

“Dead Wood” and Other Stories

by

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If I had to trace a constant motif throughout my work since I began writing in my freshman year of college it'd be a fixation bordering on obsession with rendering land and landscape. I grew up on five acres of swampland in the middle of an ornithological reserve in upstate New York, where my father's family has lived for near a century, and this area, along with the surrounding mire and fallow fields in southwest Tompkins County, tends to form the settings for my stories; cold and sere in the winter months, wet and rank in the summer, and at the best of times endearingly unattractive. The reason for this is that I'm not a very creative person, and as such, my writing, with a little extrapolation here and there, is mostly an exercise in reconstructing those memories and emotions I can't let go of. For me such feelings are tied up inextricably with the inherent phenomena of the land I've grown up in, whether directly or through persistent association, and so there's no other way to properly get them out than by telling these stories and the land that shapes them as truthfully as I can.

My senior project consists of three short stories written during my junior year of college, although they're the second or third rewrites of earlier, similar pieces going back to my freshman year. The first piece is set in the Taughannock gorge trails on the southwestern side of Cayuga lake, a place I've grown up hiking and exploring since I was a kid; the second in the Cornell University woods a half mile up the road from my house, very close to where I learned to hunt; the third in one of the many abandoned or otherwise derelict plots of farmland in the rural outskirts of Tompkins County. Although I didn't write them as a set, all three are loosely connected by motifs of pride and, necessarily, shame — causing the death of a friend, needlessly killing in a hunt, burning down your childhood home — as well as their physical proximity. Of course I'm less concerned with theme than with describing emotions, which is the point of art or

else we'd all be better off writing essays. My writing process, as far as I can call it one, is fundamentally a matter of matching emotions to places; the scenario, characters, and plot come afterward to fill in the space between. This is why I've never liked the label "character-driven," especially for short stories. As an author I've never felt the need to make my characters feel unique or interesting — and I'd go as far as to say a unique and interesting character can often detract from a short story, depending on the writer's goals — because those traits are antithetical to the character's realism and believability.

My writing throughout college has been shaped most obviously by Cormac McCarthy, whose descriptions of land and intricate sentence composition I've carefully aped to a greater or lesser degree depending on the proximity of the story at hand to his own ballpark of Knoxville drunks and very sad cowboys. More recently, and in more or less direct opposition to McCarthy's aggressive atheistic fatalism, I've been watching and rewatching Andrei Tarkovsky; his films are an exercise in simplicity, faith, and thematic honesty like I've never seen before. His straightforward approach to storytelling has drastically changed the way I think about what makes a satisfying and sufficient plot. A third influence towards my current project (and towards shaping my thoughts for this essay) is Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*, about a filmmaker studying the esoteric relationship a fictional society of Australian settlers have developed with the continent's sprawling interior.

The first piece, "Cold Sweat," is also the first written in its current form, although it's a rewrite of an earlier piece where two boys look for the body of their friend. This rewrite is based off a true story of a Cornell freshman who was found dead in the campus gorges after rushing a fraternity, whereupon the frat closed ranks and refused to help the fire department and police

investigate. Whatever had happened was obviously an accident, and either way only the frat at large was culpable, but nobody was willing to admit to being with the freshman the moment he'd fallen into the gorge or gotten lost. I was interested in the guilt a person might feel at letting a person who'd put trust in them die, but also in the guilt of being too weak or ashamed to face this first failure. This compounded kind of shame, while not the only focus of the piece, became more prominent with each revision as I took more interest in it. Luke and Vaughn both cry at the end of the story, but for Luke, who has told himself he is steeled for his friend's death, the tears are as much a reckoning with his own shame as they are for Noah's body.

The second piece, "Dead Wood," is the third (or at this point, maybe the fourth) draft of a piece I'd included in my original portfolio when applying to the creative writing program while I was still a student at CUNY Brooklyn. Again, the core setpieces and emotions are the same — an older (but still young) man and his younger (but not so young) friend go into the woods on a hunt which ends in failure. Hunting, like the military, forms a close link between masculinity and taking life — but doing it the right way, following sanctioned rules and traditions which often run about to reality. Mama is old enough to be considered a man but too young to feel he's proved it, respected for his character by his male seniors but lacking the money or the usable skills to support his wife; his sense of masculinity, and the foundations he's laid his masculinity on — shooting, tracking, bushcraft — are still a boy's. When the deer he has gone such lengths to wound falls into a ravine where he cannot reach it, putting the killing to waste, Mama's already strained romantic notions of hunting and manhood fall finally apart. I was interested in the generational interplay between Charlie, a well-meaning older man whose manhood is secure and based on the privilege of his wealth and age such that he has only a superficial investment in the

kind of hard-wearing, traditional masculinity Mama believes so deeply in, and Mama, who is both conscious of this privilege and of his own inauthenticity despite it. That Charlie, who treats the rules of manhood so lightly, seems more successfully a man to Mama than he himself is hard to reconcile.

The final piece, “In The Ashes,” exists mostly as it was originally written with only a couple additions. It’s the most recent story I’ve written, and thematically a little different — about letting go of the past, one way or another, more than pride and shame — but I think it makes a good end to the collection. When Cal and his brother go to their old home they find they can hardly remember it, the fires of their old conflicts all gone out. It’s a murky sort of story, and in writing and revising I tried to keep that feeling alive, focusing on creating a feeling of old conflict rather than creating one which, after all, is already long gone. The conclusion then is not a conclusion exactly, but the feeling of one. It’s less important to me to convince the reader a thing has happened than to convince them the characters could believe it — they’re much more a part of the story, after all, and I’ve always been more interested in stories that ask questions than ones which prescribe answers.

The three stories are presented in the order they were originally written, a couple of months between each of them. Revising each in turn was an interesting look back into how my prose style has evolved since beginning to really write in earnest. In my writing up through “Cold Sweat” I was more comfortable writing in first person, present tense — in an early version of “Dead Wood,” for instance, the character in Jay’s role was protagonist and narrator — probably because first person seemed like the natural, and certainly easiest, path to take when writing about places close to me. The pivot towards a more distant perspective in “Dead Wood”

is mostly the influence of McCarthy, in particular the distance between his characters and narrator. Although his writing is not strictly observational and his description and metaphor do more of the emotional heavy lifting than other authors might allow, McCarthy leaves his protagonists alone in their thoughts, rendering their inner selves only in the shape of dreams. This choice gives his stories a kind of filmic quality and a lifelike ambiguity that I find one of the greatest aspects of his writing. In “Dead Wood” this emotional distance is fitting for the young male characters, and although I took a more moderate tack in “In The Ashes” I tried to keep the sense of ambiguous emotion alive in the physical and scenic description.

Overall, these stories represent a sort of pivotal period for my writing — from the directly personal to, as I became more confident in my storytelling, something more abstracted and universal. I was glad to take the opportunity to revise and expand this period of work, although I’ll probably end up revisiting them again as I continue writing.

## Cold Sweat

The sun is not up at five sharp when we set out for Taughannock Park in my beater of a Corolla, and this time of year the condensation comes so thick I need my wipers just to see the road signs. In deep fog this road takes on a different shape than in clearer weather. Vaughn, my roommate, has reclined the passenger seat as far back as it goes to allow his bulky frame to fit comfortably in the cabin. He's on the phone with Noah's parents, speaking in a soft and serious voice that doesn't suit him. Vaughn is robust, broad in the shoulders and sandy-haired, with a healthy face that usually reminds me of those pictures of old Ivy athletes postered all over the college gymnasiums. Grinning footballers in grainy Kodachrome. But he isn't smiling this morning.

I understand. Yeah, Vaughn is saying, probably to Noah's mother, although I can't hear the voice. Luke and I are on our way now, it's just the weather— he leans over the stick. Any idea when we'll get there?

Still a mile or two out. Time? I say. The clock on my dashboard is long dead.

Five thirty. Ish.

Tell her another five or so, I say.

Vaughn says so. We won't be late, sounds like, he tells me. She's just— yeah. Then Noah's mother says something, and Vaughn says, Really, a whole rescue crew? That's good, and then, Sounds like we're in good hands, and then, We'll find him today, Mrs. Alterman. I promise. He hangs up and taps the phone on his thigh.

I think she blames me, he says.

She say that?



You know how I mean.

Yeah, I say. I wish I had more. Just you?

He sighs. A heavy sound. Who knows, man. I guess she's not wrong, if that's how she wants to play it. And this is true.

Was the both of us looking after him.

Was my idea to do all that stuff with him, though.

I don't really remember, I say. True as well.

You wouldn't, he says, and laughs, shortly. It sounds pained. If they find anything in his system I'll take the heat for it.

Have it your way.

I had it coming, I guess. So long as he's okay I don't care what else happens.

I look at Vaughn's face then, easing off the gas. He stares out the windshield into the fog ahead, eyes blue and wet, jaw tight, the muscles of his cheek standing out in relief. You promise. I wonder what he thinks, this boy from California. Whether he understands that Noah is dead. Whether he believes it.

Noah was mine and Vaughn's other roommate. A freshman. Last Friday he fell into the gorge. Vaughn and I were at the park with him. We didn't see it happen. We didn't see when he slipped away but Noah fell and I know he died there. I feel it, and gut sense from a local in this respect is more enough than fact. Noah fell. A blank recognition suffusing through my memories of that evening like staring too long at the sun. What's left is remnants, a fragment of memory, a roll of film pulled disfigured from the fire. Losing the night in full would be preferable to this. It hurts just to picture his face.

We reach the park earlier than expected, driving across a wide cobblestone bridge and turning into the entryway. So early in the morning of course the park is closed, and a firefighter stands out in the road by the ticket booth. He has casual clothes on under his hi-vis jacket. No turnout gear today. Only helmets and harnesses. I crank down my window and pull up beside him with mine and Vaughn's IDs in hand but he must recognize me, because he waves us on without asking for them. I turn into the lot. A few cars here and there, not one adjacent to another. There's one fire vehicle, plain white, a faded yellow maltese cross on the door. I park next to it and we step out into the chill.

Taughannock Park is a series of oblong fields, several loose colonnades of trees, a worn and patinated amphitheatre, a pavilion, a playground, a rocky beach, all arrayed against a convex portion of shoreline punctuated at intervals with white billet jetties left freely adrift in the water like decorative strings and on the northern end by sailboats moored in an inland marina, startlingly small but pretty enough on sunny days. But the park takes a different shape on these mornings, too, like a forest clearing in a dream. All detail erased in the mist that pours off the lake's surface, transforming the land around.

