Eleven Kinds of Sky

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Slate

Sometimes it is okay, in the half-dark of an early midsummer morning, to climb out of bed, to leave your little brother slack-jawed and small and tangled in wool blankets, to pad quietly in white-footed pajamas down the hallway, through the bathroom's all-night odors of hard water and drying towels, and on into your parents’ room.

They leave the window open at night, to breathe the good prairie air, so it is breezy and cold, and you slow and shiver. The floor is not carpeted but plain wood, the floral-print wallpaper peeling where the seams come together. On your mother’s dresser there are a few framed snapshots and a crucifix, some bright necklaces and rings, a blouse or two. On your father’s chest of drawers there is nothing save his silver watch and jackknife, his cracked snakeskin wallet. Yesterday’s work jeans are draped across the foot of the bed, his old brown belt still strung through the loops. And the two of them: they are mountains of cream sheets, of musky warmth, of slow breath, slow breath, slow breath.

You crawl—quietly, so very quietly—up onto the bed between them. Without a word, they make room for you, and you slide yourself between their scratchy sheets and pull the blankets up tight.
to your chin. You try to be as still as can be, as quiet as the sky. You wait and wait, nearly holding your breath with stillness—until slowly their bodies ease and their breaths slip and deepen, and then you can relax, for they are asleep once more. They need their sleep. They work hard. You understand that to be a boy here in this bent-back, make-do world is to be a shadow, off to the side of things and out of the way. Though here, for a sunrise span of minutes, you are the center of the unfolding universe.

Your father faces the wall, his broad back a sheer rising ridge, his white t-shirt stretched thinly from thick shoulder to thick shoulder. With the tips of your fingers you feel now the tight, black curls of his head, so unlike the dishwasher mess you brush from your own eyes. Oh, it is something to be this close to him, to touch him, to breathe with your big-shouldered father. You breathe with him.

But you are more like your mother, you think, turning to look at her soft, sleeping face. Not just your lank hair, but the way she is facing you and is not ridges but hills and sweeping fields. That's how you feel on the inside. You feel like plain old hills, a dry swath of buffalo grass, like you can turn your back to nothing and must face everything.

You aren't worried about this. Not yet, at least. Your father's hair didn't go dark and curl until he was in the Army. You've heard the story many times, how he blames a shampoo his sister sent him. It'll be that way for you, too. It will happen, this alchemic transition to manhood. You must be patient. Until then, you'll watch him. That's what you do: watch things, think about things. That's how you'll make your way through.

On the ceiling—it catches your eye, always—there is a pattern of cracks and twisting water damage. It looks like some shovel-headed, bent-nosed man. You don't like it, are scared of it, but the accident of that grim face holds you. You can't look away. You stare and stare, and the man stares back. You are about to squirm—to make a noise and wake your mother or your father or both of them—when the first morning meadowlark calls, and you can suddenly, thankfully look away.

You crane your neck to see out the window, to follow the bird's clear song: gauzy curtains lifting and filling, the green-silver leaves of the plains cottonwood in the front yard rippling like water. And beyond, the very sky coming alive—all blue and slate and brightening smolder.

Sheeting

It was a summer country. Not because we didn't have a winter, for we had a long stretch of near-arctic time, from mid-October through mid-April, when the sun stayed low in the sky and set in the late afternoon and the temperature dropped in mere minutes to negative twenty-three, the wind coming cold and hard from the north and west. Everything under that wind weathered. Storms drifted snow as high as our sheep shed, some twenty feet, though in the days to come the wind would scour the drifts down again to hard, dirty patches. The freeze then worked deep into the body of the land itself. There was no use trying to dig a posthole or even work a good throwing stone from the gravel. If a blizzard was on the way, you cut your fences so your stock could keep moving, might stay alive. If it was just bone cold, you stacked a load of square bales on the back of a pickup and drove out to winter range and called the sheep from the fields.

It was a summer country because when the wind finally twisted and edded and came warm down the hills and across the plains, there were only a few days of mud—and then there was the season of sun and work and dust. Under the wide, sheeting sky the real work was done: fields plowed and planted, sheep sheared, cattle branded, alfalfa irrigated, hay put up, a steer butchered, a garden harvested, tomatoes and beef tongue canned, the long winter readied for.

