Open Earth| A novel excerpt

Joan Maki

The University of Montana

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Open Earth

a novel excerpt

by

Joan Maki

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for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by:

[Signature]

Chairperson

[Signature]

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
With special thanks to:

Dee, Debra, Phil, and my peers

Mom and Dad

Andy, Alan, Lesley, and Kevin

All of my friends

And the most patient person I know, Dave
When he decided to stay and make it work he told her, his hands still a little heavy and her nodding, saying she understood, in broken English and with all of the earth and the sky breathing around them. So when they first bought the stretch of open green land, she stood in the middle of the wide open field, then without fences, with the sun blazing hot and him walking towards her, his mouth stretched out into a wide open grin and the two of them laughed and walked across the stretch of open ground, the soil soft beneath their feet. They planted an orchard. They turned the fields over and over, the black soil spilling out.

And then later, him forgetting everything, and lighting cigarette after cigarette, until his mouth was full of them, and her picking up the cigarettes where he left them and him bent, his shoulders two points, and growing thinner and thinner. And then he was tired and then so tired and him dying and her crying and talking in Finn and the boy, Ira standing next to the man lying there, waiting for him to open his eyes. But he didn’t and that afternoon they drove to town. There were acres of apple trees. They drove past them, the little red dots flickering. The boy pressed his fingers against the glass of the car window.

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Everyday Ira walked down the dirt road and back again, eating lemon drops. Katy could see him walking towards her, growing larger and larger and then standing in
the middle of the dirt road, with his hands in his pockets. His hat was tilted back on his head. He looked up towards the sky, squinting. She was leaning against the fence, her feet crossed in front of her, her arms around her waist. The sky was shaking. He stood in front of the row of cottonwoods, the leaves in crooked black shadows, like fish swimming over the ground.

"It's going to rain," he said, leaning towards her. He knew because he ached, Katy thought. And so he knew. She stood across from him, her hands in her pockets now. And then he leaned forward, coughing, the coughing growing louder and louder, and with him hunched over a little, bent a little at the waist, towards the shadows of the leaves moving on the ground. His eyes watered blue. He adjusted the hat on his head. The sky shook. He laughed then, walking away, his shadow widening across the road, into a long black shape growing longer and longer, until it seemed to run along the mountains, and past and over them, towards something else entirely. There were blackbirds along the fence, him walking towards them. He raised his arms up a little, towards the sky. At first he looked as though he was somehow letting them go, or making them happen, his arms moving slowly up and down. The birds rose in a group, hovering over him. His arms were up in the air, hanging loosely, in a circle. And then the birds were flying away, across the field and up into the telephone wire, into a cluster. He walked along the fence line now with his head down, as if he was looking for something.
Katy can see them inside, moving slowly, in pale hues of white and gray reflecting across the glass. In the dark rectangle of the store there are lamps lit, in glowing yellow orbs. And there is music playing, the sound winding, growing louder and louder and then fading. Wind instruments. In the far corner, the women are laughing and talking, motioning with their hands. There are three of them. They have smooth, shining hair, piled up high on their heads. They are buying cowboy boots and hats with feathers. They are rummaging through the clothes on the rack, pulling off loose, silky clothing. One of them is trying on a hat, standing in front of an oval mirror, her arms up towards her head, tilting the hat in different positions, smiling at herself. Her teeth flash white. She wraps a large turquoise necklace around her wrist and smiles and leans towards her reflection. Her mouth is bright red. On the wall there is a print of a cowboy, a horse rearing up beneath him. Wild West, the print reads. In faded red letters. Three hundred dollars. The women are laughing, clustered now in a group, like the dolls that used to come on pegs, with wire arms and crooked fabric heads and large, painted-on eyes. One of them, the tallest, glances at Katy. The store is cold. The woman behind the counter has dark hair, stacked up high on her head. She tilts her head at Katy, her eyebrows rising. Her hands are long and thin, covered in rings. The rings flicker in the lamplight. The woman blinks.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

Katy shakes her head, her face flashing red, and she feels it, maroon there in the lamplight. The woman behind the counter stands stiff, her mouth in a static gray line.
Katy looks around the room. Indian sculptures. Large wooden bowls. She runs her hand along the back of a leather chair. One of the women is holding a chandelier made out of elk antlers, holding it above her, twirling it slowly. The other two women are nodding.

The door swings open then and Katy’s brother Jacob is standing in the sunlit square, the white light streaming in behind him, his shadow a black shape growing wider across the floor, his hands hooked in his pockets, looking around. His shoes are untied. The door closes slowly behind him, swaying momentarily back and forth. He looks at Katy, the women moving behind her like something unreal, and her standing still, her face pale there in the dark room, an empty circle. She is wearing old jeans and has small, tired brown hands. Her eyes gleam blue and darken.

“There you are,” he says. He looks around the store, his thumbs still in his pockets. His eyes widen. “Jesus,” he says then. Maybe to her, maybe to no one, his voice a loud whisper, not meant to be said. He laughs a little. The woman behind the counter looks up at him. His sleeves are rolled up. The woman behind the counter watches him steadily, her eyes fixed in two round black dots. The women are standing at the counter now, their voices blurred. Jacob picks up a small sculpture of a bear made out of barbed wire, turning it over in his hands, the bear in a skeletal silhouette against the white square window. He holds it out towards Katy, rotating it in his hands, laughing. The women at the counter turn towards him. And he is laughing harder, his laughter rising, harder and harder and the women are looking at him and then at Katy and then at the bear, all of them quiet now. He sets the bear down and drags his hand across his face, his eyes welled up now, and Katy shakes a little and looks at the door, feeling the women looking at her. One of the women is turning the postcard display, picking out cards, and
the other two are shuffling through large, ornate western purses. The woman behind the counter is wrapping the chandelier in white tissue paper. Katy and Jacob are rushing out of the store, the door opening wide into a large blue sky.

“What was that?” he asks, still laughing. “Where the hell were we?” A pickup passes by them then, a blue Chevy, rusted underneath, with two small girls riding in the bed, their backs pressed up against the cab, knees up. The girls are laughing, their hair twirling up in coils above them.

***

It was August. Past the span of yellow grass, cut through the middle of the field, there was a road. It wound, looping, in a gray line. The soil was fresh, turned over on either side, in large black heaps. In the center of the looped road, there was a white pipe. Past the road, and across the fence, Katy was running, her feet pounding into the dirt. When she found Jacob, he was leaning against the fence. He turned towards her and smiled. He was wearing a flannel shirt, the sleeves hanging loose and open at his wrists. His shoes were untied.

“I bet I can get there faster,” he said.

Katy shook her head and laughed.

And then they were running, the dust rising beneath them, faster and faster and then over the curve of ground, and down through the field, diagonally, their arms in arches, running fast. They ran faster and then tumbled into the water, and rose up, mouths open wide, laughing. The water spilled out around them, shattering. They swam
back and forth, across the stretch of water, their arms slapping the surface, the silt rising up in spirals and settling around them. The willows swayed over them, making tiny black shapes on the water. Katy swam to the bank and stood laughing, her clothes clinging, the water in a circle surrounding her. She patted the water with the tips of her fingers and the circles spilled out, one after another, in a chain of circles, larger and larger. She turned towards her brother. He was coiling around and around in the water. His arms and legs were faded white shadows shaking beneath the water. She leaned against the bank.

And that was when she saw him.

He was walking along the bank in a black cowboy hat, two others following behind him. They all carried sticks. They were walking up and down the bank and looking at a sheet of paper, holding it out in front of them, and putting the sticks in the ground.

Katy motioned towards her brother, her hand out in a little curve. “Up, up,” she said. They climbed out of the canal, the water dripping down them in large liquid opals. They ran through the brush, their arms out. They crossed the wire and leaned down. They could see the men across the water. The voices of the men blended and scattered. They walked along the black mounds of soil, following the edge of the road.

Jacob leaned forward, his hands gripping the wire. He crouched down.

“Whoop, whoop,” he yelled then. He fell against the fence, laughing, his face red and wet. The men turned towards the water. Katy could see them moving. One of the men with the sticks put his hands over his eyes, looking out at the water. He was saying something. The men turned back to the sheet of paper. Jacob glanced upward, through
the fence. He held a stone in his hand, turning it over between his fingers. He leaned
towards the fence, and Katy crouched next to him, gripping the wire with her hands.

He threw the stone. It tumbled downward in front of the men, in a rolling gray
speck. One of the men tilted his head. Katy and Jacob crouched against the fence,
hanging onto the wire, their backs pressed against the wire, laughing.

“Did he see us, did he see us?” Jacob asked.

Katy turned towards the men. The man in the hat was reading the sheet of paper.
The other two men leaned towards him. Katy shook her head. Jacob turned. He threw
another stone. It landed between the men, the men standing in a half-circle. They turned
again and looked. The man in the hat was walking towards the canal. He was saying
something, only louder. His voice dropped thudding onto the water. His hat bobbed.

They stood up then and ran, crouched a little, their hands hanging towards the
ground, laughing and scurrying through the brush along the bank, pushing it aside. They
ran then across the field. Jacob ran faster, still crouched a little, still laughing. And Katy
stopped halfway across the field. She turned back towards the men but she couldn’t see
them, only the line of red willows that followed the bank of the canal. She turned
towards her brother. He was far away now, still running across the field, his shape
dissolving into the waving lines of heat, into a shaking shred of blue.

That evening her father sat on the porch, in the light from the open door. She sat
in the doorway behind him and listened to him breathing. Between the cottonwoods she
could barely see the old house, the first house, what was left of it anyway, gray in the
dark. She imagined the ghosts of the people that used to live there, gliding by in the
night, floating a little bit above the ground. She had seen pictures of them. A man and a
woman standing still, their arms at their sides. And a row of children, all in white, in a
line. Finally everyone left, and it was just the two of them, the husband and wife. And
when he died, the husband, he came back to her and he said it is nice here and I am fine
and don’t you worry about me, standing at the foot of her bed. And she woke up early
the following morning and stood at the window, looking out, expecting him to come
back, because he had seemed so close and real. But he didn’t.

And her father sat still, his hands on his knees, in the yellow puddle of light.

The next day he leaned down towards her, smiling, his mouth curved upward.
Here, he said, and he traced his fingers along the rings of the tree. She followed them,
her hand trailing after his, laughing a little. Winter summer winter summer, they said
together. He laughed.

“That’s how you know,” he said. “And it is always right.” He stood up and
walked away. And she traced the rings with her hands, all over again.

***

The sky is enormous. Just like they said it would be. The sky is enormous and
off in the horizon El can see the man standing with his arm up. His thumb is turned
upward too and he is walking backward slowly, along the stretch of road. He has a big
green bag strapped to his back.
“He needs a ride,” El says. She leans towards the dashboard, squinting, the man growing larger and larger.

Rick drives past the man.

El leans back.

“You could have stopped,” she says.

She can see the man in the rearview mirror. His hands are hanging down at his sides now.

“You don’t just pick up random strangers,” Rick says. He is driving faster now, faster down the road. The man is a dot in the mirror, turned towards them, his hands down now. And then suddenly El is crying and leaning against the car door, knees up, shoulders heaving.

“What are we doing this for?” she asks him. He looks at her and back at the road.

And then there is a hawk.

“Look at the hawk, El,” he says. “See it?” She looks up from the car for a moment and at the hawk, dragging her sleeve across her face. She sniffs. The hawk is circling above the field, around and around again.

“Look at it El,” he says. “It must see something.”

She sits up then. The car is drumming against the road. The hawk swoops down.

“Look at it,” El, he says. For a moment the hawk flutters there in the grass, like it is tied down, and then it rises.

“It has something,” El says then. She presses her face against the glass. They drive on. The hawk is sitting up in one of the ponderosas along the road, its head bent down towards its feet. And what would that be like? She is thinking. What would that be
like to swoop down so fast and destroy something so fast before it could know, you only a shadow above it and then it is gone, before it can even know you were there, waiting for it to run out, free for the taking. And what would that be like to not even be aware you were destroying the running thing, but only doing it out of having to do it because that is how it works. That is how everything works.

El taps her fingers on the glass and then rolls the window down. Her hands are soft and red. The wind blows through the car, shaking.

***

They rode faster and faster that afternoon, Katy out in front and the sun above them, trembling and yellow. The land was moving, passing by them in strands of blurred green. Katy laughed, her elbows out at her sides, leaning forward. Jacob was behind her, kicking the sides of the horse and yelling, leaning forward, bent against the neck of the horse. Katy laughed again, looking behind her, and then forward again, the horse running fast beneath her and breathing hard, pounding the soft summer earth.

"Come on," she yelled.