A hundred yards from the lot an ambulance idles on the wet grass outside the pavilion, its emergency lights diffused into soft coronas. In the pavilion a dozen figures of no fixed uniform or order huddle in the relative shelter provided by their open building. As we approach two of them step out to meet us, illshapen in their nylon parkas. I recognize the face of Noah's mother, broad and lined, hair wild in the mist. She hugs me tightly. So much strength for a woman her age. I am embraced for a long time, and when she releases me my hand is clasped as if by some supplicant and I find myself looking at a man I do not recognize and whose eyes I will not forget.

We step under the pavilion and the firefighter in charge takes down our names and address perfunctorily and then we stand with the rest, people I have never met who greet me softly by name and shake my hand in turn, as she explains the procedures and precautions, the zones of activity we will be assigned to, the intervals at which we will report. It strikes me that I have stepped into a church of sorts. Like it is a wake we are attending. Perhaps it is. When she is finished I volunteer to carry a GPS locator and a little laminate map of terrain I know by heart already and when she hands them to me this woman shakes my hand also and nods to me as though it were some noble choice. But there can be no protests now, no subversion of the ritual. I and Vaughn and Noah's parents will go together and this is another rite. When we step out from the pavilion and onto the grass again it is in three curious diverging lines, like hooded Franciscans in prayer. The thought of my prayer frightens me.

The firefighter from the park entrance joins up with us as we head back towards the road along a little unembankmented stream that feeds into the marina. His eyes are a clear and pale blue and he walks with a professional briskness that sets his rescue harness clinking and answers all questions put to him by Noah's mother with the same demeanor, though kindly. I see his crinkled face and wonder how many bodies he must have pulled from these waters. The stream flows under a wood bridge and then gradually broadens from ten feet to a dozen yards, still shallow enough to make out the darting shadows of fingerlings on the flatrocks beneath, and we walk under the cobble bridge by the entrance and the shadow of the bridge turns the stream to softly rippling jet.

And how long will you be once we find him? asks Noah's mother.

Depends where he is, says the firefighter. How he is. He scratches his chin and then, remembering his bedside manner, says, Might need to call in more responders if he's somewhere needs rappelling. Helicopter can take a while in this weather. If it comes to that.

But not long otherwise, she says.

Not long otherwise.

The firefighter helps Noah's parents down the long slope of the gorge mouth, the only real descent to be made. This place is really the inner boundary of the larger lake basin. The land ahead but fill displaced an aeon ago over a period equally unfathomable. Like fingers tracing their long marks in the dirt, so goes the old story. The gorge is a slight westwards fissure in this neolithic berm. Shallower even than the basin, terminating just miles from its rim. Geological minutiae from such a vantage. The sides are exposed shale, pines growing over top, and they seem to me to stretch up forever, on forever, deeper into the shadowed valley. Soon the sun will rise and all this will be gone. We press onwards.

We walk through the fog on a small flagstone path that passes under overhangs dripping clear water rhythmically on the smooth rock below in demonstration of their own massive trajectories and by pale screes where the shale is scratched and sunbleached to the color of bone even in this damp time of year and from which brown moss and wiry sprouts of buttercup grow in isolated clumps. When the flagstones end we walk on the thin band of alluvial clay built up on the sides of the stream or in the stream itself which is scarcely deeper than an ankle and running mostly over stable flatrocks so eroded by millenia of current and we travel slowly and search each crevice and eddy carefully. All sounds distant except the cold trickle of water running over rock. I walk with the firefighter and behind us Vaughn accompanies Noah's parents, following

their slower pace, making sure they don't lose their footing in the current. Their black parkas glitter faintly with condensation. The two look old, though I never asked Noah how old.

After a kilometer of walking the stream deepens into a natural pool of the type familiar to collegiate truants and rescue workers, visible by a sudden darkness on the surface, a stilling of the current. A minor cascade perhaps ten feet high feeds into it at a gentle trickle. There is little flow over the blackened slate, only a liquid shimmer and a dull babble that seems to come from the woods around as much as the falling water. The firefighter and I search the sides and find a scalable path.

What're you thinking? I say.

What's that? he asks.

How— I rephrase myself. Well. What should we be expecting here, is what I mean.

The firefighter examines me a moment. That look in his blue eyes again, casting around for his bedside manners. I guess I wouldn't advise you to expect a thing.

All right.

Give me a leg here.

I boost him up and take his hand and clamber after him. The rest of the way is easy enough for us. Slate makes simple climbing.

Look, says the firefighter, sitting for a moment beside the stream. Legs swung out over the ledge. I've been doing this thing longer than you'd guess. They all start the same. Kid goes missing one night. Drunk, stoned, clumsy, whatever it is. Sometimes— you get it. These public searches, no different. Follow?

I wipe the grit and algae off my palms and squat beside him. Yeah, I get you.

He scratches his chin. Vaughn and Noah's parents are making their way towards the still pool, speaking quietly. He carries on. If his buddies aren't right there when he tumbles, they won't call it in for a full day sometimes. You all were pretty quick, considering.

He ain't the wandering type. I shrug. I got worried.

Was a good call. Lot can happen in a day. Sometimes he might fall near a path and hikers find him in the morning. Hear him shouting, or see him. If it's out of the way he could lay there days until we go out ourselves. You okay?

Yeah, I'm okay.

Maybe laying there with broken legs, ribs. Damage to the organs, you know. Sometimes paralysis. If he hits his head, that's it. Same if he falls in fast water. Get twisted up in that you go right under and you don't come up.

I get you.

He looks at me again. Don't get me wrong now. Lots of them make out okay after roughing it a weekend. Sometimes they're just too scared to move. Young college kid with their phone broken, all kinds of trauma going on in their head. Not unheard of to just stay put til rescue finds them. So that's what I mean. There's no good guesses here.

You know better than me.

No one can tell from the start how these things end, he says. That I know for certain.

I look at Vaughn as he leads Noah's parents carefully around the lip of the pool, that darker blackness in the water. He must be optimistic. Not optimistic. Desperate the way Noah's parents are desperate, holding out not for hope but for the afterimage of hope, the same thought I clung to on the first day, that vanished on the second, that left in me on the third a more concrete

resolution. My roommate is dead, is swallowed up here. We may never find the body. If we do it will not be him.

Noah's mother can't make the climb. She gives it a fair shake but neither Vaughn nor I are quite willing to pull her up properly and the firefighter doesn't take long to put an end to her efforts. He is gentle as a mortician. Doubtless he expects little more from her husband and rightly so by the cut of him under that rubberized hood. Never seen a face gone to ruin like that. Too much to look at. Too much to look at.

The firefighter speaks briefly into his pager, speaks curtly, leaning into the jargon, and then scratches his chin. Well, I'm sorry.

He means it despite the brevity. Quiet apologies abound. An offer of escort, a sequent refusal. The tears that follow. A pitiful thing.

They offer to wait by the pool until the search is done but the firefighter is set on sending them back to the pavilion and so it goes. Noah's mother turns away and my last impression of her face cannot be sadness. Nothing there could be encompassed in such a word.

That's the way of things, says the firefighter.

You think it's for the best? I say.

For you all? says the firefighter.

Closes my mouth right up.

We make quicker time just the three of us. The firefighter and I are used to wading and Vaughn outstrips us both, striding out in front like a man driven by high accord, as though he might part the very waters, and it hurts my heart to think he might be still be clinging onto hope in the further depths of the stream. There is nothing submerged in it, nothing kept for closer

viewing. The darting shadows of fingerlings against the rocks, the filamentous lichen, the ripples of our boots against the current. The shadows of those ripples too. Around us the fog thickens further, the raw outcroppings on either side reaching jaggedly up into that strange absence of sky. Not far now to the source.

You say he's not the wandering type, huh? says the firefighter, after some time spent in silence.

Vaughn looks back. Could be he's not in the gorge.

Where else? I say. Vaughn shrugs.

He took a hell of a trek for the middle of the night, says the firefighter. Whenabouts he go missing, again?

Late evening. Was past dark. Couldn't tell you any better. I don't look him in the eyes.

I think it was eleven or so, says Vaughn. He checks his watch now. As if the hands had froze in place the exact moment Noah had vanished. As if there was ever such a moment.

Hey, says the firefighter. Pick that up.

Vaughn turns around, looks down by his feet, stops. He stoops and picks something out of the stream. A soaking mess of vague-colored fabric, water pouring from the folds in gouts. Vaughn straightens it out the best he can.

That his? says the firefighter.

Yeah, it's his.

It's Noah's windbreaker. Vaughn goes through the pockets, comes out with ticket stubs and a shrunken leather wallet, wax all washed out by the current and settled white and filmy on



the topgrain. The firefighter examines the wallet and finds its contents rotted and zips it up in a plastic bag and stows it. Nothing much to say between us. My hands begin to tremble.

Time to go on, says the firefighter, scratching his chin. Sunup soon.

We trek on in silence through the thickening fret. The stream deepens here into as true a river as any, rising up above my bootcollars, drenching my socks, but none of us steps out into the bank. The looming shape of the valley narrowing above us in uncertain shadow imposes a peculiar sense of vertigo, as if after crossing some antecedent threshold all gravity and direction had reversed along our course and by following the source of the current we are not moving up towards the surface of the world but impossibly downwards and deeper into the earth towards some taboo place from which even water flows counter to logic and by continuing this mute catabasis we will find ourselves further in violation. Of what law or what thing. I have a sudden urge to turn back but then I remember the faces of Noah's parents and do not know which would be worse to face. Too late now, anyway. I can hear the falls roaring.

It is by ear one first recognizes Taughannock Falls, but the feel of the place is what they remember. Even on a clear day the sheer spray of that enormous overhung flume bears down on hair and clothes out nearly a thousand feet from the whitewater. Not a regal weight, as some naturalists might ascribe to the experience. Taughannock belies such personification. At the end of the gorge there is a deep and sheerfaced rondel canyon and at the westmost point of this canyon the falls pours out into a small lake below. A plaque somewhere on the visitor's trail far above in the ridges will tell the reader that Taughannock Falls is the tallest single waterfall this side of the Rockies but this comparison is meaningless. Stand close enough to feel the weight of that water crashing down and there can be no comparison. There can be no anything at all.

We reach the canyon just past sunrise, light tinging the fog a soft, opaque amber. The river has shallowed out again and broadened into a sort of slowrunning floodwater only half covering the pale shards of slaterock scattered across the canyon floor. Or perhaps it runs to further depths after all and the rocks are piled up deeper than I see. Mist tendrils drift from the lake in front of us like ectoplasm, mixing with the fog, evaporating. Our own breath following in course.

Give the fog time to clear, says the firefighter. Easier to look round that way.

