Out in the center of nowhere was a lean-to shed and ancient farmhouse on the edge of memory. The flies and dust settled in thick and heavy and anything new never stayed that way. Dust must have formed the house they lived in, the truck he drove, even the clothes they wore, for she couldn’t remember any of it ever being new. Once, years ago, she had ordered in a patch of green, suburban sod from a town far away. No sooner had it been laid down but its blades evaporated into a field of dust-colored toothpicks. All newness, all color, evaporated.

When they married, she and Dan had dreamed of a home away from all the noise and complications of living in town. They had had dreams of turning this dustbowl property into a homestead, with cows and horses, dogs and children. Lots of children. They planned to live a quiet life of planting and harvesting, growing and nurturing, but each pregnancy, at five months exactly, four babies had turned to dust in her belly. Maybe they had evaporated in the heat, like the time she’d tried to grow watermelons in her clay garden. Despite all her watering, just as small emerald marbles began to form on the vines, the leaves closed into paper fists and the earth and sun sucked them dry. Or maybe, she thought, the spirits of her babies had looked down from heaven on all the dirt and brown and flat plain, and couldn’t make out the dusty house and dusty little woman among all the other dead things—and had turned around and gone back to wait to go somewhere else.

She considered all these possibilities—she had the time to, besides. Tilling the clay under or baking bread, feeding the chickens and quilting the blankets she’d always get five months into and abandon, the only company she had was dirt and the dry hum of desert heat, along with an occasional rattler.
Dan was a hard-working man, huge as any man came; steady, constant, twelve years her senior. He had the sort of dark hair that reminded her of Elvis, and maybe that’s the reason she’d loved him in the first place. He was a mechanic in town and didn’t mind the hour-long drive on the hot, earthen road that was their only conduit to civilization. Once there had been a brush fire a few miles up the road from their house, and the fire trucks came screaming by, sirens and lights whirling a warning to the snakes and lizards of the road. She could remember wiping dust from the window, bringing over a sandwich at lunchtime and staying for hours, watching the occasional siren come and go. But usually, the only thing ever seen on that road was the truck’s great, horizontal dust tornado as Dan would drive off in the early hours of the morning and arrive home again late in the evening.

Seven months ago, after the faint stirrings of her last baby had subsided, she had decided to whitewash the house. She decided this would make it more easily discernable among all the dead earth that stretched to the horizon. She’d mixed up some old paint and hauled out the dry, reluctant ladder, propping it against the wooden slats of the farmhouse. Fixing a bucket to the ladder and climbing to the top, she dipped in her brush and brought white paint to the wheezy boards. Using the back of her free hand, she wiped the muddy sweat and honey-colored hair from her face.

Listening for wind, she brought the brush to a wooden slat, and ran it across. Instead of leaving paint on the house, rather the paint merely attracted all the centuries of accumulated dust, leaving her brush so heavy with grit that she had to use both hands to hold it from falling to the ground. In the hot vacuum of desert air, even as she tried to shake the earth from her brush, the paint fused the bristles and any moisture evaporated quickly away.
Next, she had dragged out the claw-footed bathtub, an effort that took the better part of the morning, and had pumped water enough to fill it. With a shimmering sun high in the sky, she then washed and washed the house: boards, doors, windows—scrubbing with steel wool and grinding away all the old paint, hidden under a hundred years of desert dust. Her fingers raw and her heart thumping hard against her ribs, she had whitewashed, from top to bottom, the small farmhouse that had deceived so many spirits.

At dusk, she had stood back from the house. Shining like a lighthouse, refulgent and bright-white against the blazing orange, cloudless sky. *Now they’ll find me,* she’d decided, fists on her hips and chest rising and falling deeply.

Dan had arrived home later that evening and took a minute to examine the claw-footed bathtub in the yard. Without a word, he studied it to be certain it was theirs, then laid it across his massive shoulders and brought it into the house. He had walked it to the washroom and put it down, slowly. Stepping into the bedroom, he had seen his wife, hair splayed out like bunches of wheat stalks, covered in mud and dried paint, sleeping hard as the dead on the floor.

She had slept three days after Dan moved her up and onto the bed, then, rising on a Sunday afternoon, she walked directly outside. Dan had followed, silent and huge. Walking down the drive and out to the road, she had turned around. Then, she looked. There was the house, all right. Little dust devils swirled around the foundation, and almost as though the freshly painted house had been statically charged, the dirt was sucked back on, as thick and heavy and brown as it had been for centuries.

She never tried painting the house again after that. Dan never asked about the ladder or the paint or the bathtub, and soon, covered in months of lifeless earth, it was forgotten.
She only remembered it later, on a day when Dan was working and she was kneading out bread dough. Black flies, attracted to the soft, tacky dough would catch their wings as she worked and become entangled. Never paying them any mind, she methodically pressed and punched, pressed and punched, their bodies becoming a part of the chore. She heard the sound of wind and looked out the warped and mottled kitchen window. There were no dust clouds. She stopped her kneading and walked to the open front door. The sound grew louder until it filled the house completely, like a plane fixing to land right there in the parlor.

