

The Lowest Basin, Arizona Stories
On Being from Arizona, On Writing About Arizona
On Identifying and Contributing to an Arizona Literary Regionalism

by

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ABSTRACT

In *Arizona: A History*, Thomas E. Sheridan writes that Arizona isn't something real but "only a set of arbitrary lines on a map." I disagree with that statement. Writers such as Jane Allison, Jerome Stern, and Peter Turchi have all written craft books analyzing the shapes of stories, and it could be argued that at the core of their individual arguments is the shared sentiment that it is the shape of something which gives it meaning. As such, those "arbitrary lines" that make up the state of Arizona and which Sheridan dismisses have created geographical perimeters in the real world, which in turn have fostered historical, cultural, political, ideological, familial, artistic, and literary perimeters as well. So arbitrary or not, those lines have created boundaries which have given real meaning to people's lives. Through fiction, this dissertation attempts to explore some of those lives shaped by Sheridan's arbitrary lines. Based on what historian Robert L. Dorman calls the "localist west" in *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* the nine stories presented in this dissertation investigate the state of Arizona as its own unique yet limited knowledge apparatus, specifically how the state's mostly forgotten cowboy heritage, both real and mythic, serves as an underlying ontological practice for part of its population. The stories attempt to be reflective of the metaphysics for that population and are constructed from an assemblage of the region's territorial-to-present history, literature, conservative politics, economies, racial discourses and populations, as well as its arid yet diverse desert ecologies. There's also Waylon Jennings. While my work examines existence within a limited Arizona population--mostly lower to middle class conservative white folk living within the mythos and realities of the Western tradition and its associated spectrums of masculinity--it does not

prove a thesis for it. I did not collect quantifiable data or make conclusions about how and why a particular population acts the way it does. Instead, I've simply tried to undertake what Milan Kundera writes in *The Art of the Novel*, is the writer's purpose, to be an "explorer of existence."

DEDICATION

For Sarah and the kids.

And for my parents.

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"Downburst" appeared in *The Jabberwock Review* and was the recipient of its Nancy D. Hargrove Editor's Prize in Fiction. "Tributary" appeared in *Gulf Coast*. "Borders" appeared in *Switchback* and was the recipient of its Editor's Prize in Fiction.

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PREFACE

All Western men, developed by hard contact with the desert,
are great whether they are good or bad. -- Zane Grey

Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was
differs little from the past that was not. -- Cormac McCarthy

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ON BEING FROM ARIZONA, ON WRITING ABOUT ARIZONA, ON IDENTIFYING AND CONTRIBUTING TO ARIZONA LITERARY REGIONALISM

I am not an academic.

That might not be the best admission to make at the start of a dissertation, but in my experience, I've found it best to tell my readers the ending of a story at the very start. That way there's never any danger for melodrama, for artificially exaggerating plot points to keep the reader guessing what will happen just so they turn the page. Instead, I've found if my readers know everything they need to know from the get-go, then they're usually have a more worthwhile experience reading the *how* and *why* that takes my narrative to its logical end. They'll have better questions about the presumptions they had at the start of the journey, too.

So there you have it. Everything you need to know. *I am not an academic.*

I would say I am an artist, but saying one is an "artist" feels akin to proclaiming to a restaurant's maître d' that you're a "sommelier" when explaining how you disagree with your server's description of that evening's wine. It feels pompous and arrogant. As if you're all hat and no cattle, as the expression goes, even if you are a formally educated in the byproduct of tossing a little yeast on some fermented grapes. Instead, based on my time working in the wine industry during my first stint in grad school, I might say something like "I like wine" to express my familiarity with the subject (if I ever were to complain about my drink before asking to see a manager, which I wouldn't). Similarly, I like to say I write stories, or better yet, *try* to write stories in lieu of declaring myself a

prétentieux practitioner of the literary humanities. Because when your entire PhD project turns into an epistemological study and literary investigation into the state of Arizona, its cowboy culture, and the discourses on masculinity associated with that culture, it feels wrong to be boastful. It feels as if you're supposed to be an expert on the subject, but like a hand who brags they've broken mustangs all their life only to get tossed the moment a quarter horse is let up, you know nothing at all.

So there it is. I am not an academic. At least, not in the traditional sense. Instead of composing an academic dissertation made from a series of critical essays, for this project I've tried to write stories that synthesize my research. Through fiction, I've focused on what historian Robert L. Dorman calls the "localist west" in *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* (2012) and investigated the state of Arizona as its own unique yet limited knowledge apparatus, specifically how the state's mostly forgotten cowboy heritage, both real and mythic, serves as an underlying ontological practice for part of its population. I've tried to write stories reflective of the metaphysics for that population and constructed from an assemblage of the region's territorial-to-present history, literature, conservative politics, economies, racial discourses and populations, and arid yet diverse desert ecologies. There's also some Waylon Jennings.

I've taken this approach because while growing up and living most of my adult life in Arizona, I felt no matter where I went (whether to teach English in Costa Rica after my undergrad at Arizona State University, or attend graduate school in northern California, or visit my in-laws in Mississippi), everyone was quick to point out that my home had no "culture." It had no "literature," I was told, or "art" except for whatever sweat patterns formed on a person's shirt after stepping outside. It had no history. And I

am ashamed to admit, I believed this. For a while I was duped into thinking my lived experiences and the stories I heard, the people I knew and the things I read growing up were somehow better defined by people whose only education in my background was that they lived somewhere else, that their experiences were different than mine.