It was a summer country because if there was hope for us it was in a summer's work: with rain enough we might make the bank payments, might lease another section of land, might buy a new tractor or a hundred head of yearling ewes, might even get ahead of things for once. It was a summer country because it was then that we might curve the cycling seasons of our lives ever so slightly up, corkscrew toward some further hope, whatever that might be.

After a long winter of bone cancer, my father finally died on February 17, 1988. The summer after was hell's own season: the height of the drought and the worst of the grasshoppers. It was a time when the flat turning of the seasons would otherwise have been a blessing.

Stormy

First thing in the morning Donnie Laird turns his welding rig onto our road and comes raising a roostertail of dust fast down the gravel and bangs on the screen door with his ham of a fist and announces to my mother that he'll go ahead and fix the boys' basketball hoop.

The other Saturday I'd wanted to lower it so my brother and I could dunk. My mother was at work, and I took the pickup keys without permission and with the tailgate down backed over the cement pad and up to the pole. I planned to stand in the pickup bed and loosen the high screws and slip the hoop down the pole. In the rearview mirror I aimed the truck and carefully tapped the gas, but the truck fairly bucked beneath me and the wedge of the tailgate slammed into the pole, which meant the new basketball hoop and level cement pad we'd begged and begged our mother for was just-like-that useless.
But Donnie couldn’t have known this. No, he probably came raising a roostertail of dust down the gravel because that’s what all my father’s old friends are always doing: stopping by sad-eyed and grim-mouthe, their feed-store ball caps twisted up in their hands, staring at their boots and saying if there’s anything, anything at all, they can do. Most of the time my mother thanks them and sends them away. Though they are strong, they cannot haul my father up and out of this dry ground. Though they are fine farmers and ranchers, a day on the tractor or a night in the lambing shed won’t mean much in the long run. Though they too loved my father, they are like us bewildered and brokenhearted. Though they ask if there’s anything they can ever do, they ask not for us but for themselves—they ask out of the selfishness of grief.

Which is fine. Which is probably as it should be. Donnie most likely stepped out of his rig that morning and saw the bent hoop and knew right then and there what he could do. He might have even thought for a moment, before he put his fist to the screen door, about the boy who did it and what it would mean to have such a mistake made over, erased. For I imagine shame and expiation are on his mind, what with his stink of liquor and tobacco spit and day-old clothes, and when my brother and I pull on our tennis shoes and go out to help, I see the pillow of greasy coats in the cab and the pile of beer cans in the back and think that Donnie has probably not been home for days, has not seen his wife and daughters—who go to our church and live up the road from us in a double-wide trailer near the river—in a long, long time.

Donnie has my brother and me take wire brushes to the scarred metal around the bend, while he readies the welder. Beyond my grandfather, I don’t often see grown men up close anymore, so I scrape and sneak looks over at Donnie. He’s quite tall, must be over six feet, and though his face is round and wide, his eyes and nose and mouth are close together, pinched in. His skin isumber from the sun, but when he takes off his cap, there is a stark white line across his forehead. My grandfather is always telling me, stepping back and putting up his fists, that he’s right at fighting weight: one hundred and eighty pounds. But Donnie looks twice as big as my grandfather; he must be close to three hundred pounds. Donnie looks as big as my grandfather; he must be close to three hundred pounds. He is thick as shelves across the chest, his arms and legs muscled and enormous. And he wears a cotton shirt, dark blue, almost as black as a stormy sky, the very kind my father wears in the picture on the piano in the front room, which makes me wonder if this is just what you do when you are a man: getbig and thick and wear a blue shirt to work.

Once Donnie has the welder in order, we put our shoulders to the pole and bend it straight again. Donnie gets out his level just to make sure. He breathes heavily and his untucked shirt waves over the full, hairy sack of his stomach. We put on welding masks and flip the visors down and the day goes dark—until Donnie sparks the torch. He lays, like I thought he would, a thick bead directly in the metal scar, but then, opposite that, where the pole looks more or less straight and fine, he welds a long rectangle of tempered steel perpendicular to the pole, the width of it sticking six inches straight back. I think a fin, a wing, maybe Donnie’s signature or bit of artifice, but I am so happy to have the evidence of my wrongdoing made right that I don’t ask any questions—don’t discover that this steel wing is a kind of truss that carries the whole weight of the hoop, will basket after basket keep it from slowly folding over on itself.