Squinting into the heat and noontime sun, she saw dust gathering up the road, big and terrible. She kept watching, kept listening. Focusing hard, she saw that, as the cloud came closer, there was something at its center, something moving, causing the noise and the upheaval. She watched almost, as she would guess, a person might who was about to witness something terrible. But she had never witnessed anything terrible, and didn't know what sort of bad memories haunt such people. So, numb both mind and body, and hardly aware of the sweat rolling down the canal of her back, she stood in the sun, waiting.

Eventually, the figure at the head of the cloud became clearer as it roared down the dirt road: it was a person. No, a man. He was creating that monstrous cloud, that great, rushing sound. It was only him, and he was running. Running. Never mind that it was high noon and hot enough for the devil himself, but what about all that dirt? She was anxious for him, that his lungs would fill with clay and he would drop to the ground. She waited, but he continued on, until he ran just in front of the farmhouse, and then beyond. As he passed, she saw he was looking forward and running hard—sweating, but not dirty. He wore white shorts and tall socks, a
baby blue shirt and sporty shoes. She watched him pass. Next came the unexpected backlash of his colossal dust storm. Fiery as hell, it blasted her body and whipped her skirts, slapped her hair and stung as it hit. The old boards of the house shuddered and clapped and the lean-to rose an inch from the ground. It settled half a foot from where it had been before, leaving the chickens to cluck and squawk, feathers tumbling about their heads. Blinking, she watched the cloud, but the white shorts were no longer visible.

That evening, when Dan arrived home, she sliced the fly bread and served him his potatoes. She cleaned the dinner dishes, then bathed and washed the grit from her hair. Dan went out to blow the dirt from his truck engine, and then came in to bathe. As ever, Dan creaked into bed after her, and as he sank into the feather mattress she would roll, methodically and unintentionally, into his great body. It had been this way since their wedding night, as though they had been together for ages. He would throw a massive arm around her and she, so small against him and so tired from solitude, would fall to sleep in safety. But tonight she did not dream of whispering flies or of talking dishcloths, but of a man in white shorts and tall socks, running with the lean-to clattering behind him.

From that day on, the man in white shorts came running. She knew the time of day by the howling wind and could place the chickens to one side of the lean-to so they would not be disturbed when it took flight. She could watch from the window with her bread dough and knead as she looked out. That was when, on one of these days, she thought of the time she had whitewashed the house.

Looking out at the old, tired place, she could see that the daily blasts of wind had uncovered the east side of the farmhouse until it was nearly all white, except for the deep cracks and seams of the boards. The front of the house
also had streaks of white beginning to creep around from the side and show through. The house looked like a molting snake shaking loose its dying skin.

Eventually, the day came when Dan noticed the lean-to had traveled far enough from the house that he had to bring it back. He also began to notice their half-white house in the gathering dusk as he would come home in the evenings. And one day, after potatoes and before blowing the truck engine out, he stopped, searching his mind for something misplaced. He stopped moving and looked down at his hands. And then, she stopped, pot and dishcloth in hand, to watch. The seamlessness of their unwritten and tired monotony had stopped. He shook his head and walked, half a minute late, outside.

From then on, she was uneasy and restless. She dreamed of strange things—of the mother she barely remembered and the father who called her “honey” even after he had gone mad. She dreamed of a field out by her childhood home, of the sweet smell of rain and the color green.

The next day was a Friday. She knew it was Friday because on the first Saturday of each month, Dan would take her into town to go shopping, and she always did look forward to such trips. She was down to her last cups of flour and just beginning to measure it out for bread when she thought of the man in white shorts. A hot breeze brushed the calico curtains and she realized that he must be very thirsty. The nearest well had to be miles away. The flies were buzzing around the flour in her bowl, waiting—but she set it aside and went for the cupboard instead. There, she searched out one of her best glasses, and brought it outside to the pump. She held the dusty glass to the water and for a moment the dust turned dark brown, and then rinsed away. She wiped it off with her apron and filled it full.
It was almost time, and she believed she could hear the cloud gathering down the road.

She had something deep in her stomach, rattling and shaking, and her palms began to sweat. Her face was dripping already from the heat, and she figured he’d better hurry up and get here or the glass of water could start boiling in her hand.

When the cloud finally formed on the horizon, her hands and knees were trembling. She stood on the edge of the road, with the glass out on the end of her extended arm, like a hitchhikers’.

She closed her eyes tight and turned her head away from the road, hand still extended and water shaking from the rim of the glass, drying up before hitting the ground. The sound gathered and the cloud grew bigger and more fierce, and then, it all stopped. A hot puff of arid breath swept over her and the dust, suspended for a moment on the air, fell softly down. She turned her head, opening her eyes. The man was there in his white shorts, an arm’s length away, breathing heavily and looking at her.

She hesitated and then spoke, dry throat cracking, “You looked thirsty.”

“I am, thank you.”

She watched him drink it all. He gave her back the glass.

“Good bye,” she said.

“Good bye.” He dug in a toe of his sporty shoes, and continued on his way, his cloud accumulating as he went.

That night, Dan’s arm around her, she slept lightly, in that place between dreams and waking. Tossing, burrowing, wiggling, she dreamed of clouds and giant flies that could pick her up and carry her, of running. She heard a loud rumble in that dream-place, and, trying to decide if she was here or there, heard the forgotten sound of rain as it came down hard on the tired shingles of the farmhouse.