We find a rocky place in the river and sit and we watch as the fog clears. It takes five minutes to see the sky, midnight blue in the west and still faintly dotted with stars, and as the day brightens further a thin strip of rainbow manifests in the spray of the falls, vibrantly shaded, arcing across the canyon's width as if drawn by some illusory paintbrush, and the wet erected rockpiles that litter the perimeter of the lake glitter magnificently and one among them is larger and darker than the rest and it too is soaked with spray.

The firefighter stands abruptly. I want you all to wait here, he says.

It lies strangely equidistant from the little cairns that flank it along the shoreline as if like them it had been placed there deliberately by some unknown artist, as if its very existence had been presupposed for that endeavor. It and all around it perfectly clear and already memory in my gaze. A waterlogged shape smaller than any person ought to be, a pile of wet hiking clothes, jeans and a hoodie, colors soaked close enough to black. Sneakers white but filthy. Not him. Not him.

Vaughn, I say, but Vaughn is already standing to follow the firefighter now picking his way across the uneven shale with sure steps and raising his pager for words to be lost in the deaf

roar of the falls. I say You'll only get in his way and feel my voice as air and vibration and no discernable sound, the words all hollowed out, and Vaughn stops but does not sit down and I feel guilty for stopping him so thoughtlessly.

Is that him? he says. Is that him?

I look numbly at the distant bundle. Do my best to look at it. Now I think that perhaps it is a mirage, is some impossible thing, and it seems so that I cannot see it clearly no matter how long I focus on it. A thought washes up against the bulwarks of my conscious, a dispassionate, conceptual thought, and I flinch from it and then force myself, nauseated by the contradiction, to review it. Noah is dead. That cannot be him. Nothing animate could look like that. When I was a boy a deer died in the nearby woods close to the treeline. It died in late fall and was covered in a thick snowbank all winter and was preserved like some natural taxidermy until spring. As the days warmed again the hide took on water and rotted and swelled and when it finally split all but the bones were gone already. When my father and I went out to bury it in the spring it seemed weightless and somehow graceful. That was a dead thing. That was death to me.

The firefighter puts on a pair of nitrile gloves and leans over the bundle and then reaches out and touches some part of it, carefully probes away, probably for our assurance more than his, and then he sits on his haunches and takes off his helmet and runs his fingers over his scalp and does not move a while.

Vaughn splashes across the loose shale and I follow him, shambling, the ground under my feet tipping forwards, and then I feel I would fall if I went a foot further and I stop in the middle of the stream, in the middle of the canyon and the spray, and am witness to that thing I cannot bring myself to see.

The firefighter rises and pulls Vaughn back by the shoulders, Vaughn already kneeling over on the shore, from the back looking like a man arrived at the end of a pilgrimage and not a mourner at all and when he is pulled away he does not resist. The firefighter looks him in the eyes and speaks at him, the words a thrum in the air, and releases his shoulders one at a time. He walks back to me slowly and dragging his feet in the current.

Jesus, Luke, he says.

The firefighter shakes out a foil survival blanket from some hidden pocket and drapes it neatly over the bundle and weighs the corners down with rocks and then he comes back to us and says somebody ought to call the boy's parents. Vaughn and I nod without looking at him and he says When you're ready to, and he leaves it at that. We sit back down on the rocks and we sit there a while.

He's, says Vaughn, and then he turns away from me and starts to cry, hiding his face in his hands. I put an arm around his shoulders. So much tension there. Like his body might tear itself apart. I look at the blanket and the shape under it and I look for a long time. I look until the rescue helicopter arrives with a thrum in the air and whipping wind up in the canyon, displacing the lake surface in broad concentric ripples, beating the foil blanket into a shimmer, and I look while the firefighter and more rescue workers lift the thing onto a stretcher and tighten the straps around it, lift it away into the sky, and the helicopter rotors beat the wind harder and the unrestrained corners of the foil sheet beat the air and I cannot see a thing from so far away but I see nonetheless a shock of hair slicked black against skin, a forehead, an ear, the white line of a neck, already memories forever. The firefighter makes his way back to us and I see the blue of his eyes and wonder how they stay so clear.

I'm sorry you boys had to see that, he says.

Vaughn has stopped crying now and his eyes are red but dry. He nods slowly. It's good we found him, he says.

Either of you ready to make that call? says the firefighter.

I will, Vaughn says.

Some kind of atonement, perhaps.

I don't cry until after Noah's parents pick up the phone.

We found him, Vaughn says, and then, I'm so sorry.

## Dead Wood

The pair have rattled round the truck's cabin since before first light and now it blears the frosting windows like the impress of a ghost. Pallid shafts of dawn wilting over the far ranges. They watch from the glass on the passenger side, slumping in their heavy coats, hunched on the bench seat like fettered escapees from a chain gang. Rubbing numb fingers. Conversation coming in intermittence. Hold those would you. Pass the mug. A whispered fuck over the engine clatter, steaming up the cabin. Each sweating in his ratty layers and shivering yet. The driver with his hands shoved in his pockets stays the wheel with his knee, keeping steady on the gas. Glare of the clock on the dash and one appealing to his watchdial. Cold as shit isnt it. Thank god for coffee. I'll let the old lady know you said it.

On past cold farmland, old barns and rusted silos, long acres of dead cornfield. Poplars stripped and longshadowed on the road. In a field the husk of a country house burnt hollow by some faintly remembered fire. Smoky columns in the paper. There the odd signpole jutting derelict from the ditches among the sedge and brittle typha. A low roar, a rush of hot air. Whiff of diesel smoke curling. The cattails sway in the wake, withered spikes trailing.

They take the truck off road at the forested edge of an old farm plot, rolling slowly over the tractor furrows. Last week had been snow but much of it had melted and left the topsoil frozen through, a black and filmy crust. The dirt under the wheels crunching like packed gravel. The driver shuts the engine off with a sputter at the field's far corner and elbows out the door, half stumbling on the step down. Wisp of orange atop the collar and more tucked under the cap. He has his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his duck coat, shoulders rounded, shivering, hopping in place on the hard dirt. Breath carrying slantwise in the air, a thin smoke.

Hey Mama.

The truck rocks with the slam of the passenger door. The one now clambering up into the truckbed is younger than the driver, slight, barefaced, hair cut like with a plugin trimmer. A camouflage field jacket hanging off at each shoulder. He squats in the bed and holds out his hand cupped.

The driver fumbles in his breast pocket for the key. Dont go slamming that door like you been doing. It's about to fall off as it is.

It's all right. The kid slides the key into a lockbox chained to the bed, stops, blows on his hands. Oh it's cold.

What do you mean it's all right Jay. It aint your truck.

Hey, you let this box rust some more it wont take the skin off my fingers.

Whynt you piss on it and it'll warm up.

If you like me to. Jay holds the key through his jacket hem and works the lock open.

Mama scratches the bright stubble on his cheek then fishes in a rear pocket for his tobacco. Stoops into the truck cabin through the open driver door. The truck is pulled up on the east edge of the field, the earth there palely grassed, untended. On the shaded forest side all bare and pocked with icepuddles cracked or lopsided in their shallow cradles. Sunlight split into shifting dappled patterns by the thick needles of red pine and spruce, slipping down the robed and spangled branches, cutting into shadow here and there. It falls dully on the faded hood of the truck and is gone again, there again. A slow wind. In the dark cabin Mama watches through the windshield.

Thought you quit that stuff.

For a minute.

A rapping on the roof of the truck. Mama straightens from the driver door, looks at Jay, turns down the dirt path towards the road where Jay is pointing. A second truck rumbling down the field. Silvery, filling out the broad tire furrows as it goes. He watches it come then steps from the truck out past the bare stretch of ground by the treeline. Works his jaw and hawks a dark streak into the pale sedge.

Whynt you sling me some of that Mama.

Jay hoisting the shotgun from the lockbox, rooting around for the little box of slugs. The gun is an old smoothbore pumpaction slung with canvas webbing, dull iron, stock calicoed with water damage. Mama watches how the boy holds it. How he feigns a practiced hand. He shakes his head. It's bad for you, Jay.

I'll take it off your hands.

Growing boy like you.

Your poor lady's got to kiss that mouth you know.

You get off out my truck and say that.

The second truck pulls up five yards behind the first and runs there a moment, engine purring, before the key is turned and the headlights flick off. The door swings open. A man about the age of Mama's own father and dressed in faded jeans, a soft looking shirt, a brown hunting jacket. A walnut boltaction slung over his shoulder, barrel poking up high. He cracks a smile, face sun-dark and knotted at the cheeks. A face like an old oak burl.

Howdy Kimball. You make it out here okay? He reaches out his hand to shake, still walking up. Mama takes it. The hand coffeecolored in the cold, blueveined, infirm.



How are you Charlie.

He smiles wider. And yourself.

From the truck Jay props the shotgun against the lip of the bed and nods. Uncle Charlie.

Howdy Junior. I just was talking to your old man the other day.

Howdy.

The uncle holding Mama's hand still. Hope you weren't waiting too long for us.

Only a minute.

That's good. Good. I'm headed two miles or thereabouts straight east, near into the gorges. You boys might try a little closer in seeing it's your first time out here. Some good bucks here I can promise.

We'll do that.

Charlie cocks his head away from the treeline pointedly. He walks and Mama follows. Boots crunching over the packed dirt. Frozen grit crumbling and rolling off over patch snow. They speak quietly some distance from the trucks, the old man's voice a shade softer.

It's good of you to keep him some company Kimball.

It's nothing. We been running around since I was in school.

Well sure it is. You got a lot on your plate now I know. Heard you got a kid on the way.

That's a way off still.

That's good, Kimball. It's good to be a dad. You're suited.

Thank you.

You tell Annie congratulations too.

I will.

Listen Kim, I know you don't like taking handouts.

You're right.

Would you take this for me at least. You been spending more time with Junior than his own dad has. Let me do a little good for you back. The old man withdrawing from his pocket a crisp white envelope.

Come on Charlie. I dont need that. He and I've been friends a while. It aint nothin about his dad.

It's got a note for you and Annie in it.

Well then just give me the note.

It's not your mortgage in there. Just a little something. Buy you two a stroller or something like that. He slides the envelope into Mama's breast pocket. Don't go after me here. I just hate to see a good man like you on the wrong foot. Not the wrong foot. You know.

Know what.

The old man already starting back towards the trucks. Sighing, scratching his nape.

I know it's not so easy for young folk to get started nowadays as it used to. That's all I mean. You know I think well of you Kim.

I'll pay you back, Charlie.

You just try it.