I don’t understand the forces at work here, the mechanics of tension, moment, and node. How twice the strength is needed to come straight at something. How at times what is still is charged and what is hastened is dead. How bread becomes flesh, how flesh becomes dust, how the heart is bread and flesh and dust—the way Donnie cools the weld with a five-gallon bucket of water and picks up his clanking tools, and we thank him and shake his heavy, trembling hand, and though he will in a few years abandon his wife and daughters and dedicate himself to liquor and other oblivions, we think of him kindly and often.

Cedar-clean

For three days it has rained.

The little creek we’re camped on rushes straight down the valley, ditch-fast and muddy. The limbs we drag back to camp are so green with sap or rotten with rainwater they will not burn. We cannot light a fire. We have caught no trout. We huddle at the table, musty blankets draped over our shoulders.

We are here, a hundred miles from home and holed up in our tiny camper, because my father is dead. Or, rather, we are here because when my father was alive he took us every summer to the Beartooth Mountains. Some scorched July week, my father would park his tractor and pack the old forest green Coleman cooler and drive us all up to Mystic Lake, where we’d fish for cutthroat and hike switchback trails and look down over thousand-foot-high vistas of sheer rock and cedar-clean sky. Those good days the mountains were like the many stone hands of God, the sun always bright and the air crisp and just cool. Come evening, we sat on stumps and hunks of granite and stuck marshmallows on long willow sticks. My sister toasted them lightly over the coals, and I blackened them in the flames, and my brother sat far back from the fire and ate them raw, one after the other, and my mother and father too sat back from the flames and sipped their beer and laughed and told stories—the wavering dome of firelight illuminating all that mattered in the world.

We are here because my mother grieves hard as iron for my father and for his fatherless children, and so she has by herself
hitched the secondhand camper trailer to the pickup and packed the tackle box and the cooler and hauled us west across Montana to the smaller but closer Castle Mountains—where each day since, the rain has come at us hard and slantways, where each day we fish the creek and fail, try a fire and fail, where we huddle now in the camper, play another hand of cards, which my sister wins like always, where dinner is again cold canned chili topped with cheese and onions.

Yet what a time it was. Like a slanting rain, I want to whisper across the years: it was enough. There was a mountain. Fir and cedar leaned in around us. Even for the rain I had a can of strawberry soda cooling in the creek. Astonishing, that we made it there at all, that in the years to come we would make it back most every summer. Mother, I don't know how you did what you did. It would have been easy to say, Enough. To say, I'm tired. To say, I tried. Most everyone expected it, expected you to let whatever rain came soak us and whatever wind blow us like dry weeds across creation.

But here you are, with a fire in your hands. You'd gone down the road, in the rain, and found someone who'd been camped there for weeks and had a load of good kindling. You must have begged an armful—what force and fury, I think now, to knock on their camper door and beg an armful of good, dry wood—for when we peek out, we see you kneeling in the rain, kneeling before the ring of black stones, a fire leaping up before you, rising from your outstretched hands.

That fire burns hot and high, it burns all night. And the creek in the next valley, we discover, runs deeper, colder. In the morning we go out with jigs and hoppers and corn kernels and catch a mess of brookies. Back at camp, you gut them and dust them with flour and fry them with their heads on in a slick of bacon grease. The pink flesh falls hotly off the bones. We eat it and are filled.

**Washed**

My grandfather leans out the pickup window, says he'll be having coffee at the Lazy J C. “And Ed,” he adds. “Try not to scare the boy.”

Ed sucks his teeth, eyes me up and down. “Shit, Jim, it ain’t up to me if the boy gets scared or not.”

As my grandfather grins and drives away, Ed waves me around the corner of the house. We weave through a sloping dirt yard spotted with tough bunch grass and variously arranged piles of bolts and rebar and blown tires and engine parts and make our way up to a windowless, tin-roofed shed slumped near the back fence. He yanks on the strap of hide stapled to the door—the gray boards biting into the dust, the clanking knock of steel chains and wood from somewhere inside—and even for his age and bulk, Ed slips gracefully into the dark yawn of shadow he’s opened between the shed door and the shed. After a moment, I follow.