He ran the horse faster, kicking it and yelling, the horse with its mouth open wide, with white block teeth. His hat fell off then, a red hat, twirling towards the ground. He turned towards the hat falling, the horse turning also, at an angle, and then the horse turned and ran the other direction, with him yanking at the reins and yelling. Katy looked back, her elbows out, glancing back and forward again, the horse fast and pounding the ground and then she slowed the horse, and turned, in a half-circle, pulling back on the
reins, the horse trotting now, back towards her brother, the horse breathing hard, its mouth open wide. Jacob was riding down the slope of land, pulling back on the reins, his arms out above him. The reins were wide swooped lines. The horse stopped then, suddenly, and Jacob tumbled over its head. He rolled across the ground. Katy laughed, stopped now, her horse breathing fast and stomping, standing above him, where the land rose up towards the bank of the canal. He picked up his hat and ran after the horse, shaking the hat and yelling, the horse walking at an angle down the yellow slope of land, towards the group of willow trees. He ran towards the horse and grabbed the reins and led the horse up the slope towards the canal, him breathing fast and holding the hat at his side, muttering something under his breath and the horse walking at a slant behind him. Katy laughed harder. She turned her horse in a circle. She leaned against the horse and pressed her chin against its neck.

In the canal the water was coming down. It came down in a trickle at first, rushing full of silt and sand along the dry rock bed, filling up the spaces between stones. The water carried the sand and dirt and the splinters of dry, green things down with it, in a smooth wave of almost-sound. Jacob stood above the water. The horse stood behind him, with large heavy feet and a drooped back. The horse shifted.

"It's coming too slow," Jacob said.

Katy looked at the water. She had remembered it coming in the year before, and it had run faster, spilling out into the little spots in the canal. They had stood in it barefoot with it coming down, and she had dipped down and put her fingers into the water, feeling it running over her hands. But now it was different, and it came slower. And she watched it coming down, barely filling the bottom of the canal. They stood still,
the water moving slowly, pushing everything out of the way, in a thin band of gray. Jacob dropped the reins. The water began to move faster. Ira was in the field, across from the canal. He walked over the turns of soil, his arms swinging.

“What is it?” Katy asked then.

Jacob looked at her. The horse stood still behind him. She leaned further down against the horse. Her hands wrapped around the reins.

“What?” Jacob asked.

Katy looked at the field, at the row of mountains, trailing off, smaller and smaller until they were just little hills of blue.

“With him.”

Jacob looked at the field where she looked. The water rushed through the canal now. He watched Ira walking.

“It’s his lungs,” he said. “His lungs from breathing in all of that dust.” He threw something into the water. Katy looked at the field. She could hear the water now, filling up the dry spaces. She turned towards Jacob. He was running behind the horse again, the horse walking along the bank, its head tilted towards the water, reins dragging.

“Goddamn thing,” he yelled. The water came faster, filling up the canal, pushing up against the bank, between the long strands of waving water grass. And Jacob was running behind the horse, the horse running faster, him barely behind it, yelling, his voice growing fainter as he ran farther. And then he was a tiny shape, walking along the bank, following the horse, flicking something again into the water out of his left hand. The horse ran down the side of the canal, towards the water.
Ira stood in the doorway, the house dark behind him. And then, when the man got out of the car, Ira walked down the steps and leaned against the railing. The man didn’t take off his hat but turned and looked at the woman and back again at Ira. This was when he asked about it.

Is it for sale, the man asked, and would you be willing to accept some price and Ira leaning against the railing like that, his hands wrapped around it and his face, his face like it was eclipsed like the moon can be and he stood still, leaning, his breath in thin little wisps like feathers if feathers were breath. The woman got out of the car then. She had on these tall heels and the heels clicked when she walked across the steps, like fingers drumming on a table. She had all of these papers and booklets and she was showing them to Ira, Ira looking past her at the man, and she was talking about numbers and banks and her hair was white blonde and she had it tied up high on her head. Ira did not look at her but past her at the man. He was leaning against the car, looking at the house behind Ira, and at the fields. The woman was turning the pages in one of the books, pointing to numbers. She must have noticed then that he wasn’t looking at her because she stopped and closed the booklet and looked up at him. Her hair was stiff and it didn’t move when she turned back to the man to look at him for something to say, and it still didn’t move when she stooped down to put the booklets back into a briefcase. She looked back up at Ira.

“We’re just looking for something,” she said.
She glanced at the fields and squinted up at the sun. Ira didn’t say anything at first but stood there shaking his head, him suddenly tiny and his arms thin and his hands large and brown, wrapped around the railing. He shook his head at the two of them. The man stood up straight then and looked at the woman. The woman turned and walked across the lawn and to the car, the man standing now with the door open, waiting for her. They got into the car and drove away.

Madge came home to a pale triangle of light and the shadow of him in the doorway waiting, his hands at his sides. And she came inside and stood looking at him and he started to cry almost and then sat with his head in his hands, his hands on his knees and was shaking and crying almost and she made him a cup of coffee and sat next to him in the yellow light.

***

“I had to leave,” Charlie would tell her. She was tiny, too thin maybe, her arms out in little triangles at her sides, her arms long and thin and her so tiny and her hair real light, and she nodded when he told her about it. About how he had left. Because the Russian army wanted him and he was going to have to fight when he didn’t believe what it was even for and he wasn’t Russian anyway, so he came here and first he came out West, to Wyoming, and he worked in a mine, until that fell under and the men in the mine got that union together and the union blew up the mine and the men were all blamed and out of work then, out of work at any mine really, since they had heard about it all
over the place, about the dust rising and all of the shattering of sound and earth. And so he jumped a train car, he really did, and he leaned back against the moving car as it ran along the tracks, sitting with all of these other men, most of them nodding to sleep there with their chins down against their chests, some of them watching the lines of light and color through the cracks between the car boards. When the train stopped once somewhere, in Green River, he jumped out and paid for a bite to eat and so then they knew. It was just coffee and a sandwich but it was enough for them to know. They sat looking at him with their large round hollowed out eyes, staring up at him, the train just beginning to move, the door already closed, the metal clanking beneath the car. At first, they just watched him. They weren’t talking at all like they had done before. One of them leaned towards him, the rest watching with their faces so still and determined looking like they knew about something enormous and with purpose. And then the one leaning forward, his mouth full of tobacco, and grinning, the tobacco between his teeth, and half of his teeth were missing and he nodded towards Charlie as if Charlie should just hand it over, as if he was supposed to just give it over, that roll of bills that he kept there tied up with him, layered and rolled up with a little band around it to keep it tight, that he should give it all over to the man leaning towards him, what teeth he had left just soiled black like that. And so Charlie he pulled out this little derringer that he kept there in his coat and scooted back against the opposite side of the car, holding the gun on the man with half the teeth and then on all of them. He scooted back until he was on one side and they were all lined up on the other, their backs pressed into the wooden planks rattling. And he held the gun on them all evening and then all night, the train banging down the wooden tracks and them with their eyes on him, wide and white between flashes of
moonlight through the boards. He sat there the entire night, the gun shaking a little now and then and then moving it over them, passing it over their faces and then over their chests, and mumbling to himself, trying to figure out what to do. He could hear the tracks below the train and the sound of the train cars clattering and he could see the moon in little white flickers between the boards and hear the men, a few of them, just breathing heavy and hard, and could barely see them now, their bent palms against the bottom of the car, between the stacks of crates.

They sat up all night, staring at the man with the white blonde hair, holding the gun out, the barrel a little black circle pointed towards them. They could hear him breathing too, hear him mumbling something. And he seemed to be shaking, unless it was only from the train moving, and he was small, really, compared to most of them anyway, tucked up against the boards shaking dust.

The light fell through the spaces between the boards then and one of the men nodded towards him and he nodded back and the man stood up and opened the car door and the train was still moving and outside it was yellow and open and the sky was blue and it was some sort of prairie full of dust and yellow spindly grasses. The first man jumped out. Charlie motioned towards the rest of them and they stood up and followed, one after the other, falling into the dust of the cool morning ground, their arms above their heads, rolling a little, and some of them just dropping to their knees.

And then they were all gone and he put the gun back in his pocket and waited a while and then he too jumped and hitched another ride farther north and that was when he
over the place, about the dust rising and all of the shattering of sound and earth. And so he jumped a train car, he really did, and he leaned back against the moving car as it ran along the tracks, sitting with all of these other men, most of them nodding to sleep there with their chins down against their chests, some of them watching the lines of light and color through the cracks between the car boards. When the train stopped once somewhere, in Green River, he jumped out and paid for a bite to eat and so then they knew. It was just coffee and a sandwich but it was enough for them to know. They sat looking at him with their large round hollowed out eyes, staring up at him, the train just beginning to move, the door already closed, the metal clanking beneath the car. At first, they just watched him. They weren't talking at all like they had done before. One of them leaned towards him, the rest watching with their faces so still and determined looking like they knew about something enormous and with purpose. And then the one leaning forward, his mouth full of tobacco, and grinning, the tobacco between his teeth, and half of his teeth were missing and he nodded towards Charlie as if Charlie should just hand it over, as if he was supposed to just give it over, that roll of bills that he kept there tied up with him, layered and rolled up with a little band around it to keep it tight, that he should give it all over to the man leaning towards him, what teeth he had left just soiled black like that. And so Charlie he pulled out this little derringer that he kept there in his coat and scooted back against the opposite side of the car, holding the gun on the man with half the teeth and then on all of them. He scooted back until he was on one side and they were all lined up on the other, their backs pressed into the wooden planks rattling. And he held the gun on them all evening and then all night, the train banging down the wooden tracks and them with their eyes on him, wide and white between flashes of
saw her. She poured him coffee. She talked fast and with excitement and nodded and listened to him tell his story, his elbows on the little table, and her sitting across from him, her hands in her lap and her tiny mouth curved upward, listening, the sunlight from the door streaming in, landing at their feet in blocks like passageways.

It had been the smell of something then, of air that was full of something wider, something that could really be breathed. Much later she would stand there, holding two milk buckets and her hair gray then and rolled back on her head. She would be smiling, her eyes full of something deep like mountain canyons, and she would move her hands when she laughed, lifting them up like she was throwing something into the air. She would shake her head at the old man across the room, smiling and mumbling his words. And when it happened to him, when he grew weak and weaker, she would take him inside and sit him down and shake her head at him.

“Oh we all get old,” she would say in Finn, shaking her head and looking through the window at the trees getting bigger, their big leaves fluttering.

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The cattle are moving towards the east in a clouded black ribbon. He is running the horse alongside to keep them on the road and he can hear her behind him and see the first of the herd veer off the road and into the yard and he bolts and he hears her behind him following fast and he rides directly off the road into the yard. He can feel the hooves of the horse in the wet ground and can hear the hooves of the cattle and he can hear her behind him yelling. Then a man comes out the door and he knows what is coming. He
kicks the sides of the horse and pulls in front and sees the man running down the steps and coming towards him and a woman in the doorway and a couple of boys and the man running. *Shit now I am in for it* he is thinking and he has almost reached the front of the herd when he hears the man yell *cows cowboys hurry quick* and he looks down and the man has a camera and is running through the yard at an angle with the camera on his shoulder and then he is right below him videotaping and the cattle are back on the road. He looks away and then back and hears her behind him and looks down and the man is still there and running, the camera on his shoulder running diagonally through the yard. The man is videotaping not the cattle but him with the cattle and running alongside and he is grinning and the woman at the door is holding the two boys back with one arm and yelling at the man to come back to watch out to be careful and the boys are standing stiff with wide eyes.

Katy rides up next to him and he does not say anything but looks back at the house. The man has gone back inside. She laughs and says something about and he doesn’t say anything but looks forward and follows the cloud of black.

He walks the horse along the fence line and turns to her and his eyes flash dark and lighten. *It has to be this way,* he is thinking. *It has to be this way now and from now on it always will be* and she glances at him and turns back to the cattle and doesn’t say anything.

The moon is bright and it shines in through the window and blue on the ground outside. Katy is standing at the kitchen sink. She watches the moon and asks why they
never went anywhere or did anything. He is leaning against the doorframe and he looks up at her and then back at the floor and doesn’t say anything.

“We could have gone somewhere, couldn’t we have, huh?”

He still doesn’t say anything but looks up at her again and studies her profile and watches her looking out the window. She studies her reflection in the window against the blue.

“Where could we have gone?” he asks then.