Mama stands kicking at the dirt a while, working his jaw. Tapping his back pocket to some slow rhythm. When he walks back to the truck the old man is already vanished off into the treeline. Jay has the shotgun slung. Leaning on the side of the truck in his combat boots he comes up barely to the lip of the bed. Mama stands before the truck looking past the kid where the

boottracks trail off into the woods. Old marks and fresh. He scuffs the earth as if to test his own tread and then leans to spit in it.

Sure is spry for his age. You ready?

Yessir. Jay nodded back to the trees. What'd he have to say.

Nothing.

In the woods last week's snow still carpets the ground in places, dark, shrunken. Smell of wet needles. Sap white and crusted in the rills of bark. The spruce has outgrown the pine here, long branches hanging low and snowboughed near the ground or cantilevered out overhead in a shaggy canopy. Blocking the sun by degrees as it rises so the light comes mottled and cold on their faces. They walk following a path of sorts due east. Deer trail perhaps but no trace of them. Two sets of boots the only prints.

Hey Mama.

Yeah.

When do you find out which the baby is?

Mama scratches his cheek. Hell Jay, I didn't even know I'd be a daddy til two weeks ago.

True enough. Which do you want?

Tell the truth I aint thought much about it.

Yeah you have. Jay claps his hands. It sounds out loud and thin in the wood. A woodpecker lights from a spruce overhead in a spray of needles, a bright flash of throat, to vanish for some more distant trunk. Come on Mama.

Quit it.

I know Annie's been asking. What'd you tell her.

I told her I'd be fine with either.

Sure. But which do you want.

Just what I said.

You'd be fine with a girl?

Sure.

I bet you'll favor one or the other you think about it more.

Whynt we talk about somethin else.

They walk on a while. The path narrowing, winding, laced crosswise with roots.

Mama stops. What's the time.

Quarter to seven or thereabouts.

Behind them the trunks stand black and closearrayed into the distance until they lose distinction. Path twisting, hard to track.

Mama points further ahead. That way's east still. We can keep going or try the woods here a ways, your call.

Jay looks off through the trees. How do you know that's east?

Just do.

You got to show me how you do that.

Off the trail needles lay thicker on the ground and cling to their boots. Dark like bones submerged in still water. Bare shrubs collapsed along the ground here, whiplike saplings. They hop a fallen tree and Jay slips as the rotted bark gives under his boot.

Whynt you quit makin all that noise.

It wasn't me. The tree fell apart.

Wonder why there's no deer round with all that slipping and clapping.

We're walking round anyway. Dont get on me.

Yeah. Tell me if you see sign.

There's a tarpaulin or something over there.

A tarpaulin?

Jay points. Or something.

Where?

Over there.

What do you mean tarp. There's no tarp.

Jay working through the dry brush. Twenty yards from where Mama stands watching a rise in the earth and a copse of dead pines encircled and all shadowed by the larger trees. Beyond an auburn stretch of maples. Broad leaves pooling in the dirt, congealing. Maples here. Jay standing in front of the mound, moving around the left. Not a maple growing the past mile. Jay steps to the right and of a sudden vanishes, erased one half then the other like a cartoon spector. Mama sees the cords looped ten or twelve feet up the pine trunks.

He takes off his cap and runs his fingers over his scalp, the orange curls matted and sticking to his pale forehead still. He fits the cap again and rubs his eyes. You're kidding me.

Do we try here? The voice coming disembodied from the copse.

Mama kicks his way through the brush to where the old blind is strung. Jay standing hands in pockets behind it among a scattered mess of garbage. Crumpled shreds of aluminum turning up under the pine needles, the labels disintegrating. He wheels slowly. Course there aint

deer round. Look at all this. Thought your uncle said nobody but him hunted here. He stoops and rummages and picks out a plastic shell casing stove in by a boot then drops it again. Look at this. He picks an uncrumpled can lying on its side by the foot of the blind and upends it. A thin liquid like pale urine spatters onto the needles in a froth. They aint even been long last.

Sure is a dump.

Mama makes a raising jerking motion with his hands. Yeah a dump. We got to find somewhere else. Be here all week waiting for nothing to come close. They probably been shooting rounds off drunk too. Look at all these shells. He motions again.

We could give it a try.

Mama hawks onto the ground. The spit oozes black and sluglike. Rather we dont.

We got time, dont we?

Come on.

I never heard of deer staying away from a place too long.

Mama is silent a while. Around them a faint noise which is the drip of snow thawing in the dead trees overhead and the brittle creak of settling wood, the distant bore of a woodpecker, the echoed discourse of other birds. A breeze which is the sound of a breeze and no thing else. He kicks the can against the back face of the blind and lets it roll back. Jay unslings the shotgun from his shoulder and stands waiting. Mama glances at him and then turns away. You want here because they got seats and all set up, is that it.

Hell no. I got a good feeling is all.

Well I got a bad one.

We got time.

You got time.

Wont either of us have time if we dont pick some place to start.

Mama traps the can under his boot and crumples it, reaches to fling it with the rest of the trash. Considers the copse a while, eyes the blind and the sightlines beyond.

Your day, Jay. We give it an hour. No luck we move on.

They take only a minute to set up. Jay stands the shotgun against an old pine and strips off his fieldjacket. Underneath the coat a stark cotton skivvy emblazoned across the back with eagle globe and anchor. Beneath this sigil boyish shoulders, birdlike scapulae tightened as if in warding. Arms no less slender. He has walked to the middle of the clearing and kicks up snow with the side of his boot to reveal the scatterings of a firepit seared into the earth like some old carcinoma blighting the forest ground and drags from its place around the circle the larger of two old stump rounds to sit on by the blind, drawing a furrow through the dirt in his struggles. Mama squats on the balls of his feet and watches, blowing heat into his hands.

When Jay is finished the back of his neck is faintly steaming. Belabouredly he takes up the gun where he'd left it and sits on the stump with the stock and barrel across his knees. He fishes out the box of ammunition from his pantspocket and opens it and takes out one shell, the casing an arterial red against the pale bloodlessness of his fingers. With some effort he racks back the slide and presses the shell carefully into the chamber and locks the bolt. A *chak* of oiled steel sliding springloaded into battery. Mama watches him. With the gun now ready to fire the kid seems strangely more childlike, shrinking against the weight he holds with a kind of dumb reverence.

They sit a long time at watch, each with his back to the other to cover all lines of sight. Swaddled in the folds of their coats not to escape the cold but in a kind of rejoinment with it, finding for themselves a shivering equilibrium of discomfort which is the hunter's pleasure. Still observers to the faint wheeling of treeshadows which mark the passage of morning on a day too cloudy for sun. What scant light filters through the canopy trickles in rivulets across their faces like clear water, the merest hint of warmth. To stir in you the memory of a caress you never felt. For those who find in the cold inarticulacy of the woods some surrogate for the words they will not utter, the thoughts they will not face.

Mama roused from this reverie by a hand at his back. He turns carefully on his perch and follows the line of Jay's pointing finger through the fraying mesh of the blind. Parsing the thin dark lines beyond it shadow from trunk and branch. A spot of auburn there. He puts a finger to his lips as Jay seems about to speak and with an aching slowness turns himself fully around. Beneath his boots the snow almost inaudible in its shifting. The buck raises its head from grazing and he sees the crown clearly, rising from the undergrowth to near a man's height like a great skeletal bird.

Jay swings the shotgun from his shoulder and puts his eye to the mesh of the blind. Hell, it's huge.

Shh. Mama puts out a hand before the kid and stops him. Slowly he opens the shooting flap in the blind and peers through, trying to gauge the distance in the woods. He closes the flap and scratches his chin.

He's far. Wait for it comes closer. The words passing in a murmur.

Jay kneels with the gun. I hit targets out further than that.



With a rifle. And you got no scope.

Cant be more than a hundred yard.

Shh. Mama shakes his head. He gets inside of fifty and you shoot if you feel like it. For now sit quiet.

They sit and watch, breathing out slow to mask the sound. The deer stands transfixed on a slight rise in the distance framed by two straight young pines, facing directly to the side. There the forest's growth is not so dense and sunlight pools around it in the snow like milk. A deer like a tapestry hart sewn into the very warp of the world. It does not move and does not move and Mama finds himself holding his breath altogether as though time had drifted on past under his notice. He exhales and in the same moment the buck steps forward. A tranquil movement of the foreleg extending almost liquidly into the thigh and flank into a light flurry of steps and again to stillness. The crown dips, rises, turns to. For a long interval the buck is frozen watching. Dark eyes too distant to see but felt all the same.

Without provocation the animal turns silently and canters off. Jay curses and stands, rubbing the blood back into his legs. It was like he seen us.

Mama still watching the bobbing paintbrush of tail vanish into the distant wood.

We must of been upwind. You dont figure there's any sense gettin after it?

Pass my gun.

Jay passes it. Mama takes a knee and braces the buttstock against the earth to shuck the shell out into his hand. He hands Jay back the shell and brushes off the stock of the shotgun and after a moment hands it back too. Then he pulls the tin of tobacco from his pocket.

Jay stands awkwardly. Hell of a span on that one.

We'll get the next.

If we had a rifle I could of got it easy.

Mama scratches his cheek. Well I aint got a rifle. We can go after where it went or some other way but there's only so much morning. Up to you Jay.

He doesn't look at the kid.

The two lapse for a while into silence as they walk on east following the buck's intermittent tracks. A path riding up the long narrow spine of a hill with trees larger and darker than the peripheral woods, more space between them each. Before they could spot woodpeckers clinging high up on the trunks or hear them boring but now the sound is gone and the birds all absent. Black holes gaping high up in the trees mute and brooding. Jay recounts on their passage underneath a story he remembers having heard about caves dug in the sheer face of a cliff that folk were brought to be buried in. But there being no dirt up there they would go uncovered in death and the carrion birds would light on the mouth of the caves to pick at them, the birds alone and no other.

You tell me that asking how I think of it?

I just thought of it. You go ahead though if you like.

The quiet draws in again smooth as it had parted. A silence given to its own pitch. Soft wind through the pines, the old trunks' creak and sway.

Ten minutes later Mama stops and swears.

What is it Mama.

Look up ahead. Mama pointing as he speeds up his walk. Some fifty yards up along the path a silvery chesthigh fence cuts through the woods.

See here it's posted. He squats by the fence. The wire is new chainlink, neatly woven and still coiled slightly on the posts from its spooling. Sagging slightly in places with snow but it springs back when Mama brushes the weight off.

I was wonderin about those trees tagged a ways back. Things just aint going how I need today. What's the time Jay.

Halfway to eight.