What light there is falls thinly from cracks and knots. Motes of dust hover and spin in each wedge and shaft. The air feels ancient, tastes of rot and spice. The floor, like the yard, is hardpan dirt, a few pale weeds twisting for the light. The ceiling is just high enough for a man to straighten himself, and the clanking comes from the rows and rows of steel traps hung along the walls: the slender curves of number ones like the wings of
Ed is big as a bear, but slumped and pudgy and bald. He studies the rows of shelves along the far wall. I stare at the stubbly back of his neck, his shoulders rising with each breath. He must be remembering, for the shelves are not labeled, and neither are the glass bottles that crowd them: some green, some brown, some purple, some a washed sky blue, some with droppers for lids, some with burnt driftwood corks. He is taking a long time, looking back and forth, and I imagine he enjoys remembering. I imagine there is a story that explains each one, which ridge and what kind of sky, how the coyote snapped and snarled. These are Ed's blue-glass stories, these bottles and vials he considers—first this one and then that one, a clinking like bells as he thumbs through them.

For Christmas my grandfather gave me three good steel traps and half a dozen snares. Two of the traps are number ones, and I have caught quite a few prairie dogs with them—but prairie dogs are easy, will practically fall into a trap, sniff out and tangle themselves in a snare. My other trap is bigger, a number three, and I have set it where my grandfather told me to set it, along a dry wash up north. I have not yet caught a coyote, but I am hoping, which is why I'm here. Though my grandfather has trapped a fair number in his time, he is no maker of potions. He too came to Ed Dempsey, or before him Buster Knapp, for the promise of a tincture squeezed from the pea-sized glands of a coyote and mixed with rabbit piss and cow's blood and left to ferment for a good thirty years.

Ed takes up a small brown bottle now and holds it to the light, twists off the cap and gives it a sniff. He holds it out to me. I sniff too. It smells of wet fur and oranges and what I think is sex. I would like to keep smelling it, but Ed pulls it back and caps it and wraps it in burlap and hands it to me, saying, "What you do is you break yourself open a bone, any bone, and dribble some of this in the hollow—just a drop or two now—and then set that bone right at the edge of a cutbank. You've got your trap set on a cutbank, right? Or a dry wash? Right, okay then, set it right at the edge, just past your trap—maybe in a sagebrush or something where it's hard to see or get to—and you by golly ought to have yourself a coyote come morning."

I nod and thank him and step out into the white light. Ed follows, pushing the wooden door shut and wrapping the length of hide tight around a nail. We make our way back up to the house, a two-story that like most houses in town has seen better days. Ed is old and past his body's best work. He is now the mayor of Melstone. Though in his dark shed he still milks the bladders of skunks and muskrats, he spends his days dealing with school levies and zoning laws. I don't ask him how he reconciles these two lives, don't ask him about the way I hope for nothing so much as to trap a coyote, to steady the rifle at my shoulder, and as the coyote snaps and gnashes at its own bone—raw and bloody leg, shoot it cleanly in the head. Or why, after finishing Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* days before, I felt somehow bigger than myself and kindly toward all the world, even this one I feel most times I don't belong in.

I don't ask him about these things. I shake his hand, say, "Thanks," and make my way down the gravel road to the general store, little scuffs of dust rising with my every step. And no one but Ed Dempsey knows I'm carrying in my pocket a glass bottle of magic.
Fishbelly

In my Aunt Edith’s studio I am quiet.

I have not been told to be quiet, I am just quiet, for her studio—with its intricate tools and brushes and long-necked lamps on benches, its smells of paint and standing water and shaved pine—seems to me a place to be quiet, watchful, reverent.

I shut the door, slowly, and stand off to the side. I lean up against the wall with my hands behind me, at the small of my back. I feel with my palms and fingertips the whorled, rough-cut boards, and I watch my Aunt Edith. Her back is to me, one lock of silvery hair hanging down about her face. With her full, calloused hands, hands nearly as big as a man’s, she pulls the wet print from the face of the wood—all orange and fishbelly and pale blue, maybe the scab hills south of Billings at daybreak—and she studies then the colors and densities and textures, and finally hangs the print up with the others to dry. She is slow and deliberate, and maybe this is why I am quiet: her attention demands my attention, her care says there is something happening here beyond work or play. And the prints themselves, which seem, like the best of stories, to wake me up, to fairly pull the breath from my lips. I look at them. And look again.