Unfortunately, during my MFA at the University of San Francisco, I further bought into these misbeliefs. I shied away from developing the greatest resource a writer could ever have: an intimate knowledge of region, the love for the language of place. Instead, I wrote quirky, satirical stories that had no bearing on my actual life but occurred in the big, important places of the world like New York and London, Los Angeles and Paris, the South and for some absurd reason Iowa. It wasn't until a classmate, a woman who was also from my hometown, said something during workshop one day that my opinion about Arizona--and on *writing* about Arizona--changed forever. When talking about her thesis, my classmate announced that she was going to write a thousand-page family epic that took place in Scottsdale, because--and she said this very matter-of-factly, with no air of hesitation--Annie Dillard once wrote that a person needs to explore their origin story before they can write anything else. A writer needs to know where they come from before they can ever truly know where they are headed.

Now I believe it is the smallest moments that have the greatest potential to change a person's life. My decision to walk across a street in Costa Rica at the exact moment I did (and not a second earlier or later) directly put me in the path of the car that would destroy my knee and nearly kill me after its driver ran the stop sign. My decision to Facebook message my friend's little sister and ask for her in help pulling a prank on her brother has so far produced a eleven-year long marriage with three wonderful children.

Likewise, that one statement from my classmate altered my life forever, because that one statement caused me to do an about-face on the absurd farces I had dished out during my MFA. It made me focus on smaller, more intimate stories about the place where I grew up, the people I knew there, and about ways of life that were distinctive to that context. It made me realize Arizona was not some dirt lot where nothing happened and no one mattered, but its own unique discursive formations worthy of investigation.

Years later I contacted my classmate and told her I couldn't find that Dillard quote to cite in this dissertation, and my classmate laughed and said she didn't even remember saying it. Then she admitted maybe it came from Anne Lamont, or maybe Grace Paley. Or maybe--and this was most likely the case, she confessed--she had made the whole thing up and only attributed it to someone important to give her ideas a stronger ethos. "I was trying to write about *Arizona in San Francisco*," she said before telling me she had actually become so discouraged by our peers' feedback on her topic that she deleted her novel upon graduating. "I needed to say *something* so people took me seriously."

Regardless of who said what, that piece of wisdom (or flat-out-lie) ultimately brought me to this project. It made me rethink my life, both real and literary, and wonder what, exactly, was my origin story. What was the network of being which led me to become who I am? What were the cultural and historical foundations from which I emerged?

I was born in Arizona in the early 1980s and raised in the same modest home where my mother grew up. We lived in south Scottsdale, a mostly white and middle-class suburb sometimes mockingly referred to as "The West's Most Western Town," the city's self-given slogan. Looking at Scottsdale today, that nickname seems somewhat

ridiculous, but when I was a child, it wasn't uncommon for my elderly neighbors to recall Statehood Day. Most remembered when people not only still rode horses around town, but when some of those horses "wandered" off in the middle of the night, and how posses formed and found them on the Salt River Pima Indian Reservation days later, the border for which stood only a quarter-mile from my front door. A lot of my neighbors still remembered when McCormick Ranch, the upscale preplanned community just north of us, was McCormick's ranch, because they had worked on it, or on Jolly's ranch before that.

Growing up, my father was a police officer and my mother a teacher (essentially the classic lawman and schoolmarm motif of the Old West). Their entire lives they preached the importance of self-reliance, and from an early age my siblings and I knew how to tie knots and sharpen knives and shoot game. My many uncles, who were always stopping by between marriages, were involved in everything from western land speculation scams (like the Great Southwest Land and Cattle Company) to driving truck (the contemporary inheritor of the cowboy ethos, as argued by William W. Savage Jr. in *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American Culture* (1979)), to working as forest rangers on the Mogollon Rim. On the side they sold guns and routinely ranted about the federal government. At least four of them were straight up outlaws whose crimes included, but were not limited to, rustling and shooting a man.

As such, my own identity and worldview has been molded within the rhetorical and contextual constructs of these communities. It's been shaped by the regional discourses in which these communities exist--Scottsdale, Arizona, the West, the Southwest, the Wild West, the desert, the oasis. But how does one write about that, a

fragment of life in Arizona? How does one write about Arizona in general? What does an Arizona literary regionalism even look like?

In *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (1993), Dorman articulates a definition of regionalism by combining the ideas of 18th century philosopher J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, and 19th century critic Lewis Mumford. Dorman writes that both men suggested that regionalism is "the transformation of the immigrant into the indigenous" (3), or the process of an outsider becoming an insider within a geographical context. Unlike other writers who promote "universal" themes by separating themselves from their region's geographically-centered discourses in order to then deconstruct those discourses, the regionalists, Dorman suggests, use their placements *within* the provincial to write both critically and ideologically about the places and cultures they are from. Obviously, when discussing America in general, and the West and Southwest specifically, one cannot use a word like "indigenous" without implying native peoples. However, that is neither Dorman's nor my intent when using the descriptor here. When discussing the regionalists, the term is used more broadly to describe "folk" who lay roots (or had roots laid for them) within a particular region and who then embraced their contextual placement within that region as a foundation for their identity.