Hell I'll be at work the time we find a good spot.

What do we do?

Dont ask me that. Oh dont ask me that.

Mama paces a wide circle.

We could go back and just settle down at the blind again. Good a chance as any. Jay sitting against the loose length of fence, shotgun leaned up next to him. Looking down at his snowsoaked boots.

Chance of nothing like. We been walking round half an hour.

Uncle Charlie said there were good bucks out here. And we saw the one already.

And just as like it jumped the fence same place you're sitting. Look in the snow there. Mama gestures without pointing.

Jay turns to look but the snow is too trodden to read. Oh. I guess that could be.

The two stand silent in the cold. Jay opens his mouth to repeat his question but does not ask it. Mama has stopped his pacing and taken a knee over the drift by the fence, face

downturned, halfcowled in the cordlined collar of his duckcoat. Breathing deep through his nose and very still. Like some animal which has caught a scent.

He spits in the drift. A long sluice of black ooze streaking the filthy snow. Hey Jay.

Yeah?

You got your phone on you?

Jay pulls it from his pocket and flips it open. Yeah. It's got no charge.

Mama nods slow. I figured your uncle might know whose land we're lookin at. To call and ask permission.

I dont know if he does. Where are we at?

Mama cranes his neck up to peer through the canopy. The sky where it shines through is a cloudy white like sandblasted glass. Distant geese passing diagonally in a lagging chevron under the halfflight, each silhouette crisp and unlimned. A pattern of inkdrops on parchment. He stands to lean on the fence, testing the spring. We gone about a mile and half northwest of the lot. You know the lay here bettern me.

Jay thinks a moment. Could be ag school land. Past that and there's only the gorge trailhead.

The university? Mama spits over the fence.

If it is I dont reckon we're gettin in. Jay shifts his feet. Sorry Kim.

Mm. Mama peers out over the clipped topedge of chainlink into the woods beyond. Dark old growth on a gradual rise without horizon. The quiet here looped back to a kind of noise in of itself. The circulation of your own blood.

Where was it your uncle said he'd be. Over east?

Jay looks over but Mama has not turned toward him. Think that's his usual place. Him and his old work buddies.

Mama nods.

If we head on back to the blind quick we might have a half hour still to try.

If we head back quick there won't be a buck inside of a mile.

Jay thinks on it a moment. I guess we're snookered then.

Mama tests the fence with a rattle. Then he jams his boot in the chainlink and heaves himself up over top with a grunt, swinging his other leg high to clear the raw wiretips. He comes down lightly on the other side and turns back to the kid. Watch the top dont snag your pants.

Kim, we aint kids anymore.

Dont tell me that. You aint even out of school yet. Mama stoops to wipe the snow from his jeans. Thought you were goin to bag yourself a buck today.

You said yourself we aint got time. Jay pulls back a jacketsleeve to show his watch.

If it's the ag school they got open field for miles. I just want to go along the side and see if we spot anythin. Hell it's near December already. Nobody's up in those fields.

It's goin to be my ass if my old man hears.

Mama shakes the chainlink. No way this is moren a year old. Bet the only reason old Charlie's gone the long way east is cause they got sick of him and all the rest of his boys pokin round up in their neck of the woods and put this up and now he has to go round it. Greybeard cant hop a fence or we'd have him right with us.

Jay looks back at where they came down the ridgeline. Two sets of overlapping prints tracked in the snow.

I got to bring something home today, Jay. Mama looks at the kid's eyes. Looks through them with blue intensity. It's food on the table. Season's winding down. I dont get another late start to work.

The kid looks back at him, trying to form the words.

If you dont want to tag with I can meet you at the truck. Just pass over my gun and follow the tracks back. I wont make you come.

Jay unslings the shotgun from over his shoulder and lifts it clear of the fence for Mama to take. The raw steel is cold even through his gloves. He digs in his pocket for the loose shell and hands it over too. Mama strips off his own gloves and chambers the shell with practiced fingers, breath steaming.

Pass me the box there.

Jay passes it. Mama loads another four rounds into the magazine tube until the spring is tight and returns the box to him. He unclips the webbing sling from its eyelets and stuffs it into his coatpocket. To carry the gun at ready. Then he turns to the kid. His voice comes strangely muffled, spoken into the collar of his coat. You can come or no.

Jay looks at him. Something inexpressable in his eyes.

I'll come.

As they fall in before the swell of the rise there sets in an incremental dimness, a slow chill as it steepens. The clouded sun slipping back where it had risen like a momentary evening. Mama trodding up with head down to watch his step on the loose needles composting in heaps and holding the shotgun out to one side for balance while he scrabbles with his left hand for rock

or treeroot under this groundcover to jamb or brace himself against, upturning dark furrows in the snow with the pedaling of his boots. A fine scree of dirt and snow piled up behind his tracks like the bunched fabric of a coverlet. Wreathed in the plumes of his own breath, hot steam rising from his belly through his teeth. He holds his pace when he stumbles nor does he look away. Plodding up the rise behind him the kid who has taken up the role of witness is no more or less tired but falls behind as the graduation climbs, nose dripping freely, breath exploding in the cold. Wincing with blisters on the balls of his ankles from boots not yet worn in. The sides of his bootnecks are olive canvas which that morning were still glossy from the box and now a dark stain is spreading straight through from his socks. On his tongue the taste of iron and salt. He carries on behind the hunter and does not call out for pause. A silence set which if broken would send both sliding irreversibly back.

The last tenyard stretch is steeper than forty five degrees and overslung by a broken shale outcrop with a scruff of ancient moss. Mama takes hold of the rock with a bare hand and pulls himself around the side. In the cold his fingers have taken on the waxy pallor of a corpse. Sitting for a moment atop the outcrop he wipes the grime off on his coat and balls his hands to blow some feeling into them again, shotgun cradled in the crook of one shoulder. Watching the kid climb from over the rim of his collar. When the numbness gives way to pins and needles he stands again.

They have come out along the wooded corner of a frozen field spanning some forty acres down the gradual north slope of the hill. The nearest section still rowed with white plastic as though it had just been tilled and the upturned dirt lightly frosted. Unmelted snow clinging to the ground like scurf. Overhead the sky all pale and cold, sun fixtured behind thick clouds. When

Jay comes up the rise Mama is fishing out the last contents of his tin. They look out on the open ground a while and catch their breath, breathing deep in the open air. Mama wipes his nose and steps over along the treeline to peer the length of the field. Tarpaulined greenhouses glittering dimly in the faraway. Beyond them a grey slash of road. Across from the greenhouses a barn perhaps an acre in size with a sheetmetal roof for the tractors to sit out winter. Snow hanging off the eaves in a gradual pileup. From their vantage the equipment inside the open silo doors seem like toy miniatures.

Mama nods down the hill. That's the lee side. See if we get more wind.

The kid has not quite caught his breath. Stopping has caused his ankles to throb with the thud of his heart and he is stooped to loosen his bootlaces, struggling with his gloves. He turns his wrist to eye his watch. It's near eight.

Keep up then.

When he finishes with his laces Mama motions him up.

What is it?

Look in the far woods there.

Jay looks. A crisscross of bald wood and hedgerow in a windbreak casting slant shadows on the field. Beyond that more open land dipping away from view.

See them movin.

Jay shades his eyes. Only a faint wind apparent in the underbrush. He shakes his head.

Sun's that way. I cant see.

I see them.



They walk alongside the short end of the field some twenty feet inside the treeline where the faint sunlight does not reach, passing shadow to shadow like wraiths. The kid a ways behind the man. Mama moves with a kind of canine lightness between the trees. Silent and exhaling whitely in deep slow breaths. Jay following clumsily in his steps peers out through the woods to the distant road. A car flashes past too far off to hear. This gulf like one of miles, of years.

As they approach the windbreak Mama reaches down to tap a young pine near the base and goes on. Jay checks it as he passes. On the backside of the trunk the bark is scraped away and deep scores made in the flesh, sap dried into the cuts like scar tissue. He looks around in the snow for tracks or sign but finds neither. The scrape is not old enough to have healed but neither is it new. Ahead Mama has not slowed nor changed tack. Tracking his head as though following a scent. The kid checks his watch and follows behind.

Quarter past eight when they reach the break. Mama steps out onto the next field and stops cold there, chin high, gripping the shotgun at his side by its bare receiver. He has taken off his cap and the orange curls underneath are caught in the wind like buffeted flame. Casting out over the expanse of trackless ground beyond him for shadow or sign or odor carried by the air to follow.

Mama.

Jay is leaned up on a tree to catch his breath, fieldjacket rolled up under one arm. Mama puts a finger to his lips without turning.

We got to go back now, Kim. Jay lowers his voice. Speaking quietly his pitch is softer, more like a boy than a young man. It'll be half an hour just ruckin our selves back to the truck.

You come this far with me. Just keep an eye out and stop bitchin. Mama reaches in his pocket but finds only the empty tin. He spits. Like a damn woman.

I'm just tryin to look out for you.

Dont. You got somewhere to be you can go. Take my keys. I'll hitch a ride with your uncle once I bag a buck.

I dont know the way back.

Mama points back through the woods. As the crow flies.

I aint a god damn compass.

Whynt you go find your uncle. Smell the money from here.

Mama has not turned around but his shoulders are rising with his breath like raised hackles. Exhaling deep and steady through his nose. His naked fingers on the shotgun are white and turning red.

Jay puts up his hands. I'm not pickin a fight with you. I got nowhere to be. You do, is all I'm sayin.

I can be late to work a day. Bettern showin up half a case deep on the hour like all the rest of them. Mama crouches, puts the gun straight up before him like a cross. He presses the cold smooth steel against his forehead. Takes a lot to get sacked when you work subcontract.

Jay watches him a moment but he does not move.

Could at least call your boss.

I left my phone back in the truck.

What?

Left it. I always leave it.

Your boss could call you. Your wife could call you.

Sure.

But she's pregnant.

Mama rises and turns, shotgun sweeping the frozen ground between them. You don't know a damn thing. You're still a kid.

He sees the look in Jay's eyes and falters. Hell. What do you know about it.

He turns back down the field and stops. Jay follows his eyes, blood rushing in his ears.

A parcel of deer nosing out from the windbreak some hundred yards downwind on the slope of the hill with heads to the dirt searching after the faint smell of sedge poking up through the snow. One young doe and two fawns in front and a smallcrowned buck behind, all skinny enough to see the ribs through their coats and teetering in the cold on bony legs. Making their way up and across the field at some nervous stumbling pace split between caution and panic. One of the fawns raises its head and freezes, black nose twitching. A faint steam rising from its nostrils. The heat of some little life.

