bottles into the crook of his arm and ran to the front, bottles dropping as he ran.

In the front of the pharmacy were floor-to-ceiling length windows and Andrew reached the counter in time to see Sheriff Kinner’s profile moving through the panes as he walked along the other side of the street. Andrew dropped the bottles into the sack of money David held in his hand, and they watched as Sheriff Kinner disappeared into the diner across from them. Two older women – grandmothers, Andrew thought – also made their way down the street. They walked slowly, their arms looped together, their heads bent toward each other as they strolled down the sidewalk running in front of those tall windows.

David Hob’s right hand held Dinah’s wrist; in his left was the money and his rifle.

“He didn’t hear you. You’re fucking lucky.”

David let go of Dinah and rummaged through the contents of the sack.

“What is this?” he said, an orange bottle in one hand, then picked up another.

“Bowman, these are antibiotics.”

Dinah bent double, clutched her stomach, laughed loud, hard, out of control. Her face that had been pale was now red and words came heavy-breathed from her lips.

Andrew tried to make them out; he thought he caught the words antibiotics, God, and sorry, but it was hard to hear anything other than her high-pitched, choked laughter.

Andrew looked at David whose hand held a tight grip on the barrel of his rifle. Then the rifle was in the air swinging high and it hit Dinah across the face and she fell to the floor, her hands on her head and already bloody.

Andrew stared at David, his eyes half-hidden by the mask that had twisted around his face.

“Watch her,” David said and disappeared into the back of the store.

There was nothing but the sound of boxes scraping across shelves, Dinah’s light breath. Andrew moved closer to Dinah. Her knees were pulled into her chest; hair fell over her face.

“Dinah?” Andrew said.

Dinah was silent.

Standing still, Andrew felt his body surge, veins pulse.

“Dinah, look, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

Andrew squatted over her. He reached his hand out toward her head, his fingers extending to the hair that fell over her eyes. Dinah pulled her legs closer to her chest, her head to her knees. David Hob rounded the corner, his arms full. Andrew pulled his hand away and stood up.

“I couldn’t find the Oxycotin, but I’ve got Footballs and Totem Poles, and man, they had Powder D, enough to make a pretty-fucking-buck. We’ve got enough for Trenton and even more for us.”

David tossed everything into the sack already full of money and amoxicillin. He walked the length of the counter, looked outside, walked back.

“What’s she doing?” David said, looking over the counter at Dinah lying still – not moving at all, Andrew thought – on the floor.

“Take off your mask. Leave the rifle here,” David said as he took off his ski mask. Andrew looked at David’s face lined from the mask, his cheeks a ploughed field; his eyes were steely and hard. David leaned his gun against the counter and looked at Andrew, who hadn’t moved.

David grabbed the rifle out of Andrew’s hand and let it drop to the floor. It clattered against the tile. He pulled the mask from Andrew’s head, strands of hair coming with it, and let it drop too. He swung the sack over his shoulder and thumped Andrew on the back.

“Come on man, let’s go,” David said and walked out the door.

When Andrew stepped outside he saw that fall had come, that fall was all-the-sudden here, shocking in its quick and encompassing arrival. The outside air, its sharp chill, was painful to breathe after the closed-in air of the pharmacy and when Andrew heard the car’s engine whirring – whirring, but not turning over – he thought the sound was in his mind.

David Hob sat in the driver’s seat, banging his foot against the gas and turning the key over and over.

“What’s wrong with your car?” Andrew said, the door slamming behind him.

“Shut up. It’ll start.”

David pushed his foot into the gas again, the whirr a scream, then banged his hands on the steering wheel. Andrew looked at David: his eyes were not hard now but tenuous, pliant, and his jaw hung loose below them.

The engine's noise died and was replaced by sirens and bells from the pharmacy alarm. Andrew's first thought was Sheriff Kinner who still sat across the street; his second thought was that if the alarm had been triggered, Dinah was okay.

Sheriff Kinner made his way out into the street.

"Shit. Fuck," David said and Andrew slowly opened his car door; slowly got out. David jumped out of the car and ran down the street. Not fifty yards from David, Sammy Cox was stepping out of his ice cream truck. He didn't see David coming. Just made his way across the street.

Sheriff Kinner stood in front of the diner, watching David and Andrew as if he could not decide who to chase after, though Andrew wasn't running. Then there was the gleam of black metal in Sheriff Kinner's right hand and Andrew dropped the sack he held and ran toward David.

He got to the truck in time to see a set of keys fall from the sun visor into David's lap. Behind them ran Sheriff Kinner, a bewildered look on his face and his arms flailing.

David Hob put the truck in gear and they were down the road, the cold smell of freezer burn in their noses, manufactured frost sat on their skin.