To summarize Dorman's ideas, I would suggest the difference between writing about a region and being a regionalist writer is similar to the differences between a vacationer and resident. For the vacationer, place is transactional (the vacationer can easily pay money to visit somewhere else if their experience is even slightly annoying) while the resident seeks to fix the problems of their area because they are invested in its

long-term health. The vacationer might know an area well, they've memorized street names and know a person or two, but to the resident those street names and neighbors, those large and small histories, are the basis for who they are and how they think. It is the difference between Ernest Hemingway and Gertrud Stein writing about Europe from an American perspective while living as ex-pats in Paris during the 1920s versus William Faulkner writing about his everyday life in (then) little Oxford, Mississippi. But what does that latter perspective look like through an Arizona lens?

Obviously, to write about a discourse one must enter it, so after graduating with my MFA, off I went in search of an Arizonan literary aesthetic, an Arizona regionalism. Barbara Kingsolver's *High Tide in Tucson* (1995) seemed like the obvious place to start (it had "Tucson" in its name, after all), but Kingsolver's work seemingly longed for somewhere else (specifically a place with a beach) then it was about being centered within an Arizona phenomenology. Also, Kingsolver was from Kentucky (via Maryland), and her later work also seemed to be about women from other places who used Arizona as a foil to better understand where they were from. On the contrary, Robert Boswell grew up in Yuma, and his *Crooked Hearts* (1990) is an emotionally powerful novel set in his hometown. Yet that novel's descriptions of setting and culture do not seem vividly connected to place. As if by design, the entire narrative--characters, conflicts, plot--seem like they could be lifted from the page and dropped into any other American small town. It is as if the novel speaks more to the universality of the human condition (and this is not a complaint) than experiences limited to a specific regional context.

Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), about environmentalists who plot the destruction of Glen Canyon Dam, is arguably one of the most famous novels to

take place in Arizona. Yet there is a difference in a novel *taking place* in a region and *being engrained* within its peoples, values, and cultural knowledge, and Abbey's novel seems to speak more to the ecological destruction of the greater Southwest than discursive formations strictly limited to Arizona. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) reaches its violent climax along the banks of the Gila River, but that action seems more an indictment on the violence of America in general than a narrow regionalist condition. On the other hand, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is centered squarely in Tucson, yet that book is as much about the Old Pueblo as it is a meditation on Mexico, New Jersey, and Africa (the other places where the novel takes places), as well as colonialism and Indigenous histories as a whole.

One of the most prolific writers concerning Arizona is the Western author, Zane Grey. While Owen Wister is credited with "inventing" the Western genre and inserting the iconography of the cowboy into the American conscience with *The Virginian* (1902), authors like Grey and Max Brand are routinely acknowledged as mass-producing the cowboy's cultural representation via their many works, similar to how Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot invented the automobile, but it was the Ford Motor Company and General Motors that built the cars people actually drove. Brand and Grey wrote roughly the same amount of Westerns, but Grey was by far the bigger name, as his works typically sold more copies-per-title and inspired twice the amount of films, thus securing his more significant status when considering each author's contributions to the field. Of the 89 books Grey authored, nearly two-thirds are set (if only partially) in the territory or state of Arizona, and as argued by Candance C. Kant in *Zane Grey's Arizona* (1984), the other third was largely inspired by his experiences in the state. In short, due to his broad readership and

influence on the many writers who followed him and his narrative tradition, it could be argued that the cultural representation of the cowboy which the world has come to know almost as a cliché all stem from the representations Grey constructed in his works inspired by Arizona.

However, I would still argue Grey is not a regionalist. While he wrote vivid descriptions of Arizona's high and low arid landscapes, his plots were largely formulaic and based on Wister's romance model. In a way, his work is best described as Ansel-Adam's-Photographs-of-the-Southwest meets Danielle-Steele-With-Stetsons. This aesthetic doesn't exclude one from being regionalist, I guess, but part of being a regionalist is writing *from within* a region rather than *on* it. Yet, when Grey first visited the Arizona Territory with his wife during a 1906 tour of the West, he saw the land and its people mostly as an untapped, unspoiled commodity which he could plunder for material. And that is exactly what he did, supposedly becoming the first millionaire author by writing his Arizona novels first from his home in New York, then later from southern California. However, tourists quickly spoiled the "West" Grey wrote about (because he made it famous and they wanted to experience it), so he abandoned his source material in a fit of disgust (spawned partly by his feud with state officials who wouldn't let him hunt bear out of season) and went in search of new unspoiled regions, such as the South Pacific. In that regard, Grey is really no different than a corporation like Chevron scouring the deserts of Saudi Arabia for the next big oil deposit, then fleeing the country when the well runs dry. Similarly, because of his overwhelming success, Grey became something larger than the work he produced, larger than himself even (*Zane Grey Theater* premiered nearly 15 years after his death and became *the* name

in serialized western television during the late 1950s), and, in a way, became the machine overseeing the entire genre. Therefore, suggesting Grey is an Arizona regionalist feels similar to someone from Arkansas saying they “shop local” because they buy groceries from Walmart. It doesn't work.