“Oh,” Aunt Edith says, turning now, her wrinkled face sliding into a wide smile. “I didn’t hear you come in. Goodness, how quiet you were! Shall we get some ice cream? Hmmm? I think maybe I would like a bowl of ice cream. What about you, Joe?”

I am too old to be talked to this way, fussed over, but Aunt Edith, who is really my great-aunt, my grandfather’s older sister, has no children of her own and doesn’t know, and so I don’t mind. Also, I very much want a bowl of vanilla ice cream dotted with raspberries fresh from her garden. “Yes,” I say. “I think I would like a bowl of ice cream too.”

Later, we go to dinner. I get ready in the third-floor bathroom. Aunt Edith’s house is grand and yellow and sits on the rimrocks above the Yellowstone River and the city of Billings. You can see forever out this window, clear to the Bighorn and Beartooth mountains. You can see as well downtown—the thin streets and tall hotels and shiny bank buildings—which is where we’re going for dinner. I scrub my face with soap, comb my hair, tuck my shirt into my jeans, and lace up my best sneakers. I rush and scрабble down the first flight of stairs, which curves around and down the cone-topped turret of the house, and step more carefully down the next flight of stairs, in case Aunt Edith is ready and waiting for me.

She isn’t. I stand around and study the framed photo of Aunt Edith’s dead husband, his long, bearded face. He looks kind enough, I guess. Maybe a little disappointed. He failed, I have heard, at farming, and Aunt Edith supported them by teaching school. After he died, Aunt Edith started painting and making prints instead. Her work hangs in all those bank buildings downtown now, is up at the Yellowstone Art Museum too, and all over the color inset pages of the journals she has stacked on the far end of the kitchen table. My Aunt Edith is an artist. It’s thrilling and obscene to say it. Artist. It is a word that sounds like the look of red wine in upturned glasses or pictures of Spain. Aunt Edith is as well an atheist. I know an artist makes things, but I don’t quite understand what being an atheist entails, though I think it means her dead husband will not be waiting for her in heaven, like my mother says my father will be waiting for me.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” I tell Aunt Edith, as she steps from her room wearing dark slacks and a long-sleeved, silky blouse, her silver hair pulled back in a tight bun.

“Thank you. That was very kind.” She smiles and looks in her finery like my Aunt Edith and not like my Aunt Edith. “Shall we have some dinner?”

Dinner is at a Chinese restaurant downtown. It is the first time I have ever eaten at a Chinese restaurant. It is the first time I have ever eaten anywhere there are reservations and menus without prices and waitresses who don’t write anything down. Aunt Edith orders for both of us, and while we wait for our food we talk about what things I like to study in school, about her artwork, about the news, about books. The waitress comes with steaming tea and some kind of sour soup, plates of rice and orange-colored chicken, thinly sliced beef with red strips of pepper. It’s all new and strange and beautiful. Before we eat, I say, “Wait!” I look up at my Aunt Edith. “What are the names? I want to know the names of everything.”

Darkening

What you do is open slowly the thick furnace door, for just as soon as it is cracked the coal fire roars and oily smoke and sparks rush out. You take a great, long metal tool—which has a looped handle on one end and another handhold in the middle that you twist to open and close the claw on the far end—and reach into the fire and claw up and lift the clinkers, the tortuous looking byproducts of burnt coal, and drop them one by one into the ash can, a black rusting metal bucket in front of the furnace. Then, your face and hands and neck washed with dry heat, you hang the claw back up and take a thin, long-handled shovel and scoop up what cinders and loose ash you can, though much of it lifts, rolls, and eddies in the fire’s twisting wind, and shovel it too into the can. You relatch the furnace door and breathe a moment. In the crook of your arm, you wipe your ashy, blasted face.

You are not done. You pick up the ash can by its handle—careful not to let the hot bottom bump against your legs—and climb the basement stairs and shoulder your way out the front door, the cold October wind suddenly in your lungs, and haul
the previous season, and after we lost out, one of their older brothers told us to jump into the back of his sleek little Toyota pickup, and we did, and he drove us then up into the Absaroka Mountains, where there was a fire of pine and cedar spitting hot sap and sparks, a radio turned up loud, cans of Bud Light and a bottle of vodka going around and around. We couldn’t have been more than fourteen. We had been best friends since third grade—though in a few months my friend’s mother, scared for her life, would leave in the middle of the night with him and his sisters for Kentucky, and we would lose touch.