An ice cream jingle sang loudly from the truck's speakers. David Hob double shifted the truck and his hands moved fast over the buttons and knobs, trying to turn the music off.

“Try that one,” Andrew said.

“What one?”

“The red thing, pull it.”

David Hob pulled at the knob and a hatch on the side of the truck fell open until a silver chain caught it at a ninety degree angle.

David Hob spat words, cursing the truck, Andrew, the street, the town.

Andrew pulled at the knob again. The hatch didn't close, but the music stopped.

The silence sent false bells running through Andrew's ears. He could still hear the music, though he knew it had stopped.

Outside the town sped past them; the two grandmothers, arms still linked, continued down the sidewalk and Andrew watched them disappearing in the side-view mirror.

“Where's the score?” David said looking around the front of the truck.

Andrew looked at his hands turned palm-up.

“I forgot it.”

“Shit Bowman. You forgot?”

David Hob's arms held tightly the steering wheel, his whole body leaning as he clipped corners through turns.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Andrew wondered, but his arms felt heavy, his head light and unconnected. His palms were gritty and damp; his skin was warm vibrating along his body as if it did not belong to him. He thought of Dinah's hands covering her face.

“Me? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. I’ve got the plan. I’m getting us out of here.”

Andrew thought of small knees pulled close to a small chin.

“You hit Dinah. You hit her hard man.”

“Yeah I hit her. So what I fucking hit her.”

David turned his whole body toward Andrew, only his left hand on the steering wheel. His right arm hung by his side, his hand a fist.

They had made it to the outskirts of town, the truck surrounded by fields of tobacco and hay. The sky was growing dark and stars began to dot the sky. The smell of falling leaves mixed with the ice cream smell in the back of the truck.

David Hob pulled two blue pills out of his pocket, tossed them down his throat. Andrew shoved his hands in his pockets, felt nothing.

“All right,” David said, “we’re just going to keep going. We’ll go over to Elizabethton, we’ll get another car. We’ll get some money. If we just keep going whatever we get we can keep. Fuck Trenton.”

Andrew watched the day escaping, leaving the valley landscape in a murky dusk.

“Right. Trenton,” Andrew said, his voice directed not to David, but to the open fields running alongside him.

David Hob turned the truck onto Highway 23 that ran straight south. Andrew and David were silent; outside, the night was silent, empty except for the stars and the moon, the empty road with its empty possibilities.

“I’m hungry,” David said after a while. “I’m fucking starving.”

Andrew looked at David, then crawled through the small door to the freezer. Ice cream everywhere reached from ceiling to floor; any type you could want. Andrew sat on the floor between the shelves and rested his head against a stack of Good Humor Bars. It was a close space, a manageable space compared to the empty night outside. Andrew thought of Dinah, hair over her eyes, and he thought about the library where he would sit early mornings when there was no one else to see, and how there were characters in those books that were screwed up too; he wished he would have told Dinah about the library, those characters. He wished he had told her, *it isn't just us*.

David Hob banged on the freezer door and Andrew grabbed Fudgesicles, Klondike Bars, Eskimo Pies, and squeezed through to the front seat.

“Smorgasbord,” David said as Andrew dropped the ice cream onto the floorboard. “We’ll eat like kings.”

The wind had begun its nightly run through the valley. David Hob wasn’t driving fast anymore. He drove like a father would drive his family on a Sunday trip through the country when there are so many things to see that you have to go slow not to miss them.

The exit for Elizabethton approached them on the right. Andrew watched the green sign grow larger; then he watched its gleaming metal shine in the side view mirror as David Hob drove past.

David took large bites out of his ice cream. Ahead of them, shining in spotlights, was a billboard with a smooth black convertible backdropped by a sandy beach and yellow sun. In the foreground stood a woman, her hand placed lightly on the hood of the car.

“Florida,” David said, his thick voice breaking through the silence.

“What?”

“They’ll be beaches, women. We could have a life down in Florida.”

Andrew picked a Fudgesicle off the floor and thought of David when he was young, when he and Andrew would steal quarters from their mothers’ purses to buy Heath Bars at the playground. They would perch on top of the monkey bars with ice cream in their hands and on their lips and even the older boys never messed with them sitting up there so high.

David Hob pulled the truck off the road.

“What are you doing?”

“What is that,” David said and nodded to a dark mass that lay ahead of them.

He was out of the truck, his tall frame a shadow in the headlights, before Andrew had time to answer.

A Holstein calf lay in the road and David Hob stood over it with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

“It’s just a baby,” he said, his voice shaky.

Andrew looked at the calf. He looked at their shadows cast like narrowing roads through the headlights.

“They shot it,” David said. “They shot it.” His motions were jerky and quick. He strained to keep his voice even.