Recently, two novels concerning Arizona--Téa Obreht's 2020 *Inland*, partly about a frontierswoman in the Arizona Territory in 1893, and Emily Nemens's, *The Cactus League* (also 2020), about a baseball player during Spring Training--were released to critical and commercial acclaim. And while each narrative is aesthetically beautiful in their own ways, both were written by artists who are not from, nor have lived, in Arizona. This is not to say a writer must live in a place to write about it (otherwise, good luck George R.R. Martin) or be from that place either. Look what Annie Proulx, a nearly lifelong Easterner, did with Wyoming as the subject of her three famous story collections. But unlike Proulx's works, which are steeped in the history, culture, and vocabulary of the place about which she writes, Obreht's and Nemens's novels feel emotionally distant from the region they portray. That's because both reside within in the modernist literary tradition that has been perpetuated by the MFA-Industrial Complex over the last 80 years (a topic far better articulated in the seminal work on the subject, Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2011), than I can do here) and as such, both are written *on* the landscape rather than *from* it. Both seem separated from their subject the way a painting or photograph of dancers is separated from the art the actual dancers create with their movement. Both seem more like a flower grown in a pot next to a window than a cactus outside which has been nurtured by the long climatological forces which have affected its region's soil.

It is important to note that these observations are not slights against either book or their authors, nor any of the works or authors I have mentioned previously. Far from it, since these works inspired me to do undertake this project. It is simply to note the narrative constructs of these works in contrast to what I might argue an Arizona regionalism might look like. Essentially, if I were to map works concerning Arizona in a Venn Diagram, titles like *High Tide in Tucson*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, *Crooked Hearts*, *The Almanac of the Dead*, Zane Grey's oeuvre, *Inland*, *The Cactus League*, and a slew of other works not named here due to the limited space of this introduction would exist in the outlying regions, each categorized by their respective sub-genre, but not in the overlapped areas which would make up a regionalist center.

So, what is that center? And why is it so difficult to define that aesthetic when there seems to be an abundance of books written in and about the 48th state? Why have authors from Arizona seemingly been more interested in writing Scottish time travel series or high school vampire romances than works centered within Arizona bodies of knowledge? Why have authors who have written about Arizona seemingly felt more compelled to use it as the canvas for their narratives rather than the subject itself?

In 2015 I had the opportunity to study under Robert Boswell at the Tin House Summer Writing Workshop in Portland, Oregon, and I asked why his work after *Crooked Hearts* didn't also take place in Arizona. And he told me that he was advised by his agent and publisher to abandon the topic because writing another "Arizona book" would negatively label him as a "regional writer." This confused me because I am not aware of anyone casting off Deborah Eisenberg for writing too many stories about New York. I have not heard people say, "William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor were great and all,

but gosh darn I wish they would've written something besides another book about the South." I've never heard anyone even suggest that Larry McMurtry or Elmer Kelton wrote too many books about Texas. And how many authors have made entire careers writing exclusively about California and its subcultures? New England or Florida? The Pacific Northwest or Iowa? (Iowa!)

This is not to say there are no writers capturing a uniquely Arizonan experience and producing literature planted firmly within the state's ecologies, histories, cultures, economies, prejudices, and loves. For decades, Alberto Rios, has written poetry, fiction, and nonfiction about these and surrounding topics, and was named the state's first Poet Laureate due to his work. Mark Jude Poirier's story collection *Naked Pueblo* (1998) and his novels *Goat* (2000) and *Modern Ranch Living* (2004) are about Tucsonans and their lives and dissatisfactions with that city and its region. Then there is Ross Santee, who might be Arizona's first regionalist. Originally from Iowa (there it is again), Santee moved to Arizona shortly after statehood and chronicled his experience through fiction. While the market for "Western" writing during the 1920s was mostly shoot-em-up melodramas in the fashion of Wister's *The Virginian* and Grey's romances, Santee wrote *Cowboy* (1928), a quiet narrative about a fourteen-year-old boy who goes to work at an Arizona ranch. Like Rios's and Poirier's works, Santee's *Cowboy* is as much a literary representation of the human experience as it is a metaphysical study of the culture (in this case, early 20th century cowpunchers) in which that experience occurs. Santee followed *Cowboy* with ten other books, such as *Apache Land* (1947) and *The Bubbling Spring* (1949), which were also examinations of some of the cultures, histories, and vocabularies of Arizona folk; the staples of regionalism. Unfortunately, Santee's work chronicling

Arizona ended with his death in 1965. While Poirier's work details Tucson in precision and grace, it also mostly captures characters who are apathetic to their Arizona experiences and seemingly long for what Poirier was capable of doing himself following his literary success; i.e. move elsewhere. And while Rios's work is positioned squarely within that Venn Diagram center for an Arizona regionalist literature, it is also situated firmly within the Chicano literary tradition, as it speaks largely to his experiences in the Arizona borderlands.

And there, I believe, is the gap in the discourse where my dissertation fits. If the center of the Venn Diagram representing Arizona literature is a limited regionalist aesthetic and knowledge apparatus, then that center would be made up by (mostly, but not limited to) Rios's borderlands, Poirier's dissatisfied Tucsonans, and Santee's century-old cowboys, as each work is imbedded inside these different cultures within Arizona's geographical and cultural boundaries. Obviously, there are other regionalist works overlooked here due to the brevity of this work, such as J.A. Jance's mystery novels set in Bisbee, Glendon Swarthout's *Bless the Beasts and Children* (1970), Oliver La Farge's *Laughing Boy: A Navajo Love Story* (1929), but this still seems a very limited regionalist representation for a state with a Native American history that includes the carving out one of the largest irrigation systems in the ancient world; a wild west history on par with California's gold rush, Texas's Republic, and Utah's Deseret; a border history which has insurmountably influenced national discourses on race, immigration, and economics; a federal reclamation program which turned a hostile desert environment with a few thousand people into a blossoming oasis with over seven million residents; and a political

system which fostered a libertarian philosophical movement which dominated American conservatism for much of 20th and early 21st centuries.