“I don’t know. Just somewhere. Maybe Seattle or to see the Grand Canyon or something. I don’t know.” He looks at her and back at the floor again. The hollyhocks are tapping against the window, in pink and white blurs moving back and forth with the wind. He turns and leaves and she hears the front door open and close again, and she looks at her face in the reflection of the window and is thinking about the Grand Canyon. Maybe it isn’t that great, really, she thinks. So many people went there and after so many people went there why would it be special if it was just crowded and used up. She had seen pictures and the canyon was always surrounded by people, tiny people with their heads bowed over the sides of the railing and they became nothing but small cluttered dots littering the land. But that just showed how huge the earth was and how small she was and everyone was and to feel that for a moment would be good if even only for one day. She used to ride out and stand still in the middle of an empty whole earth and watch the clouds and the sun and the silhouette of the mountains. The Grand Canyon or some place like it might be good to see. To stand like the dots of people for one afternoon, looking down into the canyon. Now she can see the hollyhocks tapping. And the moon is blue along the horizon.
At first it was just the one. It was following him. Or seemed to be following him so when he looked behind him it stopped and sat watching, flicking its tail, looking at him with its two lemon eyes. He walked then and the coyote walked too, following him, close enough that he could see its shape when he turned, the yellow flickering eyes. At first he thought he could hear it breathing, hear it breathing softly, walking behind him on silent feet. But then it was only his own breathing, and when he turned again the coyote stopped and sat motionless. In the dusk Jacob could barely see the irrigation ditch, the strand of water moving too slowly, catching the flecks of large white moon. He could hear the water, hear it taking up the little holes and dips of open dry space, filling up the ditch. The coyote sat still. Jacob walked towards the black row of cottonwoods. When he stopped and turned again, the coyote was turned away from him, its head bent towards the sky. Now there were several of them, running all in one direction, from the cluster of willow trees, in a line of black coyote-shapes. The first coyote, the one that had followed him, ran towards the others, its tail in a line, mouth hinged open. Jacob stood between the trees, the leaves clattering in the sky. The first coyote ran through the line of coyotes, weaving between them. The coyotes turned then and ran in circles. They did not howl at first, but only ran in loops, following one another, in a structure like a jagged wheel, tilted, running faster and then stopping, black in the dark. The first coyote was in the center. Jacob stood still, his hands in fists now, crammed in his jacket pockets. The coyotes settled, in a group against the line of horizon. He could see the flashing of their
yellow eyes, their wide open mouths, gaping, as if they were smiling. And he could hear his own breath, slower now, feel it dissolving into the air around him.

The first coyote howled then, rising up a little, as if stretching towards the sky, filling up the earth with the shape of it standing. The others followed, howling, imitating the first, in a series of sounds. The first coyote was the loudest, the others howling in succession, one after another towards the open sky, until it was only a multitude of sounds, blending and falling and rising into the sky. The air was cool. The coyotes sat in their group, their mouths open in crooked shapes like the awkward shadows of two hands along a gigantic bedroom wall. And then it was the yelping, like something strange and far away laughing, and then louder until the sky was full of their voices, and them, the shapes of them, bent across the large white moon, as if they would block it out, or take it away, gripping it in their mouths, laughing across the stretch of open black field.

Katy was sitting on the front steps when she saw him. He was walking across the field, his hands in his pockets, and then standing in the middle of the yard, looking back in the direction he had just came from.

“Hear them?” she asked.

He turned towards her and his face was a small white circle in the dark. She was sitting on the front steps, the light from the house surrounding her. Behind him the sky was dark. He looked behind him again at the field and then up at the sky.

“They sound shriller,” she said.

He shrugged then and walked past her and through the door, and his hands were white too. The coyotes were quiet for a moment and then loud again. Katy walked
across the yard and leaned against the fence, looking for them, her hands wrapped around
the top rung.

***

Ira was coughing, standing in the middle of the kitchen, on the floor with the
brown and green tiles. “I’m dying,” he said. And Madge laughed like something not
meant and wrapped her hands around the edge of the sink, looking down into it. He
coughed louder and went into the living room and sat in the big chair in the corner, his
head bent down a little, as if he was looking at his feet. But then he wasn’t and his eyes
were closed. That night it was Madge that was up late, sitting in that same chair he had
been sitting in, leaning on one arm, her head in her palm, rocking.

“It was the sound of the coyotes keeping me up,” she said the next morning. The
sound of them grew louder and louder and she could never sleep when they were loud
like that. There was some reason, she thought, that they were louder sometimes and
some reason for them to run through the fields all in a line. Shapes against the sky. She
made a cup of coffee and sat in the chair rocking until early morning. And then she
stopped. And she fell asleep in the chair and would sleep until the sun came up yellow
and shining on everything, and the earth was quiet, the coyotes nestled up into their
groups, their heads pressed down between their feet, some of them coiled, and she stood
up and opened the curtains, the light spilling out across the floor. And there he was,
standing in the doorway when she turned around, stooped a little, small there in the
doorframe and he watched her standing in the sunlight, the light spilling orange all over her, and her glowing.

That day Ira walked across the field, stopped, and looked at the horizon. He stood so still, Jacob thought, that he seemed somehow permanently there, standing still with his hands in his pockets. At first it was the breathing and Jacob heard it, louder and louder and then barely at all, until it was only a tiny wisp of breath, a line of air escaping him, and then it was as if he could barely breathe at all, but was trying for every draw of air, and Jacob thought he could even hear his lungs closing up, growing smaller. He watched him walk across the field. The horizon was wide and open. Because they’re shrinking, Jacob thought. Or something like shrinking. The air inside of them, the capacity for air growing smaller and so when he breathes it is in trying breaths, and then all of the buildup inside. All of the dust. Summers full of hot dust rising. The earth now inside him.

He was in the shed, and through the dark window Katy could see him, working on something, fixing some little thing, something that would fit back into the green tractor, and him a shadow through the window. And so she went around to the doorway and stood there and he turned and looked at her and smiled. His face was wide, like it was full of something like a secret being told and she stood looking at him, and he turned back around without saying anything and his hat was set on the table in front of him and his hair was thick with gray and his shoulders narrow, she noticed, and tired looking and it was not that day but the next, or maybe a few days later, that he suddenly seemed to get
tired and slept and slept and then it was them putting him on oxygen and him lying there at night, beneath the lamp glowing on him and beneath it he would smile at her but his face was different, shaded over with a gray haze, like a sketch of someone that was too shaded in, with too many shadows over eyes and cheekbones. So that when he turned or shifted at all, the gray still remained. He coughed and coughed then, leaning forward there in the living room and the lamp still lit and the circle of yellow light on him, across his face and pillow and she brought him a glass of water. Her hands wrapped around the glass and held it out to him and he drank it and smiled at her again, his eyes so clear and blue, like snow melted.

I am tired. That is what he said. And he lay down and that was it. And Madge sat on the front porch, her hands in a ball in her lap, on the top step, and looked past the fields at the mountains, watching them until they seemed to move. She sat there all night until the morning and that was it and she stood on the porch while they drove away with him, her sleeves hanging loose and open, her hair in a gray circle on the back of her head. She watched them driving away. And that was all.

In the barn, Katy could almost hear the light pushing through the open spaces between the planks of old still beams and the sound of the building as if it would rise and then fall away, and she leaned towards the open knothole where she could see the mountains. Tiny mountains. The light streamed through in dusted bands across the open hayloft, the dust from the straw rising up and into the light and twirling a little there, steady and then in faint spirals, like an invisible finger was winding the dust. The light
came through the holes in the tin roof, in crooked shapes like daylight stars and all of the dust seemed to be rising up into the blue sky. She could hear the birds on the roof, swallows, could barely see them flying in and out again, through the open spaces between wood, in brown flashes, like something thrown, then gliding through the barn in swoops, the dust tangling after them, winding. And down, in the little mountain scene through the hole in the wood, Jacob was walking through the field. And then he stood near the fence, leaning into it with his arms crossed, and he was looking up towards her and for a moment Katy thought that maybe he could see her and she leaned towards the open spot in the wall until she could feel the sky through it and then she was climbing down the ladder and stepping out into the hot open sun and he was walking away, walking along the edge of the field, the dog following behind him, bouncing through the coils of black plowed earth.

Jacob is standing on the bank and he can hear the geese farther away and can see them swooping down a little, near the water, and on over it, and then up and above the ponderosa. He can see the pickup crossing the field, the shape of Katy in the cab, her ponytail bouncing and driving the truck slowly through the field, the windows all down and the sunlight spilling in around her, surrounding the truck. She stops the truck and steps out and stands in the field, near the cattle. She is writing down the numbers of the calves into a little book, leaning against the pickup.

They were walking together, the two of them, Jacob remembers now. Ira when he was so tired out and barely breathing and Katy, so tiny then, walking alongside him, and
her looking at him that night when he said that he was tired, his palms up and maybe not noticing her but still saying it. And when he looked at her it was a calm look and his eyes were two still pools and she looked at him like she knew or understood and there it was between them then. And her walking with him, her so small and walking with him and when he died she didn’t know that he had died but leaned over and touched his hands where they were crossed. And then waking up the next day to go walking with him and he wasn’t there. She stood in the middle of the road with her hair in these long braids and stood waiting for him but still he didn’t come and then she walked down to the water and sat with her feet dangling in the cold water moving slowly and she never said anything about it because perhaps she felt too foolish like she should have known. When they came and got him, with her father leaning against the table and his shoulders shaking, she still expected that walk, expecting it somehow and her still waiting, then walking by herself, her shadow the only shadow spread out across the dirt road.

***

Ira left for only one year, 1916, when the lumber mill was on strike and it was too hard to find any other work. They stayed with cousins in Butte, the air full of dust and something like mud and smoke, in the corner of a crooked house on a curved gray sidewalk, below a hill in a series of hills. This is when Ira left school and walked through the town alone in the mornings, coming home in the evenings, when the sun was a pale pink line on the horizon, sinking slowly behind the mines and piles of dirt and metal. Ira walked down the sidewalk, through the alleys, picking up bottles and putting them into a
bag, a small brown leather bag, swinging at his side. The men in the bar would turn when he walked through the door, towards the tiny boy standing in the shape of white December light.

“Here’s more,” Ira said. He rubbed his small white hands together. The men at the bar would laugh and lean back, as he dumped the bottles out behind the bar, into a wooden box. The bartender shook his head.

“How old are you?” the bartender asked. He leaned against the bar, towards the boy, his arms crossed.

Ira was wearing a hat a little too big for his head. He adjusted the hat on his head. His face was pink with cold.

“Six,” Ira said.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

The men at the bar laughed.

Ira shook his head. Because he had left the school. He was sitting in the room, waiting for the first grade teacher. Through the window the light was faded pink, sun still rising, but in suspension, unsure of whether to come up entirely. The first graders around him were restless, their heads bent down over their books, some of them swinging their feet, leaning over their desks. The boy next to Ira sighed. He had bright red hair. And then it was the thought.

*I don’t really want to be here.*

The boy with the red hair turned towards Ira.

“Is this your first year?” the boy asked.
Ira nodded. The boy turned around again and sat still, his arms crossed over his
desk, looking forward at the wall. Ira tapped the boy on the elbow. The boy turned
again. His red hair caught the light in little squares through the window. He blinked.

“You just sit here like this?” Ira asked.

The boy nodded.

“All day?” Ira asked.

The boy looked at him. The squares moved a little across his red hair.

“Don’t you know anything?” the boy said then.

Ira looked up at the window then, at the strange, pink sky. And something made
him decide to leave. He stood up and walked out then, down the hallway, down the
sidewalk and towards the center of town, his bag swinging.

He spent the first days of the month under the bridge so that they wouldn’t find
him and make him go to school. Not that anyone knew anyway, since he had never really
been there the first day, so no one could really notice that he was gone. And so he stayed
like this. That was until he found out about the bottles. There was a man collecting
them.

“They’ll give you money for them,” he told Ira. The man grinned. He was
wearing a long, brown coat. He coughed into a gloved hand.

So then he began collecting them, turning them in to buy pie and tobacco. He
coughed and coughed until he got used to the smoke. During the winter it was colder and
he spent the early mornings in the bar, sitting with the men, his feet dangling from the bar
stool. But then it was summer again and they were going home, back to the miles of
green and yellow open fields. Away from the dips and curves of black hollowed out
mines. That was when they bought it. And Ira stood in the center of the green field, full
of alfalfa, the sky above a curve of blue, stood still with his hands at his sides. All around
the earth was still and seemed to be waiting.

***

A woman in a long print dress and a boy in a suit too big for him stand at the
screen door looking in. Katy's mother, Anne comes to the door, and looks first at the
woman and then at the boy and opens the door wide, her arm out. The woman smiles,
standing straight, her face a small pale dot beneath a mass of yellow hair. The boy is
looking around, towards the open field. His hands are tucked up into his sleeves. The
woman pulls a little book out of a big quilted bag and leans towards the doorway of the
house, towards Anne, smiling. Her mouth is small and red. She is wearing a long green
beaded necklace.

"This is our booklet," the woman says. She hands Anne a thin, papery brochure.
The cat walks past Anne and through the open door. It stops near the boy, looks up and
mews. The boy looks down at the cat and back at the woman for approval. The woman
doesn't notice. He pauses for a moment and then looks back down at the cat. A small
child hand emerges from the black sleeve. Anne looks at the woman with her thin red
mouth and then at the brown shell of the boy watching the cat now and then past the
woman at the field and the oats. Through the yellow hair of the woman, Anne can see a
man standing in front of the new house, the house a large brown rectangle behind him.
He is holding something. A cluster of birds are gathered along the fence across the field of oats. The birds rise and settle again.

“Do you have a belief system?” the woman is asking Anne now. The boy is bent down towards the cat, the cat arching towards his small white hands, purring. Anne looks at the woman.