Andrew had seen David cry before. When they were nine years old Andrew had awoken late one night to David taping at his bedroom window. He was crying and

shaking and mud caked his clothes. Andrew thought maybe he had fallen, but David started telling him about his dad and a fight that was far from the last. David had told him how his dad yelled at his mom and chased him and his sister out of the room, and how his sister cried because she was scared, because their dad was big and she was small. But Andrew never learned where all the mud came from.

“We’ve got to move it off the road,” David said, and the distant sounds of sirens filled the air.

“Hob, they’re coming. We’ve got to go.”

David Hob kept struggling with the calf and the sirens grew louder.

“Come on, we’ve got to go.”

“Help me then,” David said as he lifted the front end of the calf.

Andrew looked at David, then looked down the road that would soon be awash in flashing lights.

The calf was heavy; Andrew and David struggled with each step.

Three cop cars rounded the corner, their lights flashing.

“There they are.”

“Get down,” David said and dropped the calf.

The two men lay in the field, the calf horizontal between them, and watched as the cars pulled up to the truck.

“All that ice cream,” David said and Andrew started laughing. He covered his mouth, pounded a fist to the earth, and David laughed too.

“A fucking dead cow,” David choked out.

“Your Chrysler that wouldn’t start.”

“God damn Trenton.”

“Damn Kinner.”

“Damn Dinah,” David said and the laughter faded as quickly as it had come.

Andrew’s face was to the earth, nose pressed against the dry dirt and dying grass, and he breathed deep. Spotlights sparked on and began to weave across the field.

“You think she’s okay?” David whispered.

“I don’t know.”

Andrew saw Dinah lying on the floor of the pharmacy, saw himself standing over her with a rusted rifle and a blank stare. He heard his voice saying again, it would be okay.

“I don’t know why I did that,” David said. “Why would I do that?”

Andrew saw David’s ten-year-old wide eyes, his lips covered in ice cream and there was a sun bright and metal warm on their bare legs. Andrew heard the constant machine-hum of the chemical plant and could taste its acrid air. He saw David’s profile behind the steering wheel of an ice cream truck silhouetted by the night’s light, taking large bites as he drove.

A cop’s voice shouted metallic through a loud speaker but Andrew listened instead to the muffled breaths coming from David’s covered mouth. He looked at the sky above them, too big to be filled by all those little stars.

“They don’t see us,” David said.

Bats circled the sky above them, slicing in and out of the light.

“Hey Bowman?”

“Yeah?”

“Why was that calf so heavy? I mean, it seems like it shouldn’t be that heavy. It was just a baby.”

“I don’t know,” Andrew said and looked up at the sky so clear and star-spotted, at the moon’s fragile eyes and gaping mouth, that sad, shocked face.

Fragments

Claire opened the back door of her dad's house and the sounds of her little brother banging down the stairs, her step-mom talking on the phone, the weather broadcast loud through the television, and her dad slamming the side door as he came in from the barn wasn't just noise but a physical force that threatened to push her back out the door, down the hill, back to the log house where she stayed. But when she entered the kitchen the noise stopped. Her step-mom stopped talking and her dad and brother stood as still as they could. The only sound came from the weatherman who said tomorrow would be another clear fall day.

"Kevin, pour everyone drinks please," Claire's step-mom said with her hand over the receiver, then quickly left the room.

"All right," said Claire's brother and her dad said he would take a glass of milk.

Kevin poured three tall glasses of milk and looked at Claire.

Claire thought of Charlie's hand around a tall glass of bourbon; she thought of his eyes, hazy and red, the last time she had seen him. She heard the doctor at the hospital saying again, Charlie didn't make it.

"Milk, I guess," Claire said and sat down at the table already full of empty plates and silverware. Claire wished she was back at log house with its kitchen warmed by sunlight and a woodstove. It had been Claire's grandparents' house, built by her great-

grandfather; the side door stood two feet above the ground because, when Claire's great-grandfather had built it, there hadn't been enough wood for steps.

Two years ago, that door hanging in the air had looked useless and sad after Claire's college apartment, but then Claire had met Charlie – he'd walked up to her at a bar in town, said she looked like the kind of girl that knew what she wanted and Claire had been flattered, knowing she was not that kind of girl – and they would sit on the lip of that door standing wide open, their bodies close in that close space, Charlie's feet on the ground, Claire's dangling in the air.

Claire's brother brought four glasses to the table; the glasses were new. Everything was new: the house just built a few months ago, shockingly bright with every light bulb fresh and burning. Claire and Charlie had watched the construction, joking about what they would do when her family became her neighbors. Charlie said it was her dad's mid-life crisis, wanting to move back to the farm, though her dad was past mid-life. It had been a funny joke – that big brick house rising like a fort on top of the hill – until Charlie's truck hit a telephone pole and Claire had to watch alone as more and more bricks were added. It had been a funny joke, until it was finished.