In *Arizona: A History* (2012), which is perhaps the most encompassing piece of scholarship on the state so far, Thomas E. Sheridan writes that Arizona isn't something real but "only a set of arbitrary lines on a map" (x). I disagree with that statement. Writers such as Jane Allison, Jerome Stern, and Peter Turchi have all written craft books analyzing the shapes of stories and the cartography of narrative, and it could be argued that at the core of their individual arguments is the shared sentiment that it is the shape of something which gives it meaning. As such, those "arbitrary lines" that Sheridan dismisses have created geographical perimeters in the real world, which in turn have fostered cultural, historical, political, artistic, ideological, and familial perimeters as well. So arbitrary or not, those lines have given meaning to people's lives. Therefore, my dissertation observes a way of being for people who shape their lives, and whose lives were shaped by, those boundaries. But while my work examines existence within a limited Arizona population--mostly lower and middle class conservative white folk living within the mythos and realities of the Western tradition--it does not prove a thesis for it. Unlike other works submitted for doctoral study, I did not collect quantifiable data or make conclusions about how and why a particular population acts the way it does. I am not a historian nor sociologist nor philosopher. I'm barely an academic. Yet I have relied on history, sociology, philosophy, as well as art and lived experiences to try to write stories which have allowed me to undertake what Milan Kundera writes in *The Art of the Novel* (1986) is the writer's purpose, to be an "explorer of existence." What I've done is

attempt to explore the discursive assemblages which have made up my own being. I've tried to write my origin story.

As such, my dissertation is a collection of stories based on the people I grew up with, the people I have known, the people I still know today. They are products of that "dreaded and unknown land" that Martha Summerhayes chronicled in her memoir, *Vanished Arizona* (1908), when she first arrived to the territory as a military wife in 1874. They are the metaphorical grandsons and great-grandsons of Santee's cowboys, who can epistemologically trace their lives and the way their view themselves to Arizona's cowboy past, both real and mythic, both lived and constructed by people such as Zane Grey, as well as the simulacra from other authors that followed. Similar to how one can not mention "indigenous" without evoking native peoples, one can also not mention "cowboys" without implying the pathologies of masculinity associated with that topic. Therefore, my characters are also people trying to navigate the expectations, both societal and self-imposed, associated with the spectrum of masculinity, including its shifting attributes and strengths, its weaknesses and myths, its behaviors, expectations, and toxicities.

In this dissertation are the neighbors to Poirier's characters. Some are antagonists to Rios's. Some are snowbirds buying flipped homes for far more than they are worth, but most are the people who live across the street, who can tell you every price that home has sold for since it was built. They can tell you the name of every family who has lived there. These are people who park trucks out on the street because their tent trailers and RVs take up their driveways. They know the schedules for hunting season. They see towering clouds on the horizon and don't worry about rushing home before the monsoon

hits, because they know those clouds are a hundred miles away over Prescott or Payson. In my dissertation are representations of people who are as likely to have voted for Donald J. Trump as they were to be disgusted by his narcissistic authoritarianism compared to the principled libertarianism of Barry Goldwater or the moderate conservatism of John McCain which they had voted for their entire lives. In my dissertation are people who willfully live in an unbearable heat, and who think that says something about who they are and what they are made of.

However, what I do not present in my dissertation are answers for why any of these people are the way they are. Instead, through a sort of fiction-as-historiography methodology, I've approached a population of Arizona I did not see represented in the literature and tried to present it without judgement or preconceived notions. I've tried to be critical of it, while also understanding my placement within it. In doing so, I've tried to explore questions about myself, about who I am and where I come from--questions I've often asked myself or been asked my entire life. I've tried to synthesize these questions into narratives which hopefully make my readers ask better, more informed, and more compelling questions about my region and state. About my home. Anton Chekov wrote "the role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them," and that is all I have attempted with this work.

CHAPTER 2

DOWNBURST

Amanda could only listen to the AM radio pundit bitch about Obamacare for so long, or the NPR host practically get off about the bill, before she had to dial in some classic rock, which was now Nirvana and all the other bands she had listened to in college. She raised the volume as "Down in a Hole" finished and the DJ came on to warn everybody about the logjam on the 101 caused by some shirtless guy who had climbed up on the Thomas overpass and now threatened to jump, the guy right outside Amanda's windshield along with the cops, firefighters, EMTs, and the spot where the guy would go splat, should he ever decide to go through with it.

At this point, Amanda figured one way or the other. She tugged the collar of her hospital scrubs to fan herself, the blue fabric soaked with sweat. For two hours she had sat in her Honda with its AC on and then off, on and then off, trying to save the battery while waiting for this guy to make a decision. And this, during monsoon season, where all that talk about Arizona's "dry heat" from her ex-husband when he convinced her to move turned out to be just another lie.