The other deer stop and raise up to look. Mama stands silhouetted against the white sky atop the hill, still holding the shotgun onehanded at his side. Holding back the smoke of his breath. He shifts his weight on the damp snow. Digging in with the toe of his boot.

Jay steps out from the shade of the trees and the deer break into a sprint across the width of the field for the shelter of the far windbreak. They have carried on their diagonal trajectory and Mama runs to intercept, fighting the slip of his softtreaded boots, judging the distance with eyes stung by cold. By the time he makes it fifty yards the deer are more than halfway across the field and he skids to a stop and raises the shotgun and thumbs off the safety and fighting his

ragged breathing lines up the crown of the trailing buck eighty yards away with the iron bead of the front sight and fires with a crack and waft of smoke.

Birds explode from the treetops like dust from a shook rug. The wad whizzes out past the buck's tail in a dim blur and the deer jolt and wheel away down the hill. Mama ejects the steaming shell in the snow at his feet and slams home the next without releasing the trigger. The gun bucks instantly. A small explosion of dirt some feet in front of the buck stumbles it and the animal breaks crossways away from the rest, tawny flank heaving for breath. Mama chambers the third shell and reaims. Watching the smooth hard musculature of the foreleg extend and contract, the dark meat of the heart thudding away beneath. He breathes out and allows for lead and fires again. The buck jumps up like a thing electrocuted and hits the ground splayed, hooves skidding for purchase on the snow. The other deer are vanishing into the treeline, leaping cleanly into shadow. Mama racks back the slide to load the next round, aiming for the swell of ribcage just behind the shoulder, and stovepipes the extracted shell. He swears and knocks the casing out to clear the jam but the buck has already found its footing and, limping but no less quick, disappears into the trees.

For a moment's silence before the ringing finds his ears he is alone with the pounding of his heart. He kneels and after a moment cycles the two unfired shells out into his palm. The three expended casings lay in the snow at his feet, brass rimcaps sizzling softly. A gentle curl of smoke from the bore of the shotgun and from its open chamber. Smell of hot steel and gunpowder. Behind him Jay is running up, is taking him by the shoulder. He grabs the kid back and stands. Got to get after it.

Jay steps back and looks into the trees. Did you hit?

Mama doublechecks that the chamber is clear and takes off at a jog to where the buck had stumbled. There the snow scattered foursquare with scuffs of dirt where the hooves had dug down. Small tableau of animal fear. Circling the spot Mama finds a spray of dark blood mixed in with the snow. He looks off over the buck's scampering tracks and breaks into a loping run before Jay can catch up.

The sudden cut from sun to shade as he passes inside the treeline does not stumble him nor does he slow, racing half-controlled down the perceptible slope of the ground. The buck is lost in the trunks ahead but he follows the tracks left upturned in the dirt before him, the odd foul stain bloodying the rotted needles. Playing over and again in his mind the buckshot wad thudding into the deer's belly, a low and painful shot below the scalloped sweep of the ribs. Welling up in him a guilt backfaced with adrenaline headiness, still feeling in his fingertip the slip of the sear and the slow enormous trajectory of lead arcing into flesh like it were his own hand in the buck's hot belly, his own body filled with shot. He is not long running before the buck begins to slow, tracks growing irregular. Up two hundred yards ahead where the trees begin to thin a glimpse of something here or there. Bright bushtail passing through wheelspokes of shadow and slatted light then gone again. In the canopy above a squawk and rustle of morning birds mingling with the crack of kindlingwood under his boots and the wind of his passing and the sound of his own breath and over all the echoed ring of gunfire inside his head, a mounting and instinctual roar. To crash through damp underbrush amongst the murk of a distant wood with a bellows in your chest and nostrils lined with ichor in pursuit of some marked quarry driven by that giddy panic which alone is filiation of your blood.

One last clear glimpse of the injured buck as it leaps out past the far treeline into white sun and then drops twisting away from view. Mama runs a moment longer without comprehending and then slows to a stumble, sucking cold dry air through his ragged throat, and when he passes finally from under the canopy his legs are too spent to move. Bent hands on knees retching out his lungs for air, saliva dripping from his mouth like water. A while before he stands straight again. Jay has come out from the trees and calls his name, has been calling his name, but he holds the kid at length.

They have come out over the head of the gorge to a world tilting into open air. As if the land had dropped away or been stripped up like dirt with a pulled root. Knotted soil overhanging the escarpment ledge and trees grown out into the chasm, branches straining to catch the wind. Mama has stopped some feet from the scarp and he stands a moment and does not say a word. Inhaling deeply the air in his nostrils crisp with snow and with the deer's musk.

He peers out and down, leaning with cold numb hands on a young pine growing slant from the ledge. The scarp swoops some seventy feet down the side of the ravine before bottoming into a swaleditch stream frozen over with ice. By the scraped topsoil and brush he sees where the buck has tumbled. Over rockbluffs and knifeblade shale. In the bank of the valley stream it has punctured the thin surface ice and lies there halfsubmerged in the black current beneath, still and dark and crusted with soil and with gore.

He pulls back, clutching the shotgun uselessly at his side, and looks up and down the ridge through the thin trees. Blowing back feeling into his balled and reddened palms. Nothing out there but distant birds belting their harsh morning calls. Behind him Jay is quiet. He does not look back but he feels the kid's eyes.

Got to find a way down quick. Help me look.

A moment before Jay speaks. No way we're gettin down that slope.

We cant just leave it there.

Mama standing as if to move but he does not. Jay edges carefully past him to the ledge and peers down. That's near a straight drop.

We can circle round to the mouth or where it aint so steep. Mama points some hundred yards along the side of the ravine. A great snowy talus where the ledge had given way long ago. Then haul it back up. With a rope or somethin.

Jay leans out to look and shakes his head. There's no way.

You aint scared of a scramble.

I am, man.

Mama hears the tremble of the kid's jaw and he does not look. He is still warming his hands with the shotgun propped against his leg, breathing heavy. Warming them to keep his hands busy. When he speaks again he speaks more softly than before. A tone like pleading, or past it.

I got to make sure it's dead.

Jay leans further out over the ledge to look closer. Aint no way it isnt. Not movin. Looks like it bounced off the rocks the whole way down.

I already seen, Jay.

Mama half turns away. The kid looks past him back into the woods. At the tracks which they'd made in running. Makes to swing his weight back from the ledge.

He dips from the corner of Mama's vision with a yelp as the snow slips under his boot and is scrabbling for purchase on the outcrop even as Mama dives to catch him. He misses but the kid in the flailing of his fall throws an elbow around the foot of the pine he'd used as a brace and latches to it, eyes white in his face, boots windmilling in open air. He is stammering before even finding his breath. I'm okay. I'm okay.

Mama uselessly gripping the kid's wrist hooked tight around the tree tries to offer his other hand but cannot. Get your feet. I'll pull.

Jay finds footing on the rockface and shimmies awkwardly up the trunk of the pine until Mama can haul him back by the armpits. When his feet touch ground the kid skips away from the edge like some spooked animal and walks a little circle hands on head. He tries nervously to laugh but his hands are shaking. A fat reddening scratch on his cheek where the treebark had rubbed him. Sorry. Sorry.

Mama kneels by the ledge and watches him, listening to loose shale carom off the bare stone of the scarp to shatter the ice below. When he dove he had dropped his shotgun in the snow and now it lies midway between him and the kid, partially buried. He does not move to pick it up.

Jay tries to wipe the sap from his jacketsleeves, his face flushed. He glances Mama's way without meeting his eyes. Dont look at me like that. I'm okay.

They stand there a moment longer before Mama goes to pick up the gun. He knocks packed snow from the barrel and wipes clean the receiver and stays looking at it. Water beading the dark steel. Wooden grip stained black with the oil of his hand, of other hands.



Jay is turned back towards the woods and he speaks quietly, addressing their boottracks in the snow. I think we should just go back.

Mama does not answer. He digs in his pocket for the webbing sling and clips it back onto the shotgun and shoulders it. He is facing the open air of the gorge. The sun has broken over the trees on the far side where the clouds are thinner. It shines coldly on his face. He thinks a while before opening his mouth to speak.

A gunshot to the east. Dull and distant clap blown sideways like smoke from out the barrel subsiding in a long low echo rumbling first in one ear and then the other, silence to resounding countersilence. Mama has frozen somewhere in the interval between. He looks towards the sound with a look like the shot had struck him.

The deer is already opened and the organs neatly piled, no longer steaming, only faintly smelling. Curled in the cradle of an fallen oak such that the drying blood seems black in shadow. Mama crouches to count the points, estimates the spread of the prongs. He leans back on his heels. Regards the old rootsystem spreading up over his head like some great earthwork fan. A convenient headstone. He pokes his fingers through the hole in this mosaic of dirt which the bullet had made after ripping through the buck's neck like a passing pilgrim come upon a relic. The kid sits on the trunk of the dead oak kicking his boots. Looking at his watch, at the trees around.

Not long after the old man makes his way back through the woods with a sled in tow behind him. It bounces awkwardly against the ground, like a dog jumping at his heels. He waves to the two from a distance and hails them when he draws closer.

Howdy boys.

Mama looks up. Hey, Charlie.

Had good luck today. Would you look at the spread on him.

Good shot.

You mind takin a picture for me? Charlie steps past Mama around the side of the treeroots and motions to the kid. Come here Junior.

The kid hops from the fallen trunk and comes without responding. Mama watches him then looks back at the carcass. I aint got a camera.

Use my phone then. The old man hands it over. He claps a thick hand on Jay's shoulder and steps carefully into the cradle of the tree, big muckboots squelching in the damp snow. He kneels to prop the deer's head on his thigh. The antlers like a hoary bouquet. Come here next to me Junior.

The kid sits on his haunches next to Charlie and Mama takes the picture. The old man smiling, teeth startlingly white in his mouth. Jay looking off to the side.

Here you go.

The old man takes back his phone. You want one too? It's a good buck. Be a shame to miss it.

That's okay. It was you that bagged it.

Charlie stands awkwardly a moment. Well, suit yourself. It dont make much difference to me.

You need helping loadin him on the sled?

Be kind of you.

The two men take the carcass by the legs and heave it on, antlers dragging in the snow. Blood sluicing from the opened belly into the runnels of the sled. Mama wipes his hands on his jeans. Heavy buck. You butcher yourself?

Charlie shakes his head. There's a lady up by the county line does good work. I'll bring you some backstrap when it's all ready.

Appreciate it.

No luck for you two today?

Mama steps away from him and unslings his shotgun, props it up against the upturned roots of the oak. He leans back next to it and sinks down. Not yet.