Claire's step-mom returned and she and Claire's dad brought food to the table. Everyone sat. Bowls were passed and plates filled.

The night before the wreck, Claire lay in bed with Charlie, his head on her chest, his left leg thrown across her own and his arm on her stomach. Lying under him, Claire thought of the people that had lived in the log house before – her parents and great-

grandparents. Her great-grandparents she had never known, but two oil paintings, stern, stoic, hung in the log house living room. Her grandparents had died years ago, one right after the other. Her grandfather had been a big man, a life-of-the-party man, and her grandmother had always seemed delighted and surprised by him. Claire ran her hands through Charlie's hair and thought they were a little like her grandparents, Charlie a little like her grandfather. She'd thought of her grandparents' gravestones on a hill at the back of the property, those dates so close together.

The next morning Charlie rose early and drank a glass of water from the tap as Claire made a pot of coffee, his eyes still hazy with bourbon and pot from the night before. Charlie drank the water quick, said he didn't want to be late for work, and placed a small wet-metallic kiss on the edge of her mouth.

Claire sat at the kitchen window and watched his car make its way down the long gravel driveway and turn onto the road. She watched cars pass back and forth and watched as the cows made their way through the woods to the two-acre bottom below. Two birds flew back and forth from the top of a bare dogwood to the dewed grass below, carrying worms as they flew. Three small heads with gaping beaks crested the nest's edge.

"How was practice today, Kev?" Claire's dad asked referring to her little brother's high school track team.

Kevin said practice was okay and offered nothing more. He was at the age where everything was “okay,” and Claire envied him, the way he could sit quietly, almost invisible at the dinner table.

Claire’s step-mom turned to Claire’s dad, asked something about work. He said work was fine.

Claire took a roll, hard in her hand, from the basket of bread her family passed around the table. Her dad ate a bite of his pork chop.

Claire’s step-mom turned to her.

“How was your day Claire?” she asked. “Did you work today?”

Claire thought of the things she had done that day: the last swallows of Charlie’s pint of bourbon she’d been trying hard not to finish, burning her throat that morning; the drive to the restaurant where she worked and the homeless man with a sign she couldn’t read standing on the side of the road; the deer she had seen early morning when she sat on the log house back porch as the sun made its way over her; Jim, another server whose mouth tasted like spearmint when she pulled him into the walk-in freezer, the surprised look on his face disappearing as he put his hands under her shirt. The homeless man still standing on the side of the road when she drove home, his sign still too small to read.

“I worked,” Claire said. “Work was fine.”

“That’s good,” said Claire’s dad. “It’s good you’re going back to work. You’ve been all this week, right?”

Claire nodded.

“Good, it’s time. Getting back into the swing of things is good. That will help.”

Claire knew what her dad meant. He meant that going to work would get her out of the log house, away from the things that reminded her not just of the wreck, but of everything about Charlie: a picture of Claire taken by Charlie when she wasn't looking; the Ziploc bag of pot still sitting on the counter where Charlie had left it; the bed they'd slept in. He wanted her to forget it all, she knew. She had heard her dad's long exhale when she told him about Charlie's wreck – a breath that said this was bad, but, for him, it could have been worse. It made her angry. She had felt that more than anything else when her dad put his arms around her then, even though what she saw with her face pressed against her dad's chest was Charlie's bloodshot eyes.

There was a knock at the door and a man, one of the builders who had worked on the house, entered and told Claire's step-mom that they were done filling in the cement in the lower garage.

“Didn't mean to disturb your dinner,” he said, “but that cement will dry soon, if you want to do something with it.”

“Oh right, thank you.” she said.

“It's about time they finished that,” Claire's dad said.

“So I thought,” Claire's step-mom said turning to her and Kevin, “since the cement is wet, that it would be nice if you two went down and put your handprints in it.”

Kevin said okay and Claire's dad looked at her.

“What do you think?” he asked.

He looked at Claire. Claire looked at her hands.

“All right,” she said, trying to sound like her brother.

Claire and Charlie walked down the path from the log house to the river, passing a joint between them. At the end of the path sat an old, run-down house littered with the left-behind remnants of the people who had lived there. A rusted chair and a chewed through box of baking soda, empty now, sat in the kitchen. In the living room rested a gutted television, its rabbit ears lying on the floor. The bedroom walls were covered with writing: lines from children's stories, birthdays, names.

The trees and foliage had grown up around the house. The back porch was covered in kudzu that crawled up the steps and walls. Through one bedroom window grew purple lilacs, their heavy perfume filling the air. Claire held the flowers soft in her hand and Charlie walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He pulled a small tin case filled with green pills from his pocket. He put one on his tongue, gave another to Claire.