“System?” Anne asks.

“If you’re interested we can came back,” the woman says. “After you read the book.” She nods towards the paper book in Anne’s hands. She wraps her free hand around her necklace, the beads clicking. The woman leans towards Anne, her eyes still and gray. “We can come back,” she says. “Another time. Well?” says the woman. She looks at the boy. He is stooped down, both hands pressed against either side of the cat, the cat squirming between them, its eyes wide and yellow.

And then they hear the shot. The birds rise scattering, spreading out into the sky above the new house. The woman pauses. The boy turns suddenly, his hands hanging small and white from his sleeves. The man across the field is standing still, the gun a thin brown line on his shoulder. He is walking in front of the house, back and forth almost, as though he is guarding it. The woman does not know what to say and so she laughs, shaking her small blonde head. Anne stands still in the open doorway. The woman looks at the field, at the man standing there and then back at Anne. The woman smiles and turns. The boy tucks his white hands up into his sleeves and follows the woman towards the road. They drive away in a large gray Buick, the dust rising beneath them.
The cat is standing on the fencepost, its feet poised, facing the field. Its tail flickers across the fence, like an orange pendulum, and it is looking at something across the field, its shape gone into the bright hot sun.

In the evening the air is cold and still. The oats are pressed down in places, as if some gigantic thing was sleeping in them during the night. The house across the field is dark, at first, and quiet, the man having gone back inside. One of the windows lights up. The woman is shouting first, and then the man, the house still only halfway built and with doors and rows of windows but no paint only brown slabs of half-wood and they are shouting, their voices, like the shotgun, scattering the blackbirds from the trees. The man is crossing the windows, the lights turning on one by one, in a row of yellow squares. The woman is following him, arms crossed tightly around her in the yellow windows and he is yelling now, crossing the windows and the woman-shape still following him through the large squares of window. And then she is stopping. And there is a pounding almost, him going down the stairs maybe, and he is leaving the house and climbing into a truck and driving away. The woman shape stands still, seeming to waver almost in the window, looking towards the field of oats, where they spread out into a shape, pressed down against the earth, her arms still crossed. She turns then, and passes the windows, one after another. The blackbirds sink into a cluster along the roof of the house in a thin black line.
Jacob had said they would ride out to Texas. Or maybe hitch on a train.

“How do you do that?” Katy had asked him. He shook his head laughing.

“You wait for it to stop, slide open the car and hop inside,” he said. He thought for a moment. “If that isn’t an option,” he said then, “we’ll go on down to Mexico. There we’ll really find something. We’ll stay for a little while and then we’ll come back. We’ll have seen something.”

Katy imagined a Mexico, right on the other side of the mountains, bright yellow and orange and brown. Everything would be lit up, like a constant sunset. They would cross the mountains and there it would be. They would learn Spanish. She brought a book home from the library even, and studied the words. Labeled things around the house. But then the thought of Mexico, of Mexico shining like that, was gone and suddenly they were older and the train didn’t work like that anymore. They would catch you. Or the cars would all be locked.

Now they are here still and Katy can see the outline of the new house, rising up out of the ground, the glass reflecting up into the sky. The woman stands on the deck, her hand up to her eyes.

It is dry, Katy thinks then. She can smell it, taste it on her tongue, and it has a raw taste, a lack of something in the air. The air seems to move slower too, and when she walks across the fields she can see the dust rising and settling. She can hear it beneath her feet, see it puffing up ahead of her. She can see where the water has been the year
before, from the yellow lines of the grasses, where they meet different layers of soil. The clay loam cracks, splitting into gaps. Once it had rained and rained, for maybe two days straight, and so much that the water ran down the road, ran down the road like a river coming down, wrapping around the house, spreading out into the fields, filling up the ground with pools that took days to drain, seeping into the land. The rain spread out across the windows of the house, dropping in a sheet of water, and it made a whole, thick sound, like someone was covering her ears with their palms, not letting her listen. Now she can hear the earth below her, almost hear it splitting, and in the afternoon the light is buzzing and the grasses crackle and the water runs in a sad little line down the canal.

The next day the people in the house are burning the brush along the fence line. Jacob is standing across from them, near the open canal, the smoke and fire rising. The black ash flickers up into the sky. The man looks up at Jacob, his face wide and white. He is wearing a green shirt and khaki pants. He grips the top of the fence with his hands. There is a shovel propped up beside the fence.

"It's too dry," Jacob tells him.

The man across the fence shakes his head. His arms are heavy and white. He grips the fence tighter and laughs.

"It's too dry to be burning," Jacob says again.

The horizon is shaking. The house is shining, catching the sun, the house flashing like a giant light.

"I'm watching it," the man says. He looks down at the brush burning. He pokes it with a stick. "See," he says. "It's hardly burning."
“It doesn’t take much,” Jacob says.

The man in the green stands still, looking at Jacob. His eyes cross over him. And he looks past Jacob, past him at the field, at the horizon maybe, and he lets go of the fence and stands holding the shovel, his fingers wrapped around it. He glares into the horizon.

“I bought this,” he says then. “I can do what I want.” His voice is small and strangled. He huffs a little and walks away, towards the bright booming white reflection of the house, dragging the shovel behind him. He doesn’t turn around but keeps walking, towards the house, faster, huffing, his breath rising up, combining with the sound of the air, the buzzing of heat. The ashes float past the fence and up above the open field, in tiny weightless shards. The man dissolves into the shaking house.

In the evening he calls, his voice small and broken sounding, like something falling off the shelf and breaking.

“There are cattle here in our yard, he says. I think they’re yours.” He hangs up.

They climb out of the truck and walk across the field, the five acres, the dirt piled around them. Katy can see the woman standing in the large glass window, her hands on her hips, the man walking back and forth behind her. They are watching out the window while the two of them chase the cattle back in through the open gate, the cattle in dark shapes now, moving like the ghosts of cattle, transparent. The ground beneath them is dry. The woman is standing still, like a cut out of something, two dimensional, a paper doll swaying in the window, against the dark. The man is crossing back and forth.

The gate is open.
Jacob walks across their lawn, not a lawn really, but full of weeds and dry heaps of dirt, and gopher holes even, his shape like someone out of some other time. He chases the cattle back through the open gate and Katy shuts it after they run past, their hooves hollow sounding and rhythmic, the large glass house rising up behind the cattle running. When they walk back towards the truck, the man is gone out of the window and the woman is standing alone, her hands still on her hips.

And then they are driving. Katy can see the house, the windows growing bigger somehow, reflecting across the windows of the pickup, in scattered shapes.

“Goddamn gate was left open,” Jacob says. Katy outlines the shape of the house with her fingers, in crooked lines across the window of the truck. And then it is the shape of her brother, the profile of him, growing larger, bending across the inside of the cab of the truck, and disappearing when they turn down the dirt road towards home, the house a solid yellow block behind them.

***

Once they had driven through it all, on their way back from Butte, when it was still almost a prairie and the windows were rolled down and the mountains rose up on either side far away and then closer, and then they were right in between them, driving the big black car along the road, swerving through the mountains. Madge leaned towards the open window and looked out at the road. He was wearing a hat and he took the hat off and set it on the seat between them. In the winter the land would be full of snow, so full of snow and there would be no one to walk in it so it would stay white and full until
late spring, and the fences would rise up through it, in little brown sticks like elbows and
now when the sun went down, they would be able to chase it, driving the two hours
towards home and chasing the sun, the sun a gigantic orange circle behind the mountains.
He would list off the names of the different mountains for her. They would stop along
the road and no one would be there and she would lean against the car and they would eat
sandwiches that she made and look out at the mountains. I would like it, she would say.
I would like to be here. He was eating his sandwich and looking at the mountains, at the
yellow expanse of land tucked up into them. The door was wide open. Then the sun was
turning pink and yellow and they chased it and chased it, driving down the strip of thin
gray highway. The cattle were little dots on the horizon.

***

Charlie was sleeping, passed out, the bottles out in front of him, someone having
covered him in playing cards, maybe tossed them towards him and then left, left the wind
creaking through the boards, and him sleeping still, hat back, leaning into his arms
crossed beneath, hardly seeming to breathe. The windows were black and they had all
left, and he woke up in the morning and found his own self like that and then laughed a
little and realized he hadn’t won, the cards twirling to the floor, and he tipped the bottles
back looking for more liquor. They had walked through the apple orchard at night, arms
swinging and laughing and with their heads down. They all wore hats, the hats tilted on
their heads. They reached up and picked the apples, and they ate them as they walked,
staggering through the orchard, laughing and sometimes singing, their voices ringing out
into the sky, and then Charlie, he looked up through the branches, past the apples that made black circles on the sky, and he could see the stars so plain bright like that. Just plain bright, he said the next day. And when he leaned against one of the trees and sat watching the stars like that, they grew larger until they were enormous and they were just these giant white dangling things between branches. That is really something, he said, looking up into the sky. And when he came inside, the others following, stumbling through the narrow doorway, he thought he could hear those same big stars rearranging in the sky, shuffling around, distorting the constellations, and he laughed again, shaking and then stooping, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. Let's go, he said, and they shuffled the cards and smoked cigarettes and sat around the table in a circle, talking with the cigarettes in their mouths, drinking more and more. And he fell asleep like that, passed out sleeping, against the cold wooden table. The windows were open all night and outside the sky sounded like the hum of train wheels on a track, and the smell of liquor surrounded him and he slept murmuring, the stars dangling off of their strings and tapping the roof of the house. The next day he sat up and fixed his hat on his head and got up and walked across town. It was bright and sunny out and all of the apples were hanging loose. He picked them with the other men, dropping them carefully into the wooden crates. Past the orchard and past the tip of the mill, the logs clanking against one another with the motion of the water, and the mountains stood still. There were canyons between the mountains, and these canyons had little lakes in them, settled between large stretches of granite, iced blue. Looking down into them, you saw they were shallow, and if you looked way down, really leaning over, bracing your fingers on the edge of the rock, you could see the bottoms, where the rocks dipped down and where they sprang up.
Around them the earth was pounding. They dropped against the ground, lying still, bellies pressed down.

"Listen," Jacob said. "Hear that?"

Katy shook her head and pressed her ear harder against the ground. The sky was moving, fast and blue.

"Hear them coming?"

"Who?"

"All of them coming. All of them on horses. Coming this way. Listen," he said.

Katy pressed her cheek harder against the ground. "The ground is moving," he said. "Feel it moving?"

"I hear them," Katy said. She pressed her face against the ground. They rose up a little then, looking at the horizon. The ponderosa stretched towards the sky. There were black spots between the trees. They are not spots, Katy thought. They are moving. They are not spaces but cattle moving. They lay on their bellies, against the soft ground, their elbows pressed into the dirt.

"Where are they going?" Katy asked. The black spots were quivering.

"They're moving them," he said.

"Aren't they coming this way?"

He nodded.
For a moment they were both quiet. He leaned down, propping his chin in his hands. The spaces between trees quivered a little. The grass around them rustled. She lay flat against the ground.

“They’re coming this way,” she said then. “They’ll run us over.” They stood up then, almost falling. They ran past the trees and across the open field, towards the house. She could hear the pounding still in her head. She breathed harder and harder and looked back, running still, looking back at the shapes of black waving. There were lots of them, lots of them running now. They ran faster and faster, the ground moving beneath them. Katy could feel the ground pounding, hear the ground pounding, drumming through her head, blood pounding. And then they were across the field, the two of them, and they were walking down the dirt road, their arms swinging fast and heavy at their sides. The trees stood still behind them.

***

It happened like this. “There wasn’t enough water,” Joel would say later, shaking when he thought about it, and still feeling a little strange. He had found the ditch dammed up where it should have been flowing. He started taking the dam out, the water rushing through. It was then that Cody, the dam-builder, found him.

“There’s not enough water,” Cody would say. “You’re taking it all.”

And then Joel would light up somehow, his entire face growing bigger and he would continue taking out the dam, the water rushing through now, fast, downward. And then Cody was pushing him, Joel, into the water, face down into the water, his hair rising
all around his head in a waving circle, and him pushing upward, against the hands there on his shoulders, on the back of his neck, rising up enough to get a swallow of air and then Cody pushing him down into the water again, and with the little stones there pressing into his palms, slick under his palms and the taste of it like silt and sand then lying still and waking up later, half in the water, the water sucking up into his nose and sitting up slowly and looking around and then walking home, crunching the dirt in his teeth and saying goddamn and going back the following week for not having enough water and finding the dam back in place.

And so that is when Joel goes home and gets his gun. He walks back up the slope of land and to the ditch, and crouches there, like a panther or something, waiting for Cody to come back up the ditch. He sees him first through the little clump of cottonwoods and he crouches down further, bouncing a little on his knees.

“Take it out,” Joel says to Cody standing there, Cody seeming small and insignificant, like something not belonging. “Take it out,” Joel says.

Cody laughs.