Amanda tasted sweat on her lips. She knew she was dehydrated but now wondered if she was suffering from heat exhaustion too. She knew it was heat exhaustion. She was a doctor--a radiologist, because she didn't like patients, didn't like hearing about their aches and pains, their self-diagnoses and psychosomatic worries--and knew perfectly well that babies and puppies and old people died all the time from being

left in hot cars. Therefore, it was reasonable she too could die while waiting for this guy to kill himself. Or not.

Amanda fanned herself, but her scrubs were tight and barely gave. She had put on a little weight since moving to Arizona. A lot of weight since the divorce. Even more since she started piling up on overtime at the imaging centers so she could afford her bills and student loans and the spousal maintenance for which she had been screwed by the courts and ordered to pay. Her ex was also a doctor, a cardiologist, but not a good one. He was good at the medicine but incompetent when it came down to business. She gave her collar a few more tugs, the heat insufferable. Her Acura had been equipped with climate control *and* satellite radio, but giving it, and its payment, to her ex had afforded Amanda six months of spending her nights doing something else besides reading X-Rays for clinics in India, China, Toledo, Wichita, and every other place where she was not.

Amanda used a tissue to wipe the sweat from her eyes. Her lips. Her neck. Between her breasts and belly. She changed the station, because "Livin' la Vida Loca" as classic and/or rock made her want to climb up on the overpass with the guy. That was a horrible thought, she caught herself thinking, the guy outside her windshield sobbing while a police officer knelt beside him and spoke gently to him through the chain-link fence. The overpass was only seventeen feet high (that was clearly painted on the concrete column) and from that height she would only break her legs. Maybe her back. It wouldn't kill her though, and if it wouldn't kill her, then maybe a not-so-gentle nudge was all that was needed up there for this obvious cry for help.

Static hummed though her speakers. Two hours of this bullshit. Two hours sweating and flipping from shitty music to okay music to the Diamondbacks game, and

she didn't even like the Diamondbacks, let alone baseball even though her and her ex used to have Brewers season tickets before they moved. The first baseman got thrown out at home and Amanda turned the damn thing off. On the overpass, the guy wept like a baby.

~

Ernest put his Acura in park and stepped onto the highway. The heat rose off the blacktop through his flip flops, the cowboy boots he wore at his clinic all day sitting upright on the passenger seat with his dirty argyle socks tucked inside them. He wiggled his toes, as if testing their freedom. The boots killed his feet because they didn't fit right, and they didn't fit right because Ernest had no idea how cowboy boots were supposed to fit when he went against his wife's advice--back when they were still married--and paid a small fortune for a pair online.

In front of him, cars were lined up all the way to the overpass where the man threatened to jump. Behind him cars were parked bumper-to-bumper until the road curved out of sight. It was like the whole 101 was backed up all the way to Glendale, he thought. Then he figured everyone was probably just detouring at Indian School, and that was what, a mile away? A half mile? Not that far, but at this point even a few inches was too much to backtrack.

Outside his car's recirculated air, everything smelled like warmth mixed with sweat mixed with dirt mixed with exhaust. Ernest could feel it in his pores. That was the one thing he hated about Arizona since moving there--he untucked his dress shirt and pulled the moist fabric off his skin--that sensation of always feeling dirty after just a little bit of heat.

"Aint' this some bullshit?" the guy in the truck next to Ernest said through his open window. The guy wore a mesh ball cap high up his forehead. The back of his truck was lined with McCain 2000 and McCain 2008 and Snowbirds Go Home bumper stickers. He motioned past his shattered windshield to the spectacle before them. Ernest crossed his arms and nodded, but doing so left sweat marks across his chest, so he uncrossed them but kept nodding. The guy also nodded. Ernest nodded some more. It seemed like they were having a great time fucking nodding.

"Yep," Ernest said.

Truthfully, Ernest was thankful for the man up on the overpass. Obviously, he didn't want the poor bastard to kill himself, but the man's plight had unexpectedly, and quite beyond Ernest's control, stranded him. Ernest was stuck on the highway. Stuck in his car. Stuck listening to his music. And, most importantly, stuck not having to rush home to Zooney like he did every day once he was done seeing patients. Back when he was married, his wife was also a doctor and worked so much she never cared what time Ernest came home. Back then he golfed and happy-houred with friends. He did things. He had *time* to do things, although he spent a lot of that time cheating on his wife with Zooney, which was why Zooney now kept tabs on him like she did.

Past the painter's ladders stacked on the guy's truck next to him, Ernest noticed dark clouds over the desert. Monsoon season. That was the other thing he hated about Arizona. For a month during the summers the insufferable heat became insufferably hot *and* humid due to giant thunderstorms and violent *haboobs*, which was the stupidest fucking word Ernest ever heard for a dust storm. It was probably the worst weather he ever experienced though, which was ironic, given how he and his ex-wife had left

Waukesha to get away from shitty weather. They picked Arizona after Ernest spent a week in Scottsdale for a cardiology conference, and while he lounged by the pool for seven days--families splashing and running around, kiddos doing cannon balls in the deep end--his wife shoveled snow back home. At first Ernest hated the storms because he had relocated to Arizona for never-ending sunshine, but now he hated them because they always came in the afternoons, which made it difficult to get home fast enough and avoid another fight with Zooey.