Walking back down the dirt path they stopped at a rusted school bus that had sat next to the creek for as long as Claire could remember. When they were young, Claire's father told Claire and her brother that the bus belonged to Davy Crockett and they would throw rocks at the bus, trying to break holes through the rusted metal. Charlie picked large rocks from the ground, too heavy to be thrown so far, his camera dangling from his neck. Claire watched Charlie heaving the rocks into the air, felt the ground vibrate when they landed short of the bus.

Claire's little brother went first, sticking his hand into the grey floor. Claire placed her hand next to his. The cement was grainy and cold and it made a sound like a kiss when she pulled her hand out.

"How nice," her step-mom said.

Claire looked at the empty, wet impressions and thought of Charlie's funeral months ago filled with people she didn't know. Claire had gone alone, hadn't wanted her family there. Charlie's family, his mother and father, knew Claire – she'd had dinner at their house a few times – but they seemed to look at her like they looked at everyone else and Claire had run her hands over the closed casket wishing it were open, wishing for a face she knew.

"Would it be okay," Claire asked, "if I wrote something small in the back corner?"

"What do you want to write?" her step-mom asked.

"Just initials, back in the back."

"Charlie's initials?" her dad asked.

Claire nodded.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Claire," he said.

"I just...I need to do something," Claire said. "You won't even be able to see them."

"Your dad's right. It's not a good idea."

Claire looked at her family standing in the garage light, their shadows cast long in front of them; her step-mother's shadow spread across the floor, crawled up Claire's legs

to the knee. Claire thought of Charlie's body lying over her. She thought of his empty bottle of bourbon. She thought of birds nesting in a tree.

"Why?" Claire asked, wanting to hear the answer.

"It's just not a good idea," her step-mom said.

Claire looked at her family looking at her. Kevin's hand, like her own, was covered in wet cement.

"I'm sorry Claire," her father said putting his arms around her, but Claire pushed him away.

"No you're not."

"Yes, we are," Claire's step-mom said. "But we don't want a reminder of this. I don't want to remember those things."

Claire rode with Charlie down back roads, gravel and dirt, holding beer cans between their legs. Charlie said he wanted to get some air, to see what there was to see. The road ran beside the river, a deep blue running fast, and two men waded up to their knees with fishing lines flying above their heads. One man's line went taut and he waded deeper into the water, but they rounded the bend before Claire could see what was on the line.

Charlie took a turn too fast and his truck went spinning; the front end bumped up and over a rise on the right, the back tire dipped into, then somehow back out of the ditch on the left. There was the scream of the truck's brakes; gravel spit from tires knocking against glass and metal; the cold hard smack of the window against Claire's forehead.

When the truck stopped they were facing the way they had come. Charlie wiggled the gear shift into first and picked his beer can off the floorboard, still half full. Claire put her hands to her forehead, then her chest, arms, legs. Her head ached but that was all.

Charlie made a joke, *guess we'll go this way*. He punched the clutch with his foot, shifted into second, laughing. And Claire was laughing with him.

Claire sat at the kitchen table. Her dad and step-mom sat beside her and her little brother stood at the sink washing the cement from his hand. The microwave beeped and Kevin brought a plate of warmed food to Claire.

“Here sweetheart,” her step-mom said, handing Claire a fork, “you need to eat. You need something inside you.” But Claire felt everything inside her. She felt moments in her, fragments of Charlie: his wet-metallic lips on her lips in the early morning; his head heavy on her chest; his arm drawn back with a rock in his hand. Inside her was the run-down house, his empty bottle of bourbon, her father’s face when he learned what had happened, her family surrounding her in a kitchen so bright that the night outside looked blue.

Claire tried to bring the fork to her mouth but her body was heavy with everything and it only hung awkwardly in her left hand, her right hand still dotted with cement. She let the fork drop to the table.

“Claire, honey,” her step-mom said, “do you want to talk about this?”

They had met Charlie once, by accident. Walking back from the run-down house Claire and Charlie, a joint still in his hand, had been surprised by Claire's family walking down the gravel path from the log house. Her family had come to the farm to check the progress of their house, then walked over the hill to find Claire. She couldn't remember what she had said to them, or if she had introduced Charlie. All Claire remembered was her father's face when he told her, *we were looking for you*.

Claire said she didn't want to talk.

The table was silent. Kevin played with the food on his plate. Claire's father coughed.

"We never said grace?" her little brother said, more like a question than a statement, and her dad put down his fork and clasped his hands together.

"God is great," Claire's step-mom began and her dad and brother joined in, "God is good." Their eyes were closed, heads bowed. Claire closed her eyes and tried to make her voice form the words, but she and Charlie sat alone on the porch getting high. Charlie took a funny half-step into the yard, setting off the motion detectors that sent light shining after him.