“I don’t think you’ll kill me,” Cody says then. He walks towards the creek, his hands in his pockets. “I don’t think you’ll do anything like that.”

And then Joel crouching there, his face red and his cheeks sucked into his face from anger or maybe just from sitting there so long like that, and then him rising up and facing the man standing there, his hands in his pockets. And the other man, Cody, shorter, standing watching him with a large, crooked face, as if he’d been hit when he was so little that he grew into it. And Joel, one hand behind his back and his eyes
flashing like cloud bursts and then pulling the gun from behind him and standing facing Cody, Cody with his hands still in his pockets, chewing on something now.

“You almost drowned me,” Joel says.

“I meant to,” the shorter man says. He shifts, still chewing. “But I don’t think you’ll shoot me.” He spits. The water rushes by them, narrow and gray, in a stream of water sound.

“You almost drowned me,” he says again, as if that is the only thing he is thinking or possibly can think and Cody standing across from him, his bottom lip out. Cody smiles. His teeth are brown. He steps backward.

Joel stretches out his arms.

He shoots.

He watches Cody falling, sideways into the water, the water running fast and heedless under him. Cody lies still. And then Joel is shaking and looking at the man lying there and then all around him at the trees and all of the black birds gathered up high in the trees and looking down, at the man lying there, and he is shaking harder and then for a moment wondering what to do. He starts to drag the man up the tiny bank of the irrigation ditch, his head trailing and then feeling sick inside and just leaving him there and walking crookedly back into the trees, his head bent a little and the gun swinging loose at his side.

He drives to town, the dirt rising up beneath him, clouding up through the open windows. He is still shaking. He walks through the door of the sheriff’s office and sits down across from him and shakes and looks around and says I killed him I did and starts
to cry or at least sniffle a bit and the sheriff asks who and puts him in jail until they find the body and put the entire story together and figure, since it was he that was first almost-drowned, and only for taking what in essence was already his, and only defending himself, the self that needed defending, that he could be acquitted. And he drives home one week later, after the almost-trial, still shaking and wondering what else he could have done. Because he needed his water.

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They were standing at the end of the culvert. When she leaned down a little she could see the other side, a tiny oblong circle, where the light came through. Jacob was standing in front of her, leaning against the rounded cement, the water curling up around his bare feet.

“How long do you think it will take me?” he asked. His face flashed pink and then white again. He gripped either end of the cement with his small brown hands. He bowed his head into the open culvert.

“Go,” Katy said. She yanked out a blade of grass and stood watching her brother. She weaved the grass through her fingers. And then he was walking through it, his arms out towards the sides of the culvert, the water crashing around his feet. She stood in the circle of cement, and she could see him, his shape cut out of the circle at the other end, his arms stretched out towards either end of the culvert. The black water rushed through, a line of black water, falling past her and into the irrigation ditch. When she stepped into the culvert she could hear his feet pounding, echoing through the cement cylinder, falling
out into the still summer air. Katy weaved the grass around and then leaned further into
the culvert. She dropped the blade of grass then. It fell into the water, rushed into the
ditch, and she followed him, walking through the culvert and towards the little circle of
light, her brother in a moving black shape cut out of the circle, the walls around her cold
and moist and the cobwebs in messy little clumps all above, hanging and sticky and her
hands breaking through them, snapping them apart, and them dangling, with the tiny
skeletons of spiders gone now, dangling over the water rushing by. Jacob sounded far
away and he was only a shadow now, a shape standing at the other end of the tunnel. Her
steps grew louder and louder, crashing through the cement, the water crashing too, and
her brother sounded far away, tapping the end of the water with his bare foot. She
followed the black water, dragging her fingertips across the cement, the webs hanging in
translucent strings. When she looked up he was gone and then it was as if someone was
behind her, the sound of her own footsteps echoing behind her. She turned around,
breaking the crashing water sound, the water rushing cold over her feet, and she stood
facing another little circle, the willows tiny in it, and the sound stopped. She pressed her
open palm against the cement. She pulled off a little piece of lichen and dropped in into
the black water. She turned then and walked again and she could hear it, growing louder
this time, louder and faster, pounding, as if someone was behind her. Someone is there,
she thought and so she walked faster, crashing through the line of water and the cement
with the sound pounding through the culvert, growing louder and louder and then the
sound behind her grew closer and closer as if a hand would wrap around her shoulder, or
tap her, and so she walked faster until she was suddenly in the circle, the light pouring
through in a crooked shape across the sides of the cement. Jacob was standing beside the
culvert, picking up little stones and tossing them into a gopher hole, the stones tumbling down, the sound fading. His eyes were still and bright and he was laughing, laughing at her standing there, her looking back behind her into the black, her hands white at her sides.

***

Madge was alone when she saw him. She was doing the dishes when she heard a voice and she looked over and there he was. He was standing in the window, his face almost pressed up against it, looking through it at her, although it did not look like he saw her there, his eyes bouncing back and forth, his mouth open in a circle. He leaned further towards the glass, his head bent a little to the side, his cheeks sucked into his face. She jumped back and shouted and ran towards the open door and shouted at him Walt Walt and he walked around the corner of the house, in wide, slow steps, his knees rising up towards his chin. He stood below her. His face was long and thin and brown. At first she had only seen him across the field, going in and out of the little house, his head bowed beneath the doorframe. The house was tiny, only one room, covered in what looked like tar paper. There were cans stacked outside, behind the house. Now he was standing below her, his shirt tucked in, his sleeves hanging loosely over his thin brown arms. He was covered in dust, or something permanent, like oil, in black gray spots all over him. He looked at her. She was wrapping her hands in a towel, drying them off.

“We can’t find him,” he said.
There were three of them. Walt, Tom, and the woman. The woman that stood outside during the day, in the open doorway, the light flooding through her like she wasn’t even there, her hands on her hips. She washed their clothes and set the clothes out on the line to dry. She cooked breakfast for them, standing over the little wood stove, chewing and spitting to her side, into a can there by the stove. She walked back and forth across the little yard, talking to them as she went, her voice collapsing into the air.

“She’s the sister,” Ira said one day, coming home.

“Whoever she is, she takes care of them,” Madge said. “You can tell it.”

Walt had shown Ira a radio, turning the dial, his face widening. In the tiny house it was almost black, the walls covered in something like black ash. “Listen,” he said, turning the dial, his face widening. The woman, the sister, was sitting in the corner, her hands folded over in her lap. She spit across the floor. She tucked the tobacco back under her lip and stood up, watching them momentarily, her standing in this long gray dress, that maybe used to be white, tucked up into her stomach, falling out in folds across the floor. She walked across the room and opened the door then, the sun spreading out across the dark floor of the house, her shadow widening across the stretch of sunlight, the shadow of a woman, her bottom lip puffed out a bit, her hands on her hips.

It is the next week that the taller one, Tom, walked fifty miles along the road. This is when they lost him, or thought they lost him, the other one standing beneath the
steps of the neighboring house, his hands grasped out in front of him, his eyes full of
something scared, something new and scared, because no one knew where he went, only
that he was gone. He was gone for almost a week. The sister stood on the porch, her
arms in wings on her sides, spitting in the dirt and waiting for him to come home. And
then finally one day, her inside, sitting still, only chewing and spitting and waiting, she
heard the car drive up. She walked out towards the road. She could see him, Tom, there
in the car, his head tilted a little, towards the window. He was looking at her. The man
driving got out of the car and Tom followed, leaving the door wide open behind him.

“All right,” the man said. He adjusted the hat on his head. “That’s it. You’re home.”

The man with the hat surveyed the house with his eyes. He nodded at the sister
standing there and the other tall man standing at an angle behind her, his hands still
wrapped in a knot. Tom stood next to the car door, his face wrenched up a little, as if he
was confused, or just ate something sour. The sister hollered at him when the car drove
away. He followed her back into the little ash house.

Because he heard that there was a circus there, Ira told her later. And he’d never
been to one. Anyway when they found him in town, walking like that, the way he is, they
brought him in. The sheriff, because he didn’t know him either, didn’t know anyone who
would walk that far just to walk it, asked him how he got there and Tom said I walked
and the cops all laughed and stuck him in jail for three days and called all of the
surrounding counties until they found someone that had heard of him, in this case the
county commissioner, who lived nearby and knew all about him and so they brought him
home. Tom said anyway that he'd never walk that far again. Not for a circus that wasn't even going to be there.

Madge pictured him walking along the road, his legs in high curves beneath him, swaying a little, his long arms swinging. The people passing by him, slowing down and asking him if he needed a ride. And when he said no, he disappeared into their rearview mirrors, growing tinier and tinier, his legs two long insect legs, walking slowly down the road. And then in some hard cold jail cell, sitting there confused and not knowing how to call home because he can't really and not knowing why he's even there. And then the brother, Walt, standing outside the window like that, his face like the face of something in some strange dream, pressed up against the glass like he was trying to blow circles into it, his mouth open like that and so worried. He came back the next day, after Tom came home, and stood in the door this time, the same long face only now with a different expression, like something that suddenly made sense, and he nodded and laughed and said they found him and then stayed and drank a cup of coffee with her, his legs out towards the middle of the room.

Across the field Tom stood with the horses. Old horses that someone gave him, their eyes large and black and wet. He stood in front of them, rubbing their noses with the tips of his fingers. His mouth moved a little, as though he was talking to them. And they seemed to be listening, their heads drooped downward, closing their eyes while he leaned towards them closer, his mouth still moving. He stood near the faded yellow
horizon, like he would stand there forever, the horses next to him, the tiny black house a speck behind him.

***

They were walking through the fog that day. Katy could see Jacob, ahead of her, moving slowly, slowed down somehow, running through it, as if he would disappear and not ever come back. There was snow on the ground. It was dry snow, the kind that made little shards that when you tried to mold it into something it broke apart, like cold white sand. The branches of the trees were bare and covered with little crystals, in clumps. She ran after him. He was a shape moving. He ran into the haze.

So when she looked around, she could not see him. The sky seemed to be lifting up, higher and higher, growing wider, and then smaller, collapsing there into a puff of white, the horizon blotted out by the fog, and it was like standing inside of something, the feeling of being closed off somehow. She stood at the top of a little rise of earth, looking down around her. She could see into the shed, the black shapes of things. At first she thought she could see him there, someone standing in the shed, and she started walking towards it, towards the shape standing still in the dark there. She could hear her own breath, and when she came closer, it was empty and she stood in the doorway. Along the wall she could see where they had carved their initials, the in jagged long letters, some of them extending down the wall, carved into the wood. She ran her fingers over them. And she thought of them there. She pictured them pressed up against the wood beams,
knives in hand, chipping away at the wood there in the shed while the world outside was still and yellow, slowly turning. And there was a feeling then, in that dark place, of not being alone, and she turned to see if someone was there with her, because she almost thought she could feel someone there, as if someone was next to her breathing, looking through the window at the fog, fingers coiled around the frame of the window, leaning out. And so she turned and maybe expected to see someone standing there, but the window was empty, the cold falling through. And then she was turning fast and walking away, and standing back on the little rise of land. Below the shed she could see her brother. He was cracking the ice in the irrigation ditch with his heel, the ice falling in pieces down into the cold black water. She ran down the hill towards him. His face was wet and red with cold. He dragged his hand across his forehead, pushing his knit hat back on his head. He looked at her. He was laughing. Above them the ponderosa were covered with white.

That was when they heard it, flying towards the walls of the earth, large wings crashing. The sound drowned out everything. She stood next to him. They stood with their hands over their eyes. It flew higher and higher towards the white haze of moon, wings rustling. It seemed enormous. And then it screeched again, only louder, echoing across the valley floor. She could hear Jacob breathing next to her, sucking in the air and trailing it out into a thin white line of cold. The hawk was flying higher. And then it was hidden in the white and blue blur of evening. Up into the sky. And when she turned then he was walking away, dissolving into the white fog, like some magic act, and the hawk was spiraling upward, up higher and higher until it was only a little fleck of something.
like ash, and he was dissolving further, fading into the white that hung all around. She walked back up the hill and stood in the doorway of the little shed. The roof was crooked, slanted. The boards were black now, because they had burned once, almost dissolving into ash.

That night when she tried to fall asleep she imagined the hawk falling out of the sky, spiraling downward, towards the cold hard frosted earth. Fast. She was standing in the field watching it fall. It was someone else, someone she couldn’t find, causing it to fall. It fell in a large crooked brown shape, hitting the ground in a loud hollow sound, like a drum. She looked up into the sky and the sky was empty, pink with sunrise. Her brother was standing below, his arm stretched up, pointing towards the sky. He had not heard it fall. And there was someone standing next to him, someone like herself, standing in a red hat and with her hands in her pockets, looking towards the field where the hawk had landed. She sat up straight then, facing the black bedroom wall. In the morning the hawk was gone, or at least they couldn’t find it. She told her father about it, standing in the kitchen.

“It was enormous,” she said.