That night, shoulder to shoulder in the pickup bed, where I’d made him lie down after he’d pulled on that bottle too many times, my friend told me he wished his father would just die, that God was asleep at the wheel up there letting a son of a bitch like his father live, that it would be a whole lot easier if someone would just murder the bastard.

For the mountains and tall pines and ragged firelight, I couldn’t even see the sky.

**Gone**

We rode into the world in the backs of pickups.

Say sitting atop what’s left of a load of Bull Mountain furnace coal, my jeans blackening and greasy, as my grandfather turns his Ford down the gravel road to our house, splitting this load of coal like the last between his stone cellar and our earthen one.

Maybe coming back from the ranch, my grandparents up front, so my brother and me in the bed with our backs up against the cab, some old wooden posts and a thick-ringed chain beneath us, the highway wind wheeling dust and straw.

Or letting the GMC idle where it will through the snow-swept north pasture, clambering into the back and cutting the twine and tossing a good ton or two of alfalfa hay flake by flake to the sheep.

Or the backs of our thighs burning against the tailgate as my mother drives us all down to the river for an afternoon swim.

Or a bunch of boys piling into the bed of my old GMC after school and riding down Main Street to the Lacy JC for Gatorades and beef jerky before basketball practice.

Or that boy, the one who seemed so certain the world would not ruin him, climbing out the back window of the cab and into the pickup bed at seventy-five miles an hour, tossing can after can of Mountain Dew behind us like bombs onto the highway.

Or the night my friend drank too much up at that summer basketball tournament in Reed Point. We were in the junior varsity division, on a team with some boys we’d played against during the previous season, and after we lost out, one of their older brothers told us to jump into the back of his sleek little Toyota pickup, and we did, and he drove us then up into the Absaroka Mountains, where there was a fire of pine and cedar spitting hot sap and sparks, a radio turned up loud, cans of Bud Light and a
Once the games begin, they go on for hours, everyone yelling and cheering, people smoking and drinking, players fighting, the rhythmic thump of hip-hop knocking through the dark prairie night. The winners stay on the court, so we wait a long time to get a game, and once we’re on, the play is fierce—but we stay on. Bruce is thick in the chest and strong. Though a few inches shorter than me, he can take two dribbles and hammer the ball through the iron. Randy is tall and quick. He looks all elbows and knees but spins like the wind. His long hair flying, he slips through swaths of streetlight and rolls the ball off the backboard and in. It doesn’t take long before whoever’s playing defense on me starts sagging back to help out on Randy, who usually scores anyway. Near the end of our fourth or fifth game, Randy slices into the key and leaps and, somehow, kicks the ball back out to me. I bobble it but am so wide open it doesn’t matter: I have all the time in the world. I dribble and aim, shoot. It’s a three-pointer. I hit it. My first bucket of the night. Randy brushes back his long black hair, points at me and lifts his chin, says I shoot like an Indian.

I leave the Little Big Horn the next day, drive home. Bruce and I write a few more letters, but we lose touch. I don’t really mind. I’ve seen now how things can change, how distance and difference may remake us. I study as hard as I always have, and in my senior year I apply for every scholarship I can find and even get quite a few of them. I lie in the tall grass back of the house, susurrus of cottonwood leaves above me, the pages of a novel my sky.

And I think of that single shot. I almost held onto it, waited until Randy was open again and passed the ball back to him. If it had been Bruce that passed it to me, I might have done just that. But it wasn’t. And I didn’t. I shot it. I see the ball arcing above us, turning and turning, and at its zenith disappearing for a moment in the high prairie dark before dropping again into the light.

**Bruise blue**

If there had been a flood, a true flood, the dark and frothing waters slewing across the plain, our house would certainly have sheared from its moorings, drifted like a drunk, and sunk.