"Let us thank him for our food."

Claire made a joke, teased him, and Charlie laughed at himself, then walked back up the steps and sat down beside her.

"By his hands we are fed."

There were shadows between light, warm skin goose bumped by the cool summer air around them.

“Thank you for our daily bread.”

Disjointed memory obscured by what happened and didn't, couldn't, once that night passed.

“Amen.”

Claire felt stunned by the quick absence of their voices chanting. When she opened her eyes she saw they were all looking at her, but their glances moved quickly away. Her dad looked around as if deciding what to do. He ate a forkful of pork chop. Her step-mom followed his lead, and then her little brother. Claire pictured Charlie in his truck on the curving road on his way home from work. She imagined that he had stayed late, splitting a joint with the guys in the kitchen. She imagined that he had left early, eager to see her. And she thought of her father, his eyes serious, downcast, asking questions about Charlie after they'd met on the gravel road.

Claire's step-mom put her hand on her shoulder.

“You need to eat,” she said.

“I can't.”

“Claire, it's been four months. You've got to stop this.”

“You didn't like him,” Claire said and pushed her plate away. “I can't eat this.”

“We only met him once,” her dad said, his eyes turned downward.

“You didn't like him,” Claire said again and looked at her step-mom.

“No, I didn't,” she said.

Claire looked at her family, their faces shiny in the bright light.

“I have to go,” she said walked into the blue night outside.

She walked down the hill to the log house. Behind her sat their house sturdy as an answer, growing smaller as she walked. The wilting trees bent to the wind, leaves taking their transient turn while the trees stood naked in the fading light. The cold wind brushed over Claire's skin bristled against the night, her body light and unconnected like that day in the hospital, like the night she and Charlie first slept together, like the day down by the rusted bus.

When Claire reached the log house she did not go inside. Instead she sat on the lip of the side door, her legs hanging above the ground where those steps should have been. She heard the phone ringing and knew it was her dad. She looked at the sure black telephone wire strung from house to house, almost invisible in the night.

Her hand was dry and cracked from the cement still stuck to her palm and she scratched at the hard gray pieces. As she scratched small pieces fell to the ground and littered the grass below her feet; others stuck to the skin underneath her fingernails; others still stuck hard to the palm of her hand.

A Slow Burning

He had been in love once, but no one knew it. He was the Man of the River Valley; River Man, he heard people whisper when he walked through town to buy the things he couldn't grow: butter, toilet paper, the flour he now sprinkled over his dimpled ball of dough. The flour that coated his hands in a fine white film while his dog Sam circled his feet and licked the flecks of flour that fell onto the tiled kitchen floor.

Sam was the only witness to his love. He had seen the letters, had seen the lilies planted in the yard for her. Had watched them grow, wither, and die. Sam had crouched in the dirt as the River Man dug up the old bulbs, ripped from the river-rich earth, and planted new ones. Fire Lilies this time.

Dough pressed between the River Man's fingers as he moved his knuckles over its surface. He felt the warmth of sunlight as it filtered through the curtains.

Her name was Grace. She had known the River Man as a boy. He had known her from the beginning. He knew how light and shadow shaped her face. He knew her favorite subject was English. Her favorite flowers were lilies. But there were many things he did not know. He didn't know about the ways that love might move. He didn't know if she had loved him too.

The River Man moved his hands over the dough but turned his face to the window. His house was a small house by the river, hidden in a bend, and from his kitchen window he could see the swimming hole, watched as kids from town played out

their lives among the water and rocks. Sometimes boys would come down the ridge, and if they came in groups they came with rocks and sticks to throw onto the River Man's tin roof. The River Man would climb the tree next to his house and sweep them away with a broom. When they saw him coming the boys ran away.

But from his kitchen window the River Man also saw different types of love. There were tall boys with short girls or tall boys with even taller girls. There were girls who only sat so close to their boys, and there were girls that shed their clothes and dove into the river, daring their boy to follow. The boys were aggressive, or shy. The boys had eyes that flew fierce through the river green, or eyes that were soft, dulled by the world around them. They were strong. They were meek. They were quiet, or they were loud.

But today the River Man saw no one in the river or on the diving rock. He heard nothing but Sam's rhythmic panting as he lay in a shaded corner. The River Man felt nothing but the skin-smooth dough pressed into his palms. He put the dough in a mixing bowl and ran his fingers once more over its surface. Grace's hands were pale, her nails painted red. Her skin felt as soft as flour the one time he touched her cheek. The River Man covered his dough with a clean, damp cloth and sat it beside the stove to rise. His shoes made a sound like Velcro as he mopped the tongue-licked floor.

He stopped when he saw someone pass by his window.