***

The moon was full and bright. Charlie was walking in the dark, following the line of railroad track, his shape crooked against the sky, swaying, hat tilted, the track out before him, pointing towards the horizon, growing smaller and smaller until it was only a
tiny triangle disappearing between the mountains. And that was when Charlie first saw
him. The horse was a white shape against the gray sky, the man a gray shape sitting tall
and the horse making light breathing sounds and the man on the horse saying something
to the horse, coaxing it over the tracks, the horse glowing white and stepping awkwardly,
its feet up high, like a parade horse. Charlie stood with his hands in his pockets, between
the two lines of track. The horse stepped over the tracks then and the man was riding
slowly, the horse a little gray spot growing smaller, towards the black row of mountains.

“He won’t get away with that,” Henry said to Charlie the following day. He was
standing in the corner of the empty bar, pouring out a little pile of tobacco into a tiny
white paper. “He just won’t,” Henry said. “We won’t let him.” He looked down at the
paper, rolling it in his hands. And then he lit it, looking out the window at the road.

“That man never did like to work,” Henry said. He breathed in deep and exhaled.
The smoke billowed up around him.

“I’d say he’s working pretty hard,” Charlie said then. “Having to move those
calves over the mountains there, and down over them. And then,” Charlie said. “And
then having to find some place to put them.” Charlie laughed, looking down into his
bottle, peering down into the black cavity of glass and then lifting it high, towards the
man that got away. He took a drink and set the bottle down on the table. Henry shook
his head.

“There are some things that just aren’t right,” Henry said. He was still standing at
the window of the door, the light streaming past him, his shadow an elongated shape
stretched out across the floor.
“Well now,” Charlie said. He laughed harder. He scratched his head and looked down into the empty bottle. He stood up. “We’ll see who finds him.”

Henry leaned towards the door, looking out at the blue sky. The shadow of him grew thinner and longer. It grew up the side of the bar, up into the glasses and bottles, curving.

“That’s my job,” Henry said. “And I’ll find him.” Charlie nodded. Outside the sky was large and blue and still. The ground was brown, still frozen from the night before. Two boys looked through the glass at Henry and smiled, pressing their faces up against it. They left little circles with their mouths and ran away laughing, tugging at each other, running down the dirt road and into the sun.

That night Henry stood near the railroad tracks. He was smoking again, the cigarette a little orange speck like some firefly lost, now a lone thing flickering. He could see the row of houses down the road, the tiny squares of yellow light. He tucked his free hand into his pocket and stood watching the tracks. The mountains stood looming.

“It’s getting too damn cold for this,” Henry said to himself. He dropped the firefly. It floated to the ground. All around him it was black. He stood there for half the night, the moon a sliver in the sky, tucked up behind the clouds. And then he walked home.

Charlie was in the bar when he saw the rustler again, thick with coats wrapped around him. He was wearing a hat, the brim flat down over his eyes. He surveyed the room and then sat down at the bar, across from the bartender, his knees up a little, feet
propped on the bottom rung of the stood. The bartender glanced over at him. He poured him a drink. The man leaned over the drink, his hat pulled down over his eyes. The bartender watched him, dragging a white rag across the open bar. Then he leaned towards him, gripping the white rag in his hands. He said something to him. The rustler laughed, pushing the hat back on his head. He hit the bar with his fist, laughing harder. He pushed the empty glass out in front of him, and he was grinning.

"Another," he said, nodding towards the rows of shining glass bottles behind the bar. The bartender stood still behind the bar, holding the rag, his little black apron tied around him waist. He leaned forward then, towards the bar, saying something. The rustler laughed.

"I'm just telling you," the bartender said.

The rustler nodded, taking off his coat. He set the coat on the stool beside him and sat still, hunched a little towards the bar, his collar turned up against his neck, his hair a little too long, hanging in strands from beneath his hat. He adjusted the hat on his head and looked around the room, smiling a little.

Charlie stood up then and walked towards the rustler. The rustler looked up at Charlie. Charlie held a bottle in one hand, stretching his other hand out on the bar, palm open flat against the bar.

"You know he's looking for you," Charlie said.

The man nodded, smiling. He leaned into the bar, his elbows on the bar, drinking in swift little gulps.
“You going to turn me in?” he asked. He didn’t look at Charlie, but forward, at the bartender, the bartender pouring a drink and looking at him when he turned around, walking past the bar, out into all of the people sitting.

Charlie shook his head.

“Not unless you take my cattle.”

The rustler shook his empty glass. The ice clinked against the glass.

“Well, I won’t take your cattle.” He turned towards Charlie. “You don’t turn me in,” he said. He set the glass down on the bar. The bartender walked by and grabbed it, refilling it and setting it out in front of him again.

“All right,” Charlie said.

The rustler leaned into his drink, his sleeves open at the wrists. He was young, maybe not quite twenty, his face smooth and brown.

He rode through the woods, somehow a part of them, riding through them on a white horse, with a white mane, and him with his longish dark hair and green eyes and the trees standing tall and still around him and the crackling of the horse stepping through the brush, and the cattle too, the few of them anyway, and him riding through the woods like that, as if he was from some other time, some wider, greater expanse of time, and his large boots and layers of coats and him bundled up and sitting still on the horse, not really that big underneath all of the bundles. And during the day he sat underneath the trees, the spots of autumn light alighting soft and yellow across him. He sat next to a little stream of water drinking and smoking, the horse leaning down into the water, making soft sucking sounds. And the man in town, Henry, the sheriff, waited for him, for some sign
of him, walking along the railroad tracks, looking for hints. Scuff marks in the dust. Until it seemed hopeless and he quit bringing it up.

“Don’t know,” Henry said, rolling a cigarette, standing in the light of the open doorway in the summer. And the man on the white horse rode slowly, through the trees, up and over the dips and turns of black night mountains. He rode through the miles of dark green and black, the tips of the trees in little triangles against the night sky, the horse breathing softly, the calves running through the brush, in black liquid shapes.

“I saw him once too,” the bartender said later. He paused. “It was before I knew.”

Henry squinted at him.

“Pretty horse,” Sam said. “Real white. Almost like it was lit up.” He turned towards the counter. He was wiping the counter off with a red rag.

“Anyway. It was before I knew,” he said. His face flashed red.

“You haven’t seen him since?” Henry asked.

“I said I saw him then,” Sam said.

He was stacking the glasses into a row.

“And you didn’t know then?”

Sam shook his head.

“Well when did you see the horse?” Henry asked.

“When I went outside. The last time. There was a fight outside.” He paused.

“Not with him, but I went outside and there the horse was. Just waiting for him. It sure was white.”
“I know that,” Henry said. “You told me that.”

Sam nodded.

Outside there was a little line of snow on the ground, barely. The road was frozen, in permanent ruts. Henry stood in the open doorway, looking out.

They were working on the canal, digging it out, standing inside it, covered in dust and dirt when the men rode up, wild-looking men, their eyes blazing and dark. They were rounding up wild horses, they said. There were too many. They were asking for volunteers. The rustler was the only one that left, following the men, him still almost a boy, awkward and thin, despite all of the digging. They ran them into pens, the horses large and fast and shining, with darting eyes. He ran the horses through the woods and down across the mountains, into the valley. In the evenings he went to town. When he walked through the door the women would turn and look, all of them, smiling. They would press against him dancing. He promised each of them a horse, a wild one, his eyes large and moving, green. He was only seventeen. He left a year later, after most of the horses were gone. They asked his brother about him, the brother growing red in the face. The brother said he didn’t know. And he probably didn’t.

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Katy was skating out in front, across the ice, the ice crackling beneath her and Jacob behind. Jacob was wearing black hockey skates, the bottoms of them starting to rust. He went in circles, making lines through the thin layer of snow and he stood still
and popped the air bubbles with the toe of his skate, and he could see her skating faster, 
er her feet up behind her, one after the other, her hair all stuck up beneath that red knit hat 
and her skating faster and then around the bend, and still the sound of metal on ice, the 
scraping sound in this rhythm. And then the sound stopped and when he stopped to listen 
for her he couldn’t hear her anymore, only the soundless air around him, that hung 
around him and when he breathed he could hear himself breathing and he listened again 
for her but the sound of the skates was gone. He figured she was too far down the canal 
for him to hear her anymore. He followed the lines that she had left in the snow, thin 
gray lines. He tried to stay in between them.

When he came around the bend she was sitting on the rocks on the edge of the ice 
with her feet out in front of her and looking forward at the stretch of land through the row 
of trees, at the yellow metal arm up above the willow branches. The willows were 
covered in a thin layer of frost, little white slivers. He stood looking at her and then at 
the yellow machine and he thought for a moment he could hear it creaking, as if the arm 
was rising up and falling. She sat still with her skates out in front of her, her heels 
digging into the ice. She tapped the heels of the skates and made little holes in the ice, 
looking through the trees at the yellow metal.

“I don’t remember that there,” she said.

She knew where the wooden box came out of the side of the hill. It dropped 
irrigation water, overflow into the canal. And she could stand under it like a little 
waterfall during the summer and hear the water falling. And there was the footbridge, 
that crossed over the canal, and she would lean over it and look down into the water, her 
arms hanging over, watching the little minnows in the water. But through the trees now
the yellow arm seemed to groan, and she tapped her heels into the ice. Jacob looked at her and back again at the machine, and then at the ice. He skated around slowly, in one little circle. She watched him for a while, skating around, not saying anything. She was holding the red hat in her lap now, turning the edges of it in with her fingers. And then she was taking off her skates, untying them and pulling the laces out loose, and trading the skates for her tennis shoes, the pink ones with the white laces. He stopped and looked at her. She stood up then and was crawling up the bank, grabbing bunches of grass with her small red fists, the skates over her shoulder now, the laces dangling gray.

He could see her walking away, the flashes of the pink shoes in the thin layer of snow. Holding the red hat at her side. Her ponytail bouncing. He skated back and forth in a little section of ice. He could sense the yellow there through the trees, and it felt like someone was hiding behind it, or in it, and was watching him. He tried to ignore it, but he felt a little sick although he didn’t really know why, except for maybe that sensation of being peered at from some hidden place, and he stood in the middle of the ice in his black hockey skates, and his sister was a little dot blended into the snow.

The next day the air was cold and white, shaking. Katy stood in the clump of cottonwoods. The cottonwoods were bare, the leaves wet and rotting yellow and black across the ground. She stood still, her hands in her pockets, looking up through the trees, through the still gray branches, towards the white sky. The air smelled damp and cool, like wet soil. Katy breathed out a little circle of gray. The birds flickered in the trees in shapes of black and brown, moving through the branches, dropping to the ground as if dying fast, and then rising, back up into the trees. The birds grew louder and louder.
Through the branches the white sky moved fast. She leaned against one of the trees, the birds dropping and rising around her. The trees were tall and gray, crooked against the white sky. Through the trees she could see her brother. He was wearing brown work gloves and a blue knit hat. He walked across the open field, up and over the slope of land. He walked up the land towards the water. She turned and trailed after him, the sound of the birds growing larger and then smaller and then fading far away, into a hum. She could see him walking into the depth of trees and across the frozen water, the water shallow now and covered in a sheet of clear ice. He disappeared into the willows on the other side, the willows in dark scribbles of red and yellow. His hat was a little piece of blue flashing. Katy stood on the bank, above the water. She could see the stones underneath the ice, the trails of green things caught, waving slowly like thin crooked hands. She stood above the ice. The hat bobbed through the willows and then was gone. Above the trees and the canal the sky seemed large and too close. The ice was a thin layer over the water, the shapes underneath it moving slowly, back and forth, undulating. Across the ice there was the rustling of willow branches.

Katy stepped onto the ice. She could hear the birds, far away, falling from the trees. She looked for her brother, but he was gone, the willows quiet and still, tangled.

And then it was the falling in, happening so fast and with her holding her breath suddenly and her arms out around her, and then falling back into the water, the ice snapping beneath her, the water hard and cold and breaking, and her falling fast, crashing through the ice, the water all around her. The water was pounding hard and cold on her
head and throughout her, moving throughout her and filling her up somehow, throbbing. She swung her arms around, up and over the water, crashing down on the surface of the water, through the shards of broken ice floating, the ice crackling around her, the water pulling her down. The water banged hard in her ears, in a sound like an echo. The world above the water was a blur of colors moving, a reflection of something in a shaking mirror, the sky like trembling white water, the willows in blurred tumbleweeds, the ghost image of willows, of sky, of hard brown earth. It all moved slowly, in steaming browns and grays and yellows. The cold ran through her, aching. The world passed overhead, moving fast and separate. She felt the water pushing her down. The water banged harder. And then she rose, the water still pulling, her arms out above her, grasping air, her mouth open in a black hollow, her arms crashing down onto the water, and then she was crawling through it, towards the bank, and then sitting on the bank, in the mirrored white air and beside the water, breathing hard and fast and cold, and then coughing, and leaning down, towards the sand and the rocks, her head pounding with cold and the world louder and louder and frosted in white shards of early spring ice, the birds falling from the trees again, from the willows now too, in drops of brown and black. The birds called towards one another and louder until there were more and more of them and the earth seemed full of them, crammed to the brink with birds. Katy looked at the water. It suddenly seemed harmless, only a pool of water really, the splinters of ice hardly moving.