Jay seeks his eyes but says nothing. Charlie nods. As if it were something he could understand. That's a shame. Well. There's time left in the season yet. And next year.

Think I'll stay out here a while longer.

Charlie flips back his jacket cuff and looks at the watch there. Lifts an eyebrow. Could use your help hauling him to the truck.

Jay's strong enough. I'm goin to try my luck a while.

You better call your work at least.

I will.

Jay loops the cord of the sled around his hips and he and the old man set off through the trees. They take care not to look back. Mama sits in the cradle of the fallen oak exhaling through his nose, watching the twin gusts of pale smoke filter in the sunlight. He reaches for the shotgun and pulls it close into the crook of his arm, nestling the smooth cold barrel against his cheek. In

his coatpocket sit the two unfired shells but he does not load them. Rather he closes his eyes and sits there as if going to sleep. He murmurs to himself in the cold.

What do you know about it.

## In The Ashes

The frame of the ruined farmhouse listed steeply southwards under what remained of its blackened clapboard skirting and viewed from across the withered acreage of cornfield and the shallow ditch splitting it from the road its slant seemed to share a common degree with the bent and wasted stalks before it. As if out of a painting. Some ruined pastoral sequestered in an attic. Caleb would have liked to pull his truck onto the shoulder of the road and look a while longer but he didn't. He pulled into the dirt driveway that led to the derelict house. Next to him on the benchseat his brother had the passenger window rolled despite the chill and his elbow resting on the frame, the white snub of a cigarette pinched between his thumb and index finger. Smoke curling thinly across the cabin roof, pouring upwards out the window as the truck rocked over the frozen earth. Smoke blurred against the cold air. He glanced at the analog dashclock and then at the phone in his lap. Then out the windshield. At the house or at something else Caleb couldn't say.

The farmhouse had burned two months back in early October. Started sometime in the night and out by the time the fire department pulled up in the morning, smoldering, steaming like cauterized tissue. Heavy rains that time of year. Freak luck it hadn't burned to the ground. The marshal ruled out faulty wiring because the house had no electricity, ruled out a gas leak because it had no gas line. Marks on the floor and cabinetry suggested gasoline had been poured. Talk of insurance fraud flared and subsided once it came out that the house had no insurance on it. The owner, who was a widower in his sixties, who had not called the fire in, was found the following day in a nearby motel and approached for questioning. Arson, he said. He had no reason to burn his own farm. He suggested first that some boys the county over must have done it, that he'd

seen their truck go by too often in the weeks before, they'd shouted at him from the windows. When this was dismissed he asked the investigating officer if the fire department could not have set the blaze, or the investigating officer himself. He was wise to such things, he said. Facing such a conspiracy against his household and the land thereon he would not sit idly by. He spent the weeks following submitting petitions for civil action against the fire and police departments to county court. When the judge threw out his case he turned up at the courthouse with a shotgun. The gun was unloaded. His sentencing was still in progress.

All this Caleb had learned in a phone call from the county jail early in the morning several days ago. A dim cool morning, mist clouding his bedroom window. The phone on his nightstand had woke him up. He'd stayed silent after the old man had finished.

Then he'd said: First call I get from you in ten years and it's asking for bail.

Then he'd hung up.

He'd sat in the dark several minutes without moving, without putting the phone back down. Then he'd dialed his brother. They'd last spoke back in their mother's town of Rye, at a bar a mile down the road from the cemetery when they'd buried her. That was eight years ago. The details came back as he waited. The line took a long time ringing and for a moment he'd thought perhaps the number had changed but then the dialtone cut off and a voice answered. He asked after his brother's name.

Speaking, the voice said.

Then: That you Cal?

It's about our dad, he said. Hear me out.

They were hesitant to talk long on the issue of the farmhouse and their father. His brother had moved out of state not long after they'd spoke last. When he mentioned a wife Cal tried to picture what his face might look like now at forty and realized he couldn't. When he asked how the old man had Cal's number Cal explained he'd been calling each month to try and get ahold of him but with no luck. When he asked why the hell Cal should bother they began to argue, or rather they quit bothering to hide it. Each raising his voice over the other haltingly, the anger coming out stiff for lack of use. Cal recalled without either saying it aloud that he and his brother had left off badly. They'd talked about the old man then too. Neither expected him to show up for the rites but they got around to talking anyways. He didn't remember if they'd come to blows but he remembered the anger coming up hot from his liver, billowing up like quenched iron. If anger were a thing that filled some part of you inside he'd been holding it close since they'd last spoke. Since they were boys perhaps. It felt like a child's anger, cloudy and shapeless, smoke swirling in a burning room. He hadn't considered that. Hadn't until he caught himself smiling while he cursed into the receiver. He'd fallen quiet, then said: I was thinkin I'd take a drive and scope out the farm. If you cant make it or don't want to then that's all right with me. I just figured I'd ask.

When his brother answered it was restrained, as if he were breathing hard and trying to stifle it. You looking to take the place?

Hadn't thought about that. Guess it depends what the judge says. I just wanted to see what's happened to it.

I already said I dont want a thing to do with it. It's yours if you want it.

Will you come?

It's a three hour drive.

I'll pick you up.

There was a long silence before his brother spoke again.

You're not planning on paying his bail I hope.

No, Cal said. I'll see how things stand with him first.

He'd driven up from Philadelphia that Sunday at six in the morning. The weather was clearer and colder, sky flat and papercolored. It felt like it would snow. It was only a slight detour to the address his brother gave him over the phone, at the end of a cul de sac in a quiet hamlet some ways off the interstate. The houses looked templated. His brother opened the door before Cal had time to holler. He looked fairly wider through the middle and beardless and he was wearing glasses. Cal slipped out of the truck cabin and shook his hand, gripped his shoulder. They'd stood that way a moment. Howdy, Cal said. Hey, said his brother. They had not quite hugged each other.

They'd stood on the front lawn a moment before his brother invited him inside as though he'd been deliberating whether or not to offer. Inside the house was large and well decored, walls painted with dusty pastels, the furniture upholstery all soft cream twill. Photos stood on the fireplace mantle and on the windowsills in view of the entranceway. A man, a woman, a toddler of indeterminate gender. Faces he did not recognize.

His brother's wife was coming down the stairs when they stepped through the foyer, a small calmlooking woman in old jeans and a rumpled chambray. She greeted him without exactly smiling but her handshake was firm. His brother had said the two of them were the same age down to their birthdays and he was surprised for a moment to see the lines on her face. But



they had not been boys for a while. He took his boots off in the foyer, minding the hardwood floor, and while his brother went to the kitchen for coffee the wife sat him in the living room on a long plush sofa and took an opposite seat across the coffeetable. She was the kind of woman who looked you in the eye seriously when she spoke, the kind Cal was no good with, but she waved away his apologies for intruding and did not press him deeply for questions. She seemed to understand something, though he was not sure what himself.

Where do you work? she asked.

Here and there. Mostly I paint houses nowadays. He showed his spattered hands.

You know your brother painted this one when we moved in. At least the inside walls.

He looked around the room. Guess he's got good taste.

I picked the colors.

You know when we were kids I never pegged him for the marryin type. He had been looking at her inverse reflection on the glass top of the coffeetable and now he looked up. I dont mean to be rude.

This too she waved off. I don't know much about how he was growing up. He doesn't talk about it. I knew he had a brother, but for instance, til yesterday I didn't know what your name was.

Patient woman.

It's all you can be. She was drumming her fingers on the arm of her seat. You know he never spoke badly of you.

I'm sure if he did I deserved it.

She stopped drumming her fingers and leaned into the chairback. Motioned to one of the photoframes on the walls. You know Saiorse's still napping or I'm sure she'd like to meet you. She's very good with new people. She was looking at him steadily and he held her gaze. She had dark coffeecolored eyes and remarkably clear. Most of those are old photos. She's five years old now. But she was just a toddler when she met your brother and she took to him just fine. And him to her of course.

That's good.

They say babies are good judges of character.

It does make sense.

She sighed. I'm just saying you don't need to be so worried. About him or about the two of you.

He couldn't hold her gaze any longer. Thank you, he said.

Mm, she said. Just do whatever it is you two have to do and come back.

His brother came back from the kitchen with a thermos of coffee rather than mugs. He'd pulled on a ratty duckcoat which age had stripped almost entirely of wax and he was holding a pair of workboots in his off hand. Ready to go if you are, he said.

His wife saw them out of the house. As Cal was opening up the driver side door of the truck she called out to him. Come back anytime.

He raised his hand palmup in reply and shut the door and turned the key. As he pulled out the driveway he said without looking at his brother: I think she likes me.

Dont even joke.

The rest of the drive was a straight pull north. When they'd pulled out of the cul de sac his brother had cracked the window, then produced a pack of cigarettes and proceeded to smoke without pause the entire trip. He didn't offer one to Cal or ask if it were alright. The traffic was good and the weather unchanged, which left them only to remark on the chance of impending snowfall. They weighed on that topic with great solemnity, peering from under the cabin roof for some sign above which might be augured. The sky was so uniformly white it could have been cloudless. His brother tried the radio and Cal explained that it was broken. When they could no longer avoid it they volunteered in bits, as if apologizing, things that had happened the past eight years. It was not the content of the conversation holding Cal's attention but the quality of it, the intermittence, the long silences which stretched on tensionlessly for minutes as if the space had been reserved for some truer discourse they had yet to muster. They'd gone the whole trip without mentioning the old man.

When they arrived in town Cal dropped by the police station first. His brother had given him a look as he'd taken the turn into town but hadn't spoken. Cal thought he'd shook his head but it didn't matter. He parked the truck across the street from the station, an ugly squarish windowless building fronted with beige plaster. He got out then looked back. His brother hadn't moved from his seat. Cal turned and opened the driver door again and leaned in. His brother looked him in the eyes.

If you're doing this I'm staying in the truck.

He nodded. His brother drew from his cigarette and waved his hand. He shut the door and crossed the street.

Fifteen minutes later he walked out the station and back to the truck. His brother glanced at him through the windows and then looked away again. He pulled the driver door open and hopped into the seat, the old chassis creaking. His brother didn't say anything until he'd shoved the key into the ignition. The engine was sputtering.

Well.

Well what, Cal said.

Well what'd you do. What'd he say.

Cal drummed his fingers on the wheel. He thought a while before speaking. Ordered his thoughts. Found he couldn't. The iron heat in his gut raged aimlessly, a dumb mute hate for he couldn't say what.

Let's go and see what's left of the old house, he said. I'll tell you what he said.

His brother looked over. You pay it?