A boy and girl stood in his garden looking into the window, and the River Man moved behind a curtain, looked out. He didn't know if he could be seen.

The River Man had seen this boy and this girl before. They came to the river more often than the others. They were not loud and they were not quiet. Sometimes they held hands. Sometimes not. Sometimes they swam, the boy shedding his shirt and shoes, the girl disappearing behind a tree with a lily blue bathing suit held in her tan hands.

He swung from great vines. She dove from rocks. The girl was fast, fierce, and when they raced from bank to bank she always won, but she moved slowly when she reached for him.

The boy hung back while the girl moved closer, but even when they moved away from each other they moved together.

No other boy had ever come to his house with empty hands. No girl, except this girl, had ever moved through his garden with a quiet step. The girl walked to the side of the River Man's house and leaned against wooden boards that sighed with her weight.

The River Man held his breath.

The girl had stolen a tomato from the River Man's garden once, but Sam did not growl as they came closer.

Grace went to church every Sunday. The Man of the River Valley, when he was a boy, would sit two pews behind her, sending his prayers not up, but to the girl in front of him. Stealing glances, pieces of her, while others' eyes were closed. Her hair was brown, eyes blue. But it was not the kind of love based on hair and eyes.

The River Man moved away from the window. He didn't think he had been seen. The dough had risen and the River Man placed it on the counter and moved the rolling pin back and forth until it lay flat. Specks of flour stuck to his hands and spotted his shirt

sleeves. Through the window the River Man watched the boy and his girl wander around the yard, bending to smell the flowers they passed.

When he was a boy, Grace walked with the River Man – his clothes spotted by the drops of milk that always fell from his milking pail – down the half-dark winter road to school. She did not walk beside him, but slightly behind and he felt her following. Felt like a cloud followed by the rain.

Outside the boy followed his girl down the garden rows, her face soft, eyes calm. The boy walked closely behind her. The River Man rolled the dough over itself and pressed the ends of the loaf together. His fingers left deep impressions. The boy put his arms around his girl's waist. The girl leaned back on her heels and they swayed together, back to front and front to back.

Grace went to a dance with the River Man one winter, but she went to dances with many boys. Brown hair hung loose down her back. Her dress was blue.

The girl and her boy walked the edges of the flower garden, then the edges of the house, sometimes holding hands, sometimes not, and those hands, Grace love, said love, prayed love sweet Grace, river Grace never grace.

The Man of the River Valley put his dough in the oven. Its warmth filled the room. The dried-flower smell of its heat covered the River Man like moss over stone.

The Man of the River Valley brought her flowers. He walked her home. On her lamp-lit front porch she kissed him goodnight. On her lamp-lit front porch he told her, *goodnight*.

She was with him when he got the letter calling him away.

Outside the girl laughed and her soft sound floated into the River Man's kitchen, hung in the air with the smell of baking bread. Sam rose from his place in the corner and circled the kitchen. The boy and girl moved into the back of the River Man's yard where he could not see.

Grace, green dress covered in yellow straw, hid in the hayloft rafters where he could not see, and came down only after he called her name, over and over, into the thick air.

She was sick. She did not want to come down to him, to anyone. He was leaving. Her brothers were leaving. The men of the valley had been called to go. She was sick, but he had to go.

Are you scared? Grace asked him. *Scared Grace? Yes Grace. How long?* Years Grace, months Grace. *I'm scared too.* Words falling from grace, mouth Grace, lips Grace, yours and mine that never knew grace. Was there something more in her eyes? Did her voice drop at the words? *How. Long.* She put his hand in hers.

Voices light and sweet filtered to the River Man from his backyard. He could not see them, but in the spaces between that soft noise the River Man imagined they were kissing. He imagined that the boy put one hand on the small of his girl's back, sent the other running through her hair.

The River Man felt Grace's brown hair run like water through his fingers. He felt her dough-smooth skin. He heard her voice calling to him from the river, from the trees. He closed his eyes.

Sam whined and scratched at the door and when the River Man opened his eyes the door was open and Sam was gone. His chair scraped against the tile floor as the River Man rose. Sunlight shone in an arc around the empty chair, its wooden legs splintered with time. Its backrest caved inward in the shape of the River Man's spine. There were two oval-shaped impressions in the wooden table where the River Man's elbows rested. The floor beneath the window had been worn white. But all the River Man could do was close the door and listen to its hinges creek.

The boy and girl played with Sam in the front yard. No one had ever played with Sam before. The River Man watched them from the window. The boy's hair was brown, eyes blue.

The girl was tall and thin. Sam chased her around the yard, long legs dancing over the ground like the branches of a willow tree, and the boy ran behind them.

Past the boy and his girl was the river, full and slow, and beyond that was the other side.