Ernest went to talk with the man in the truck about the big storm "over yonder." That was how he was going to phrase it, he decided, like he was just another local, the salt of the Earth just like this guy here. Ernest rehearsed saying it in his head a few times, but by the time he went to speak the guy had already turned up his radio. Ernest rocked on his heels until he realized "Amanda" was the song crackling from the guy's blown-out speakers. Amanda. *One whom deserves love*, he remembered. He put his hands in his pockets. How ridiculous, he thought. Of all the songs. He jingled his keys until he folded his arms over his chest. He looked behind him, then to the front. The tops of his feet burned.

Inside his car, the Acura's AC made his sweaty shirt turn icy. "Amanda" was still playing when he dialed in the preset country station, and he leaned back and listened to the end of the song that shared the same name as his ex-wife. The AC blew so cold his nipples turned into hard little stones.

~

Against her better judgment, Amanda turned the radio back on. She knew nothing would be any different. Same stations, same songs. The game was in the sixth. She

CHAPTER 3

TRIBUTARY

About a month before I killed my dipshit nephew, the bride came to my table carrying forty in chips. For the record, those two events did not cause one another, the married woman and demise of my sister's son, but were in a sort of relationship together, like how all things become related when shit floods downstream. Like in '83 when they had to open the spill gates for Hoover Dam because every stream this side of the Great Divide had drained into Lake Powell, some four-hundred miles upriver, causing it to crest and threaten to release a torrent stew of muddy water, spilt boat gasoline, and old dinosaur bones dug up from an era long best forgotten. Like how everything converges, someday, somehow. My point is, there was the bride and there was my nephew, and when the bride came to my table, she hoisted up her gown--an outlet special poofy in all the wrong places--plopped down on a barstool, dropped a five chip on my table, and told me to deal.

"So where's the groom so I can congratulate him too?" I said, and laid her card then mine, hers then mine. Right off the bat I was guessing she was from Victorville or San Bernardino. When you've dealt as long as I have you know how to read people, and there's a difference to the way Californians carry themselves. Like when they came to a table they expected to win. An unearned sense of entitlement, is what I'm getting at. She was pretty, or used to be, and if it wasn't for the wonky eye or faded Jesus tattoo, I would've thought she was twenty years younger. Or at least would have told her so, had she asked.

"If I knew you could tell him to go fuck himself for me," she said, and dragged her finger across the felt. I dropped a one-eyed jack on top her hand.

“Bust,” I said.

She took off her tiara and set it on the table. “Ain’t that just the Goddamned truth.”

When my shift ended I went against my better judgement and headed to the elevators, her room number scribbled on a cocktail napkin, her name *Jenny* in cursive along the top. The *J* was huge and grandiose, while the *enn* and *y* were tiny and fell off the page, which somehow seemed appropriate. I kept looking at my shoes waiting for the doors to open, hoping nobody in security was watching the cameras. Going up to a room was a strictly fireable offense and would get you blacklisted if you ever went applying at the other casinos. Laughlin had its reputation, of course, and didn’t need its blackjack dealers raw-dogging just-married guests and making it worse.

In front of the elevators, I started counting in my head--one, two, three--and if I got to ten, I told myself I was heading straight for my truck. At eighteen the arrow lit up green and the elevator doors opened. Inside, two kids polishing off margaritas dry humped each other. I smiled and they smiled, and they staggered off looking for the pool.

Fortunately, Jenny had changed clothes before answering the door, so I could at least pretend to forget what she had done only a few hours earlier. She just stood there like a goddess from a bad country song in her white bra and panties, which were yellowing at the seams.

“Wondered if you’d show,” she said, and swirled champagne in one of the glasses from the bathroom.

We didn’t say much after that. She sat on the bed and unbuttoned my uniform. She could

tell I was self-conscious about my shirt coming off, so after she got the first button undone, she kissed my big belly and winked that off-kilter eye of hers, as if to say she wasn't perfect either. Then she ran her fingers over the tattoo of the .357 my dad gave me twenty years earlier for my 16th birthday, which I had made permanent right after he got killed at the place where my belt rode my waist so it always looked like I was packing.

“Just what I need,” she said, my skin goosebumping under her lips. “Another outlaw.”

I grabbed her hands before they found my real bad tattoos higher up my back, mortgage worthy cover-ups of some old bullshit I once thought important. “I’m a bad man,” I told her, which was cornier than I intended, but by then I could’ve said anything.

Her sweet smell was still lingering on me when I drove home at dawn, cigarettes and Korbel and pussy. It was actually pretty gross, but it had also been a while since I last made any, so once I crossed the Colorado and entered the parking lot lights of Bullhead City, I hit the smoke switch for my truck and blew a big ole celebratory puff while I drove straight on home and hit the hay without even showering.

~

Couple hours later I was enjoying my postcoital morning lonesome when my phone rang out in the kitchen, and I knew I was in trouble. Only family and work knew my landline, so I figured either Vance had checked the cameras or Mom died.

"Wade, I'm sending you Brooks," my sister cried. Before I skipped town seventeen years earlier, my sister had hooked up with the head asshole I used to ride with, who--before moving into an eight-by-ten cell for the rest of his life--knocked her up good with my dipshit nephew, who I learned via Christmas cards was just as dumb as his dad.