Katy could see the pickup across the field, the hay all stacked up in the bed, the pickup still running, the shape of her father in the cab, and Jacob in the blue hat standing on the bed, on top of the hay. He saw her first, a girl standing in a red coat, her hands in
white balls at her sides, the coat somehow wrapped around her, her hair in dark ropes. He stood still, his mouth wide open. She walked towards the truck, dragging her hand across her forehead, the air cold all around her.

They drove towards the house then, him throwing the hay out on the way there, the heater turned up and towards her. The wet was hot now and steamed. The ground jolted beneath the truck. There was white fog on the windows. Katy rubbed a circle out with her closed fist and leaned towards the window, looking through the circle at the field and the sky, the horizon a blurred line between the two. She could see her brother in the rearview mirror, the bottom of him anyway, and then his face when he leaned down to pick up a bail, his face wet with cold. The blue hat slipped back on his head. The cattle gathered into a red and black stream behind the truck. The circle on the window filled up with fog.

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They looked and looked for him. He had gone out hunting, as he usually did, but this time he didn’t come back. They surveyed the entire mountain, or they thought they did anyway. They brought horses and hound dogs too, and they rushed through the crackling woods with the dogs out in front of them, some of the men on horses, others walking fast with the dogs, through the deep white snow, holding the dogs back, running after them, the winter sun cold and white through the dark depth of the trees. They
stopped in the woods and sat in a circle, eating sandwiches. And then they went to the house.

"We can't find him," the tallest man said. He stood beneath the porch of the white chipped house. The snow was only in patches now, the ground thawing beneath it. The other men stood behind him. They held their hats at their waists. The wife stood on the porch above him. Her face was wide and red and she cried and wiped her face with a little white cloth. Her hair was cut short and curled. She wore men's boots. A dress with little red flowers. A blue down coat, buttoned up to her chin. The other men turned to look at the dogs, that sat in a little group, their breath filling up the air around them with sound. The woman stood still, her face flushed red and winding the white cloth in her hands.

"We've looked," the taller man said then. His eyes were moving and dark. He looked back at the men and at her again. "We looked everywhere," he said. "No sign of him."

The woman twisted the cloth faster, wrapping it around her fingers and watching the men, her eyes still and gray. She looked past them at the row of pines and blinked.

"Oh," she said then, slowly, in a sound like water draining. She looked at the thick span of trees. She could barely see the tip of the mountains behind them, gray now, covered in a thin layer of snow.

"He said he would be back," she said. She folded the little white cloth in her hands, and then twisted it again, looking at the trees, past the men holding their hats, her eyes steaming and gray. She sighed then and looked down at the taller man, and then at
the dogs in a group. One of the dogs, the biggest, was sleeping. The belly of the dog rose and fell. The other dogs sat near it, with large drooping eyes.

“And even with those dogs,” the woman said then. She wrapped her hands around the cloth. She looked at the taller man standing nearest the porch, holding his hat. He tapped his hat at his side. The woman stood still, in the large brown boots, twisting the cloth, her eyes still and gray.

“That old one there,” he said then, nodding towards the dog sleeping. “That old one there, he’s ready to quit.”

The woman’s eyes widened, like two smooth gray stones. She looked at the dog.

“It’s a pretty thing,” she said.

They left that evening, after having coffee with the woman, the woman on the porch growing smaller behind them, sitting still with the dog in a brown heap beside her. The dog still slept, only having moved now, lying on the top step of the porch, and her sitting beside it, her hands folded in her lap, her head bent a little to the side, towards the sky and the trees and then down towards the dog, the dog gigantic next to her, breathing slowly. She breathed along with the dog, watching it sleeping, twisting the white cloth in her hands.

It was not until years later that someone found him. Of course they knew it was him because it was his jacket, hardly there, a gray strand of cloth wrapped around bone, and him almost in one piece, propped up beside a tree, near the top of the mountain, his hat at his side too, a frame of a hat really. He looked like he was waiting for something.
They wondered that nothing got him, even after he died. And then they wondered how it
was he got lost, after knowing the woods so well. And maybe it was because no one else
lived there, and no one else really knew the mountain, other than him, and he was gone,
lost in the congestion of the pines, after having gotten himself lost, wandering across the
mountain, and almost crossing over it, onto the other side, that they thought maybe he
didn’t really know the mountain either.

***

Katy was sitting in the pickup, waiting for her father to get back, when the girl
came out of the new house. She had never seen the girl before. She brought a bridle with
her and she was wearing a little black cap, with a round ball at the top, and these black
pants that stopped at her ankles, pulled somehow into her black boots. She stood across
the fence from these two horses. She opened the little gate and stood next to one of the
horses and she leaned against it, sliding the bridle on and the horse standing still, looking
straight towards the fields, standing still like that, like some sort of statue. And then the
girl was leading it out of the fenced in area, closing the gate behind her, the other horse
following, trying to get through the gate and then stopping, turning in a circle when the
girl shut the gate. The girl led the horse into a little arena, filled with blue hurdles. She
rode the horse around in this little circle of dirt, jumping over the blue hurdles. She rode
the horse around and around again, sometimes saying something to it and patting it there
on the neck, sitting still and straight, the horse going around again and again. The other
horse stood in its pen, watching the girl riding the horse, with its head drooped down
towards the earth. It ran around a few times in the enclosure, snorting and then it stopped, facing the opposite direction. And when Katy looked back the girl was sitting on the ground, the horse above her. And a woman came rushing out of the house, her arms all up in the air. The girl stood up and brushed off her pant legs, and she was saying something about the horse, looking at the horse with this strange look and her face bright white and then at the woman, the girl’s voice rising in what sounded like some far away whimper. The woman stood at the fence of the little arena, her arms crossed in front of her. The girl led the horse away, through the gate and back towards the other horse. Stay on, Katy thought then. She leaned towards the dashboard. The air seeped in through the window. She is supposed to stay on, Katy thought. She imagined the horse dropping the girl every time like this now, shaking the girl off like dust or like flies and the girl falling and the woman rushing out again and again to make sure the girl is all right.

They put something like a jacket on the horse, a blue one, tied so that the horse’s feet stuck through, and they left the horse in the original fenced off area, with the other horse. The girl stood at the fence looking at the horse and shaking her head. The woman stood at the doorway and she was saying something to the girl, saying something about the horse and she was propped up against the doorway with one arm up high and wearing this green shirt that shone a little there in the afternoon, and the girl walked back to the house, holding the little black hat at her side, tapping it at her side. The door closed behind them. For a moment Katy thought she could see them, through the window, maybe looking out at her, noticing that she was there. But then she didn’t see them and the house was still.
And so she walked across the field, towards her father, up and down the little folds of earth. He was leaning over a calf, his hand wrapped under its throat, and tagging its ear, the calf shuffling a little bit and the mother standing above, unsure, looking at the calf and then at him with wide rock eyes. He let the calf go and the calf moved forward a little, shook its head and stood again near its mother. Her father stood up and tucked the extra tags in the front pocket of his coat. They walked back to the pickup, him in front and her behind. They drove across the field, past the house with the girl gone now. And the two horses stood still in the enclosure, their heads bowed over the fence, towards the open fields, bowed there, as if they were nodding, and they stood there for the rest of the afternoon and when Katy looked outside again, when the sun was going down across the fields, they were still standing there, their large horse heads bent over the pole fence, the fence worn a little where they had chewed at it, both of them in jackets now, one in blue and one in green, standing with their heads drooped.

It was a long winter that year, the winter Katy followed behind her father, up and over the dips and curves of land. Under the sheet of smooth white ice there were fish frozen. They stared at the sky, with round wide eyes, mouths open in little black hollows. As if they were trying to escape, somehow rise up over the water, and into the sky. There were lots of them in little groups, the water frozen solid and white, the fish in blurs of gray, watching the sky. Katy stood on the ice, drawing circles over the gazing fish with the toe of her boot, uncovering them. When the ice thawed maybe they would swim away, first in little pools between the ice, and then on down the canal. Maybe it had happened so fast, she thought, that they didn’t have time to die, but were still alive.
Sam, the neighbor then, had walked up to the fence above the canal where she was standing.

"Cold," he said.

She nodded. He was wearing a plaid wool coat, the collar turned up against his neck. He had thick dark hair and liquid gray eyes, like two ponds.

"You stay warm," he said. He smiled down at her and walked away, the squares of plaid turning into a tiny red patch against a cold gray sky. He brought her a snow globe later that winter. He was sitting at the table with her mother and father drinking coffee. He was wearing large brown work boots. He turned the globe over and shook it and set it upright on the kitchen table. It had a little woman inside, standing with a dog. She had thanked him, her child face reddening, and him a huge man sitting at the kitchen table. He laughed a little. He was spooning sugar into his coffee and stirring it. Her father sat across from him. The snow fell soft and heavy.

It had been his. All of it. But when he died he hadn't thought about the land, about what would happen to it. And he hadn't thought about anyone trying to change it, or wanting to change it. It just seemed that it would be the same somehow.

And then the two sisters came up from California, driving up in a big silver Cadillac. They had large white-blond hair and smelled like women's magazines. They stood outside his house, bracelets and jewelry clicking at their wrists, looking at all of it and wondering what to do with it. And then they were selling it, all of it, in five-acre sections, and they got their checks in the mail in California when each piece sold. One of
the sisters would come back later and stand looking at it, her face stoic and white, jewelry still clicking, wondering what she had done.

***

The snow melts and the earth is black and full of a loud, pure smell. The sky is a washed out blue, the river runs low, the rocks down into it and the water rushes past them, through the spaces between stones. At night it is warm too and the wind rustles things, stirring them up, and the wind is warm and it clanks a little against the house, making a sound like someone trying to get in.

On the wall in the living room there is a painting of a man in a big yellow trench coat and a black cowboy hat, standing near a forest, holding what looks like a thermos of coffee.

"Open the door," El says, looking up a little. "I heard something." But when he opens it there is only the empty black shape of night sky and the branches of the trees far away, waving, like they are waving at her, and he closes the door and stands against the wall, looking at her with his eyes moving across her, standing with his hands still on the door.

So then one day he leaves and doesn’t come back and there she is, standing on the big wrap around deck, her arms around her waist and looking at the horizon maybe waiting for him but he still doesn’t come home. And every afternoon she stands there, and every evening she turns around and goes back inside and all of the lights flicker on,
all of them, one after another, with one bigger light, that seeps out into the sky like into
black paint and the woman shape walks back and forth across the yellow windows,
maybe with her arms still crossed and she stands at one of the windows looking out. She
crosses the house, walking through room after room, locking the doors that open towards
the night, pressing her face against them, listening for someone standing there across
from her, her hands shaking. At night she thinks she hears things, things like they are
prying open the boards up around the house, and so she gets up and turns on the radio and
listens to the static talk of voices without bodies, talking about salvation, and she sits
waiting for him to come home. But he doesn’t and the next day she is out there again,
standing on the deck, when they drive up in two separate cars to tell her about it. About
how they had found him. She looks up at the windsock she has hanging above the deck.
It is shiny and it flickers a little there in the morning sun. She watches it turning. And
then she nods at them and they shake their heads and say they’re sorry and turn around
and walk back to the two separate cars. And she sits down on the edge of the deck while
they drive away, her feet swinging through the boards. And then she stands up,
straightening her long skirt, and stands leaning against the railing, and looks up as if she
is looking right into the sun.

The first night Rick leaves and goes to the bar. He pictures her at home, walking
through the house like she does, and he sits at the bar, leaning into it, cowering over his
beer and he can hear the voices all around him, surrounding him. The bar is tired looking
and seems to be covered in dust, like if he dragged his finger across the wall it would be
black with dirt. The bartender is looking at him with this strange look, as if he is about to
tell him something, but then goes back to prying the caps off of these cheap beers, setting them out on the bar, leaning into the people like he does. And then the women there with their long hair, all of them, smoking and leaning into him when they talk, their breath like Saturdays and their jeans too tight and all of their mouths covered in red like candle wax, as if they would melt when you set them out under the light, they would just melt away. He peels the label off his beer. And then he is leaving. And he just keeps driving, faster and faster. And no one really knows what happens next until the woman standing there and the police driving up and looking at her and at the big, long house with all of the windows.