The Man of the River Valley heard of her death when his seemed near. He heard of it in a letter. The writing was his mother's, but Grace's voice told the story. It was a story about the mountains and the river, plowed hayfields and dark covered roads.

Grace's letters had told of the green ridges and the white line you can almost see between those reaching trees and the blue horizon behind them. She told him of clear shallow water that ran swift over smoothed rock and of dark water that pooled in the swimming hole.

He had never sent his letters. Dear Grace. God save Grace I love, Grace that gave grace. If I had told her of that grace.

She told him of the valley, its roaming wind and rivers. The fast-changing seasons and slowly setting sun. Her voice a slow burning that covered everything in ash.

The sun cut a pie wedge on the floor and Sam ran through it. The girl and her boy stood still, peered into his house, but they did not run away.

The Man of the River Valley walked to the doorway, his toes on brown earth, his heels on tiled floor. The sun blurred his vision and set their faces in shadow.

“I have apples,” the River Man said. “Do you want some apples?” The girl and her boy stood still. The boy turned his face to her.

“There are tomatoes too. Pick one.”

The girl bent down, plucked a tomato from the vine. Sam ran outside to the girl and her boy.

“Thanks,” said the girl.

Wind ran through the river valley. Trees swayed and their leaves shouted. The river’s surface rippled.

“There’s bread in the oven. Do you want to come in for fresh bread?”

The boy and his girl looked at each other. They looked at the River Man and his house. They looked at the trees, at the flowers. They looked at the river running slow. Then the girl took her boy’s hand and led him into the River Man’s house. The River Man turned sideways to let them pass.

She ran a hand over the kitchen table's rough wood surface, over the tiled counter, the time-worn chair. Her fingernails were skin-pink with tips so white they seemed to glow. In her other hand was the tomato.

The River Man stood in the doorway. The door stood open.

"Sit," said the River Man and looked at his one crooked chair. Sam looked at the River Man and sat under the table. "The bread will be ready soon."

The boy put his hands in his front pockets. The girl looked at an old picture of an old home the River Man lived in long ago. The boy took his hands from his pockets and crossed his arms over his chest. She picked up the frame.

"What's this?"

"That was my mother's house," said the man.

"Oh," said the girl. She ran her hands across the glass.

"Did you grow up here?" she asked.

"No. I'm from Grayson County."

The boy shuffled his feet, looked out the window.

"The bread should be ready soon," said the man.

"Who's this little girl?"

The Man of the River Valley took the picture from her and looked at the little girl standing at the edge of his mother's house, her body half-hidden behind the corner.

"That is Grace," said the man.

"Oh," said the girl. Her eyes met the River Man's eyes and they were as flat and even as a city street. She looked at her boy and the boy looked at the Man of the River

Valley. Inside his blue eyes was the river, the trees, the rocks, the girl, the old house hidden in the bend, the Man of the River Valley – the man from Grayson county – and the boy’s eyes were bright and heavy because of it.

The River Man put the picture back on the kitchen table. He cracked the oven and poked his head into the heat.

“Almost,” said the man.

The girl reached for her boy’s hand, and those hands twined together were love sweet grace, are love only, my only grace.

The boy looked at the picture of Grace beside the house, then at the picture of her taken days before the River Man left that sat on the kitchen counter.

“She was pretty,” said the boy, and wind blew from the river through the open kitchen door.

In a valley in another county Grace was buried in a family plot. The one time he went back the River Man had stood at her grave, read the words *in loving memory* printed on a stone. The River Man looked out the window at the lilies in his yard. He looked a sky that had begun to fill with clouds and knew that the rain would not be far behind.

“She was,” said the River Man.

A burning smell filled the kitchen and when the River Man opened the oven smoke poured out.

“We better go,” said the boy.

“It’s all right,” said the man. “I can scrape off the edges. It’s not ruined.”

“Maybe next time,” said the girl. “It’s going to rain.”

The River Man looked at the boy and his girl, the girl and her boy who seemed to touch each other even though there was space between them. Their hands looked soft and capable; their feet were planted firmly on his kitchen floor with an animated stillness, energy implicit in their tan legs. The River Man's hands were cracked and dry from too many years in the dirt; his legs felt heavy inside his starch-stiff pants.

"I'm sorry," said the Man of the River Valley.

"It's all right," said the girl.

The boy and his girl turned toward the door.

"Thanks," said the boy.

"It's all right," said the River Man.

The girl and the boy passed through the open door and out into the garden. They walked carefully through the tomatoes and corn. They passed through the lilies, the girl bending to sweep her hands through the red blooms. The boy stopped, but the girl kept going.

"Can I have one of these?" asked the boy.

The girl put the tomato to her mouth and closed her teeth around it. She wiped the juice away from her lips with her sleeve.

"All right," said the Man from the River Valley. "That's all right."