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Charity of Potatoes

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CHRISTOPHER VONDRACEK

CHARITY OF POTATOES

The last time I talked to my Grandma she told me a story about the Klan who—because there weren't any Blacks in South Dakota—resorted to Catholics to harass and bully from behind white sheets. "And in the morning, they'd come and take the potatoes." That's how she said it, too, the *poe-tay-tahs*—talking like two generations didn't separate her from Ireland, recounting how in the parsonage of a gray-wood church they now hang seed signs from a Swiss priest kept a store of potatoes, and after Swedish farmers took off bed sheets and stopped being mad about Grandma's family eating their God and drinking his blood they wagon-rode to the parsonage asking for food. "They'd come and take the potatoes." And she repeated the expression, still impressed by the audacity of human guile, "They'd come and take the potatoes."

"Who'd come?" I asked. "The Klu Kluxers?"

"Yes," she replied. "The Kluxers," like some family across the river with a lop-eared donkey—the affable Johnsons or Simpsons. "I don't think they even knew what they'd joined," she added, either the easy forgiving of nursing homes or the cautious proximity one keeps from True Evil—no letting-off-the-hook-of, but rather an ignoring-of the wire, tightening and whipping in the kerosene lamplight, stretching from porch to thick black barn door wide open, black as hell.

I'd like to say the world turns by gravity, falling through space, but I think instead it's Hunger, that's why we see miracles in barns—and why we're best at table.

I never talked to my grandma again. She died months later. But I think that was the point of her charitable interpretation of her neighbors' comingling, that in the morning, when she swung

open doors, the machine shed was just a machine shed, the hoof marks or tire-tracks were lost in the crabgrass. And the parish priest locking the cellar door, just shook his head, after putting back the potatoes onto another heap of potatoes—walls up to the earthen roof, enough to feed every hungry child or beast walking the earth, potatoes the size and density of your fist, like the tiniest of storm clouds waiting to be called on, to be boiled in the water pots of the land, cut blind, skinless, tender and clean.

If I have a granddaughter, I'd like to leave her stories of the past. But not any lessons. Just stories, and maybe Grandma's recipe for scalloped potatoes. I think that's why we pass down recipes, to make sure those who come after us are always fed, and won't worry about whether we knew or knew not whatever it was we did to tide ourselves over between meals.