***

They found the Salish girl by the hot springs in the winter. She was asleep next to it, a tiny girl curled into a ball, like a cat. She was next to the water, in the steam, her arms covered with tiny droplets. When they found her they did not wake her up at first, but picked her up and carried her home, back across the forest, in the snow, her still asleep and warm and not waking up until the next morning. She forgot she was even out there to begin with. But then a rich man bought the hot springs, and he thinks now that maybe he sees her. He wakes up sweating and runs towards the open window. And he will try to make her leave but she will keep coming back, always cold, and always finding the pool, and lying beside it, in the hazy white pool lights reflecting on the water and he will turn them all on and try to scare her off but she will keep sleeping, curled up into a ball, her knees up to her chin and her black hair out in a fan around her tiny brown
child face, there on the ground, the steam rising up from the springs. And he will go back inside, up the shining stairs to his bedroom, and look out the window, towards the water. And he won't see her anymore but will only stand shaking, thinking he sees her, drinking something, his robe tied around his waist. And he will stand there the entire night, every movement of water a possible soul lost in the woods, and he will be selling it the next day, to someone else, because he is afraid of a tiny brown girl sleeping.

***

Outside now it is snowing. He sits in the open door of the pickup, smoking. He seems large, filling up the empty space of the open door, his wool jacket buttoned up to his chin. He drops the cigarette on the ground. He looks straight out in front of him, at the field now empty and white. The windows of the house glow yellow. He can see Anne through them, moving slowly past, probably cooking something, her hair tied into a knot on the back of her head, and her gray shape moving slowly. He stands up then and shuts the truck door and walks back towards the house at an angle, his hands in the pockets of his jacket. The cattle stand in little groups in the field, covered in snow like layers of salt, their heads drooping.

Anne can see him walking through the snow, the white all around him, crossing his face and him with his head bent down into it, pushing through it, the wind all around him and the snow wrapping around him, a gray figure walking. When he comes inside he hangs his hat up, his ears red and wet underneath, his face red and cold. He presses his
hands together. Outside the air is white and black, shaking. He sits down in the yellow light from the kitchen, looking out the window, leaning in towards the table, drinking a cup of coffee and with the world so white all around. She stands across from him, the snow behind her in little flecks, crossing behind her like she is standing against the sky, falling up into the sky. He turns towards her then, his hands folded together, like he is praying, or is on the verge of saying something important. His mouth moves a little.

“What is it?” she says. She leans down towards him.

“I need to go now,” he says. His mouth quivers. She lights him a cigarette, the snow falling harder, in giant white tufts, like someone is ripping apart a blanket, it falling in down pieces all over the ground. He turns back to the window, smoking and looking out, his hands shaking now, the cigarette tight in his fingers. His shoulders are two points through his shirt. She stands in the next room, folding towels. She can hear him talking, mumbling to himself. She can feel the cold through the walls of the house, shaking the walls of the house.

Later she goes outside, the snow falling slower now and the moon hidden behind the clouds. She walks through the cattle, shining the flashlight across them, their heads turning towards her. The calves are in little black heaps across the ground, pressed up near their mothers. The snow piles up along the road. She walks crunching, wading through the snow like thick white water.

During the night he wakes up and goes into the kitchen and sits in the dark. She finds him there and turns on the light, him not looking up at her, his face hard and still.
His eyes are glazed over with something thin and white, like milk. She makes him a pot of coffee, talking underneath her breath, standing at the counter in her thick blue nightgown with the faded flowers. She sits down beside him and looks out the window at the shining snow.

The next day he stands in a little clump of ponderosa, holding his hat in his hands, looking around him. She stands in front of him and takes the hat out of his hands and places it on his head, pulling it down a little, turning the earflaps down. He watches her, his eyes glazed blue. She takes him by the hand and leads him back inside, him following her through the white snow crunching. Inside he lights a cigarette, and sits still, smoking. He sets the cigarette on the table and lights another. She reaches for the cigarette still burning and puts it out, crushing it in a little blue ashtray. She shakes her head at him.

“What now?” she says. He is looking out the window, at all of the snow, coming down in heavy wet flakes, lines of water rolling down the dark glass windows.

In the summer he walks down the road and doesn’t know how to get back. The neighbors bring him home. He is always smoking.

“It’s getting worse,” they tell her. “He’s wandering farther.” She nods and takes him by the elbow back inside. He grows thinner and thinner, his shoulders in two sharp points through his thin blue shirt. He sits still, or paces up and down the road, mumbling and smoking, stooped a little, as if he is reaching down for something.
There were hundreds of them, throughout the field, all standing facing one direction, their large wings drooped down towards the ground, the ground frozen beneath them. They drove past them, and then past the open gate and out into the field, where they all were standing. Katy leaned towards the window, the window rolled down a little, the cool air pulling through in a line, circling through the cab of the truck. Above the sky was gray, growing purple with the evening. The geese turned towards them. All of them, their heads bent in one direction. And they moved their wings, slowly, up and down, and they walked a little, towards the row of cottonwoods, their wings moving slowly and then a little faster. And then they were rising. First it was one, and then another, and then all of them, rising up into a cluster, faster and faster, and honking now, growing louder and louder and rising up into a cluster, and calling towards one another and rising up and towards the mountains, Katy leaning against the window, her chin on her arm and her brother there too, him leaning against the steering wheel, watching through the window, until he couldn’t see them anymore, until they were just little specks of dust and then gone, flickering out into the sky, towards the sun falling. Katy could hear them, growing softer until they were a part of the mountains, a part of the sun going down, and maybe, she thought then, maybe they will never come back. Because they seemed as if they were leaving for good, with how they gathered up and flew away.

They stepped out of the pickup then and they leaned against it, the sky dissolving in this line of pink and red. Katy breathed in the cold air, felt it drawing down into her
lungs, and settling there. The sun went down and the sky stood still, the few strands of oats still rustling.

“Where do you think they’re going?” she asked him.

He stood upright then, his arms folded.

“Towards the mountains,” he said. He paused, watching them flying away. “Past the mountains,” he said, nodding. “They’re going on past the mountains.” He climbed back into the truck. His breath was a little cloud in front of him. He spit there into the dirt, the truck door still open. The sound of the geese was gone now.

At night the stars would all shine, thousands of them, and all around it would be pitch black, so when someone walked through the dark, it was like being safely under water. And then it was the standing still, standing in the middle of the open night field, hands hanging still, grasping the night in tight fists, holding it like it was something tangible, and then forgetting. Opening hands. And soon the eyes would adjust, and the shapes of things, of trees and of cattle, and they would turn gray and the sky would move slowly overhead. There was nothing around, nothing really, just the quiet hum of existence, of all things simply existing, the cattle standing still, some of them lying in black clumps on the ground, little mounds of cattle hills, black against the sky. And then Katy thought she could hear someone walking, walking through the dark night, weaving around the cattle and the cottonwoods, and singing a little. But then it was the pounding of blood in her head, like a seashell pressed against her ear, and she woke up sitting on the edge of her bed, her feet dangling, barefoot. The window wide open and the wind
rushing through, twirling the down from the cottonwoods around and around the dark room, remnants of something.

***

Katy found a map, the edges of it yellowed, and she put little gold stars on everywhere she wanted to go. She pictured herself, walking through the narrow streets of strange cities, leaning out of a little window in the morning, parting the wooden shutters, the light spilling in across the open floor. Everything would be shining with this strange light like the sun was set up in a different spot in the sky.

She told Jenny about it, the two of them sitting on the floor in her bedroom, leaning over the map, Jenny with her knees crossed and resting her chin on her fist. And Katy would think about it throughout the afternoon. She pictured the birds, there on the streets, the birds that would rise a little when she passed by them, darting up onto the roofs of houses. The sound that they would make. The fluttering of wings.

But then it all seemed to fade off somewhere, like something put away in a drawer, and Katy walked out in the mornings, her shadow long across the ground and the air cool and the ground covered in morning frost. The sky gleamed. She stood in the middle of the field, the sun shining cold. And then there were the cattle, pushing through the open gate, and the sun was a white ball, like a giant closed fist.
And her father would start the wood burning, poking the metal into the fire and
the calves would be bawling. There would be the smell then too, the burning, and the
smoke rising up and black and into her face and her squinting her eyes and holding the
leg of the calf, pressing the leg into its belly, the leg folded there, while he branded the
calf, him checking the brand, the smoke rising up around him, moving his fingers across
the ash there. The calf would be bawling, its stomach rising and falling and its eyes
rolling back into its head, whitening. She would let go of the leg, and the calf would kick
and they would set the calf upright and the calf would jump up and walk away, sniffing
towards the ground and then standing in the tilted shadow of the barn.

The entire afternoon her father would stand with his hat bent over the calves,
running his fingers over the brands, the calves bawling and then walking around the open
gray spot of earth. He would stop sometimes, standing there in the hot light, and drag his
hand across his forehead, and look up towards the cattle, the cattle walking towards the
mountains, slowly, until they were just little dots scattered along the horizon. The sun
would fall in this orange spinning thing, and the sky would light up pink and they, she
and Jacob, they would sit on the fence, both of them, watching that sun going down,
dropping behind the mountains. And he, their father, would walk towards the little
yellow house, his head bowed a little, and his shadow would stretch out across the road,
longer and longer until it was only a strand of him in the evening. There would be shape
of light forgotten between shadows, and the air would taste cool and unused and new
again. Katy would still hear the calves, a few of them, and then slowly the sound of them
would begin to fade away, tucked into the sky. The earth would be still, the sun just a
little orange speck, like it wasn’t even there to begin with, and Jacob would drop off of the fence and walk away, without saying anything, and he would grow smaller and smaller until he was just a shape against the wide open fields.

***

When the man came in his clean white shirt he knocked on the screen door and when no one answered cracked it open and stuck his head through.

And Jacob searched his face for something to say, his hands balled into fists at his sides. It is as if it doesn’t matter, he thought. As though he’s worked his whole life to only be bought out by someone else, as if he or the land even, or the thought behind it, is just another man’s opportunity. Another opportunity. And because of that it doesn’t matter, and he can ask like this, just ask, as if none of it made a difference.

He looked at Katy and she was gripping her hands tight, opening and closing her fists and not looking at either of them but forward at nothing. The man stood above their father, his tie crooked across his white shirt. His face was tight, his cheeks sucked into his face. Their father sat still, looking up at the man standing there and mumbling something and shaking his head.

“I would be sure,” the man said. Their father nodded.

“I’m sure,” he said. He looked up at the man standing there. And then he was standing, standing in front of the man in the white shirt, the man holding a large brown envelope, his fingers gripped around the brown paper, and he was tiny next to their
father, like a sliver of something. He crinkled the envelope between his fingers. Katy stood in the corner, pressing her palms against her sides and staring at the man standing there, his mouth a straight line and his eyes two small blue disks. And he did not seem real but like an image of himself, as if he would just fall over flat if she pushed him, like the cardboard people that stand in the corners of gas stations. The man turned a little and nodded at her. His mouth was wide and dark. He looked at her and she was gripping her hands tight, opening and closing her fists and not looking at either of them but looking forward at nothing. The man stood across from her father. Her father stood near the table, propped up against it, his hand in a fist leaning against the table, his shirt sleeves rolled up, looking at the man standing there and with the eyes crossing over him.

“All right,” the man said then, still looking at Katy. “But don’t think a deal like this will come along again. You may be the only one not saying all right. Not going ahead with it.”

Their father shook his head.

“You’re the only one missing out,” the man said. Their father nodded, still looking at the man in the white shirt, his eyes crossing over him, evaluating him. The man turned red and then white again. “Well then,” he said. He smiled at Katy. And then he left, the screen door tapping slowly, tapping and then closing.

***

Her father had waited for her. “I’ll be right here,” he said and she clamored onto the round piece of metal towards the same horse she always chose. The cream colored
one with the white mane and the streaming red roses. She went around and around. On
the inside circle there were oval shaped mirrors. They had little white lights around them
and she could see the reflections of all of the people in them, scattered into shapes. She
held onto the metal pole, with its curved lines, spiraling around, holding it tightly. Every
time she went around she looked for him. The first time he was waiting for her and he
looked back and smiled and nodded. He was wearing a straw cowboy hat and his eyes
were steady and laughing and reflecting in the light there from the round yellow bulbs.
Her horse had a wide, open mouth. It was up higher than the other horses. There was a
tiny girl next to her, sitting sure and bored, her arms hanging straight downward. Katy
glanced at the girl and then up again, looking for him. She passed by him. He was
talking to someone, his head bent a little, and nodding. She laced her fingers around the
pole and sat forward a little, the music from the inside of the circle rising up in sharp
tinny sounds, so that it drowned out the sound of the crowds. The next time she went
around he was gone. And the horses were speeding up. The music rang faster and faster
and the girl below her was waving her arms, held outwardly at her sides, her arms
swaying slowly as she went up and down on the metal horse. And then the horses were
slowing down, and she was looking for him, across the people moving. She could see the
reflection of the girl in the mirror, and the reflection of the horse's mouth, open wide with
white chipped teeth. And the ride stopped and she was left hanging between two
horizontal circles. She climbed off and stood looking for him. And then she followed the
other girl off of the circle and stood in the mass of people, the girl fading into the crowds,
weaving through them, running. And then there he was. Just like that. He pressed his
palm down on her head.