Yeah. I paid it.

Hope you dont expect it back.

They saw little traffic on the drive out of town. The farmhouse was on the county border, nothing but empty plots for miles. Small surprise nobody had seen the fire in the night. Cal parked his truck in the loose patch of gravel in front of the farmhouse that might've passed for a driveway, careful to mind he didn't cut into the cornfield, though it would hardly have mattered. The crop was all cut this time of year and by the cracked hard look of the earth little care had gone into its planting. He unlatched the truck door with some effort and stepped out. The shaggy conifers at the edge of the plot stirred hazily. He thought he could feel the wind on his face, or maybe not. It was too cold to tell.

The farmhouse was smaller than he remembered. Burning certainly played a role in it but the rough dimensions of the foundation seemed to have shrunk from their scope in his memory, though as he considered them his memories were not so concrete themselves. The porch was burnt to such a degree that it looked more like a pile of scrap wood or the leftovers from a bonfire and the upper floor and roof were caved in. On the east side of the house one gable stood nearly untouched save that the siding was scorched black from its original white and nothing was left on the inside. The frame was all cedarwood and would've burned flat to the ground if it hadn't rained. As things stood the soft yellow was charred black where the flames had licked it and the west side had partially collapsed, giving the whole structure its rhomboid slant, and where they hadn't reached, high up on the east side where the roof had fallen in, the exposed lumber was already beginning to green with mold. How thin they looked. Naked and bonelike. Warped somewhat with the uneven weight. How many years or decades they'd been sealed in under those old shingles he couldn't guess. He tested the porchstep and then stepped up onto it, peering in through the heap of debris at the front door. It was half ajar, the top hinge pulled screws and all from the doorframe when the lintel had shifted. The screws hung loose and slightly ominous in their sockets across the opening. Inside the house was pitch dark. He stepped off the porch and looked back for his brother. His brother was walking around the house through the cornfield, minding the rows. He'd put out his cigarette when they exited the truck and perhaps it'd been the last he'd had because he hadn't struck another one. Behind him the white fog of his breath rose slowly and lingered. Cal recognized the duck coat now that he could see it from the back. It was the same ratty coat his brother had bought at seventeen. It wasn't that he

was seeing it from the back that he recognized it but that his brother was standing in the cornfield. He tried to picture the fields full but couldn't.

Circling around the west side of the house, which was mostly untouched on the outside save for some discoloured ovals where heat had penetrated to the clapboard, he stopped to kneel and examined the ground. It was littered with white flakes of ash and bits of melted shingle and in places the buildup was so thick he couldn't see the dirt under it. He squatted and sifted through it with one hand, tossing away the shingles. They were damp and cold to the touch and he had expected otherwise without realizing it. Mixed in with the ash were slivers of a more yellowed white that cracked rather than crumbled, some trod deeply into the dirt. Paint chips peeled from the aged and ill maintained siding over the years. They reminded him of eggshells. He ran his palm over the boards. Long strips splintered off and fluttered to earth, bits of rotted wood falling with it. He stood and circled on.

Because the woodshed behind the house was built from corrugated sheets of fiberglass and some feet away from the rear wall it had been spared the brunt of the flames. It held perhaps a quarter of a cord still but the faces of each chunk were black with rot. A shelf fungus which had taken root there. He looked a while with a wrinkled nose. His brother had wandered over to the lone silo at the rear edge of the yard, standing in one of a pair of deep ruts where the tractor had always been kept over winter. The tractor was nowhere to be found. His brother hit the wall of the silo with a rock. It rang out like a great tin gong. Cal watched him.

They regrouped in front of the ruined porch. Cal was sitting on the step when his brother circled back. His brother eyed the pile of scrap and then leaned up on the more vertical of the frontposts. It creaked a moment but held. They looked out at the road, which had been silent

since their arrival, and up at the sky, which kept to its inscrutable whiteness. For a time Caleb thought he could see clouds swirling but the moment passed.

His brother spat and spoke first. Hell of a job that man did.

Hell of a job.

You want to bother getting inside?

Cal twisted where he sat to look back through the doorway. Sounds risky.

His brother nodded slowly. Cal turned back to the road. Something you looking for in there?

No, his brother said without pause. After a moment he said again: No. I dont recall he's got anything of mine. Figure everything in there's all burnt up anyhow.

Figure that too, Cal said. They sat a while. His brother asked how long they planned to stay.

Just a while longer. He was fiddling with a long slat from the porch railing. Hey, he said, after a pause. You remember much about this old house?

Hmm?

Anything. What it looked like inside. What our bedroom was like. Anything.

His brother thought for a moment. Did we share a bedroom?

Cal made a gesture back at the house. Well. It's hardly a big enough place for us to both of had one.

His brother snorted. Fool idea if we did. He pondered the question for a while, craning his neck back. It was well past dawn but if the sun had risen any higher the sky did not betray it. It stretched low over the field like a taut sheet.

I ask because I cant hardly remember a thing. Dont think I could even tell you what the place looked like before it burnt.

Not a thing? his brother said. He scratched at his neck. Well. What with how long it's been I suppose I get that. Farm and all feels hazy for me too. Even you. You look too old to be the same age as me.

Kind of you, Cal said.

He'd taken the rib for what it was but neither of them laughed and it began to sour. After a moment his brother forced a chuckle. Then his face straightened. Speakin of. How's our old man looking, he said. Like he's passing on soon?

Cal considered it. Think there's something wrong with him.

Grass is green.

Sick wrong, I mean. Wrong in the head.

In a different way from the usual.

He wasn't wrong in the head back then. There's wrong in the head and there's just plain wrong and he was the second kind.

I know it, his brother said. They sat a while. His brother said: You're thinking he burned the place cause he's gone wrong in the head.

I dont know why he did it.

Well, what'd he tell you?

He gave me half a dozen reasons and there wasn't one of em made any sense. Said in the end he didnt know why the place went up. Like he did it in his sleep or did it then forgot. Cal shook his head. But he was in that cell talkin like he found God and then lost him.



Old man talkin religion. His brother spat. Cant picture it.

Maybe he planned on staying in there while it burned.

His brother stood up off the post where he'd been leaning and paced a few steps, touching his lips. You think he would?

Cal shrugged. I dont know. Sure are easier ways of doing it than burning.

And he's been hollering arson at the whole county.

That he has.

Could be he's embarrassed.

Embarrassed.

Hell. I would be.

Cal shook his head. My god.

His brother knelt and picked up a shard of gravel. You thought of it.

They sat a while with their implements. Cal drawing shapes in the stones with his long slat, his brother rising at intervals to pitch a rock over the ruined roof of the house. Now and then they'd hear the hollow report of a missile caroming off the silo. He felt with a certain strangeness of emotion that he was ten years old again. Then he felt like the time simply hadn't passed, that he had not become a boy again but merely was still, would remain so. He tried again to picture the house as it had been but couldn't. Perhaps he had imagined it. Perhaps it had not existed.

Cal got up abruptly. His brother looked up.

Help me clear some of this stuff off the porch, he said.

His brother looked at the ruins. Now hold on.

Just off the porch. Get to the door at least. Tidy the mess.

A mess he says, his brother said, but he stood and cracked his hands.

Clearing the porch took them the better part of an hour. The heavy roofbeams which had collapsed inwards onto the porch took the two of them together to drag away even with a rope and by the end of it both had removed their coats and were sweating despite the weather. They were standing in the porch more than on it. The floor had only been scorched by the fire but it was thin planks with no struts underneath and when the beams came down they'd smashed right through it. The front door stood dislodged in front of them, screws swinging listlessly. Cal looked over at his brother and saw that he was steaming slightly, his shirt dark with sweat under the shoulderblades. He stepped forward and tried the door but it wouldn't budge. He took a step backwards and then slammed the door with his foot near the bottom hinge. It buckled with a splintering sound. He looked back at his brother. His brother cocked his head.

After demolishing the door they made their way into the house, which was pitch black under the collapsed roof and smelled overpoweringly of soot and an awful lingering vapour cutting into the eyes and sinuses which Cal supposed was burnt guano from the attic, and pulled out everything light enough to carry. Cal remembered a toolshed out by the silo and found a sledgehammer and prybar and a shorthanded axe in it. A monolithic table in the living room which would never have fit through the door was smashed to bits and brought out in pieces, where they discovered it had been reduced almost entirely to charcoal already. Everything was dumped in a pile in the middle of the driveway. They'd spoke hardly a word. When they passed each other in the dull light outside they hardly looked the other over. A nod, a blink. A certain mania had begun to seize them. Their eyes were adjusting away from the daylight. Not into the dark of the farmhouse, the almost sightless rooms which were a felt world of soot and dust from

which they emerged like specters or shadows themselves into the cold glow of the door ajar. Away from the light. They squinted and shadowed their eyes. Overhead a sky unchanged though it was almost noon. A hawk circling overhead for mice huddled under the dead husks of corn. A wind in the trees which you saw but did not feel on your face. A nature to which you were not privy.

By the time the house exhausted them the pile of debris was well over their heads and stretched the width of the porch. Most things in the house were wood and much of it was too charred to ever burn again. Chunks of wallplaster clung to the ripped out frameboards like gristle on bones, heaped in with the broken table and chairs, the bedframe and the spring skeleton of its mattress, the broken grandfather clock, the books, the barrel and receiver of a .22 rifle. It was everything that had ever been in the house not gone whole up in smoke the day it burned. Cal and his brother sat shoulder to shoulder on the stoop looking up at the pile. They were coated head to toe in a fine black powdering of soot and sweating in the cold. They were coughing, breathing deeply. His brother tried to whistle and started hacking. When he'd recovered his voice he said: Aint that a sight.

Hm, Cal said. He felt light and very cold. As though inside him was colder than the outside. He looked up at the white sky and thought of nothing at all.

After a minute he looked down and wiped his filthy hands on the grass. Then he got up and went to the truck. In the truck's glovebox was a heap of old newspapers in a paper bag. He took it and walked back to the pile and upended the bag on the gravel.

If I ever need a fire, he explained. His brother nodded. Then laughed.

It took them a while to get the pile to catch. Not much would burn a second time but there was enough untouched wood to make it flare up for a while. The smoke was dark grey and opaque, rising in plumes with the updraft, flanked by heat shimmers. It did not fade as it rose. Something small and white fell silently past Cal's face as he stood minding the blaze and landed on the toe of his shoe. It was a scrap of newspaper. He nudged it away and looked deeper into the flames.

Do you get it? he said aloud.

Get what, his brother said. Then: Oh. Why our old man did it.

Why he did it. Cal was smiling. I cant figure him out.