The foundation was bad. There was a great long crack in the stone and cement of the south wall of the basement. When a summer storm thundered through, or when a chinook wind came whistling up from the south and the snow melted in a matter of hours, water sieved from that crack. The plaster came away in chunks then, and the water came even quicker, muddier. My brother and I swept the water to the sump pump in the corner, shoveled out the mud. More than once, the pump burned out trying to keep pace with the rain. Then, until we could get to town to get the right part, the whole basement would fill and stink, and mosquitoes would breed. Beyond the sodden books and ruined rug and shorted-out freezer—those hundreds of pounds of bloody, stinking, worm-rank meat—we knew the house itself might not hold. The south foundation wall might buckle, causing the house above to sway and lean.

So one summer I dug a trench around the perimeter, some three feet down, and dumped in bag after bag of powdered bentonite, which hardens when water hits it, and then packed dirt
over the bentonite. We didn’t know what we were doing, didn’t know bentonite is a terrible carcinogen. We were hoping the bentonite would waterproof the foundation, though with every afternoon storm, thick clouds shouldering across the suddenly bruise blue sky, the rain coming hard and fast, a gully washer, muddy water still ran and pooled in the basement.

My mother had a contractor come in and pour a wide sidewalk around the foundation then, but that didn’t help either. The contractor told us the only thing left to do was lift the house up into the air and tear out the foundation and redo the whole thing. We didn’t have the money for that. We shut the basement door. Let it flood, hoped the walls would hold.

And the foundation was just one thing among many. We had mice in all the closets, ants in the sugar drawer, mealworms wriggling in the flour, millers and moths hatching eggs in the ceiling. In the summer, our little air conditioner cooled maybe a room and a half. In the winter, we rubbed our stinging eyes and coughed as coal smoke rose through the vents. The kitchen counters were knife-scarred and stained with coffee and blood and burnt sugar, the wallpaper in the bathroom peeled off in sheets. Yet through it all our old house weathered and stood. The waters never rose high enough, I guess, and the stone below, even broken, was stronger than it looked.

Cloud-shot

I find the notes folded and bent to the curve of my back. They must have slipped some time ago through this tear I have just discovered in the left pocket of my old red-checked jacket. The first is from a small pad, folded only once, right down the center, and faded now to a rinsed sky blue; the other has been folded many times and is nearly worn to nothing here and there along the creases.

Deep in the day’s cares and worries, finishing up graduate school in a few weeks and on yet another plane to yet another job interview—Baltimore, this time—I can’t make any sense of the first. *Masking tape and overshoes,* it says. *Stock salt. Steel posts. Handsaw. Claw hammer. 10 inch frying pan.* The script is my own, I think, but the list is utterly unfamiliar. I don’t own a handsaw. What’s this about stock salt? The second is just three names: *Donnie Laird. Clyde Brewer. Wade Kincheloe.* I read it again. And once more. These men were my father’s friends. They were, like my father, hay farmers and sheep ranchers who drew their irrigation water from the Musselshell River. And, like my father, all are dead. Yet my father died years before Wade or Donnie or Clyde, which made him a kind of sad legend. And legends, with their anecdotal lack of detail and good-hearted dishonesty, are something less than real. Though I fished this jacket years ago from the back of my father’s closet, though my shoulders now fill the spaces his once filled—to me he has never been more than some sad-eyed farmer’s beer-sour breath, the dusty photograph atop the front-room piano no one ever plays, my mother’s Sunday morning tears.

Yet here, now, in my own two hands, are these lists: the very things of a day, a season, a life. Was he on his way to Tractor Supply up in Billings? Or maybe the stockyards across the river? Did my mother, still in her nightgown and patching once again his old pair of overshoes with the last of the masking tape, remind him all morning not to forget? Did he owe Clyde money? Or did Donnie owe him? Were they all thinking of going in on some rangy Wyoming sheep? Maybe signing up for a truckload of good alfalfa hay? Was he just waiting for the irrigation water to roll to the back fence, sitting at the kitchen table and sorting things out with pen and paper and a cup of black coffee, light rimming over the far hills and trees?

I stare at the lists through takeoff. Rub my thumb along the many creases, over the few still-sharp corners. The plane begins to level. Bright, upswept clouds slide beneath us, alternately obscuring and revealing the roads and rivers below. I trace carefully the slanted letters, so strangely like my own. Then, just to feel the syllables further, I say, out loud, *“Clyde. Wade. Stock salt.”*

The woman sitting next to me frowns. I say again, louder this time, *“Stock salt.”*