“Do you know what time it is?” I wiped the gunk out of my eyes only to realize my fingers still smelled like the night before. I turned the sink on hot.

“Brooks’s in trouble.”

“Well don’t ship him here.”

“This is your nephew we’re talking about,” she said, then turned off the crying and ramped up the pissed off like she was good at.

“And it’s your fucking kid. Have his dad toss him a bone.”

“That’s not funny.”

“And I ain’t a comedian. What’d he do now?”

“Same shit you used to.”

“Now I really don’t want him.”

There were reasons why I didn’t live in Phoenix anymore, and none of them were good. My back was still dimpled from that night we robbed those brothers and I took off on an Indian that maybe kinda sorta wasn’t mine, its owner getting his shotgun off before I could drop the clutch. I was lucky it was quail season otherwise that spray would’ve been a lot worse than birdshot.

“He’s a good boy,” my sister said. “He just needs back on the straight and narrow.”

“Do not send me your kid,” I said. I snipe-hunted the ash tray for something worth lighting. “I have a hard enough time babysitting myself, thank you very much.”

“Well tough shit,” my sister said. “Because he left for your place an hour ago.”

~

I wasn’t supposed to be at work until three and planned on taking the Sea-Doo out on the river before the storms moved in, which the news was predicting, or watching some

football, or maybe looking at a little internet porno. My point is, I had plans. Instead, I locked up my guns. I hauled my penny jug to the coin machine at the Safeway and threw a Masterlock on my TV bracket.

I did all of this because the last time my nephew was in my home, back when he was in the fifth or sixth grade, that little shit robbed me blind. It was right after I had bought my house, and Mom came up with my sister and her boy to see the new me. The me who was no longer lifting anything not tied down just to lay track marks down my arm. The me no longer preaching about a forthcoming race war like *The Turner Diaries* was gospel. If you would've called me a skinhead at the time, I might've argued with you, but that was only on account of how I used to wear my hair in a ponytail. The new me went out of his way to treat his family to buffets and shows. The new me took time off from stable employment to take everybody joyriding on the Sea-Doo. The new me wasn't ranting and raving for casual conversation. Day they left, however, I noticed all the quarters in my penny jug were missing. My iPod was gone. A pack of Camels, along with two condoms from my nightstand, had disappeared. Yet when I called my sister to tell her about it, I was the asshole for "accusing a child."

I was in my driveway checking the lock for the Sea Doo when a green Chrysler with a red door--which barely ran back when my sister drove it--pulled up. The timer belt clicked even after the engine turned off, and low and behold my dipshit nephew emerged from behind the wheel, his Dodgers hat sitting crooked on his head. He was as skinny as an AIDS patient and his acne scars made him look like a burn victim. I couldn't tell if he was limping or G-stepping, way he walked. And he was so sweaty I assumed his car's AC, like him, was pretty much useless.

"I don't remember your place being so shitty," he said, limping up my driveway.

CHAPTER 4
DRY DOCKED

The billiards table was flipped over.

That's the scene that met Tweed the moment he entered the Yacht Club after getting the call and bumping his wailers and leaving the interstate median where he had clocked speeders heading to and fro California since before dawn: the billiards table on its side, the wax sealant which held the concrete slabs together broken from the fall, the blue felt glued to the slabs the only thing keeping the monumental table in any sort of semblance of still being whole.

“And how many folks you say did that?” Tweed asked. He pulled a pen from his uniform shirt pocket and scribbled over his notepad. Behind the bar, Dwayne stood with his arms crossed over the Yacht Club's logo. There wasn't a body of water suitable for a yacht within a hundred miles, but that hadn't stopped Dwayne from decorating the joint with compasses and flags, oars and ship wheels, or from paying the fees and becoming fully chartered so he could sell novelty memberships to the one and only maritime establishment in Quartzsite, Arizona.

Tweed's pen bled through a half-dozen pages while waiting for Dwayne's answer. Near the soda dispenser, Chastity smacked her gum. She leaned over the bar and stared Tweed down with a look he did not appreciate, her arms pressed together so her chest bulged from the brink of her uniform's tank top, as if making perfectly clear what Tweed was missing. In the dining room, Mike and Zelda sat at the same table where they sat every morning and ate the same order of fried eggs and limp bacon they ate for every

breakfast. Mike also glared at Tweed, although that was for an old parking ticket he still hadn't paid, while Zelda just went about eating her food. For a moment Tweed wondered if anybody had even left their spots since the night before.

“Just one,” Dwayne said, but he looked hard at Chastity when he said it.

Tweed flipped to a page in his notepad that wasn't covered in chicken scratch. The billiards table was huge, an old gyroscopic self-leveling model made for cruise ships and which Dwayne had paid quite the penny for at auction in San Diego. Tweed noted the gyroscopic was already busted before the table was flipped--which was why it was probably sold in the first place--and although Dwayne always swore everything was on the level, no one in town ever expected to get much of a leave after taking their best shot.

“Wait, you're telling me only one man did that?” Tweed asked.

Dwayne kept looking at Chastity, and Chastity kept staring down Tweed. She popped her gum. Dwayne breathed in a belly full, and Chastity shook her head in disgust. “Yeah,” Dwayne exhaled, and Chastity grabbed the coffee pot and refilled Mike and Zelda's mugs. “Just one.”

Tweed turned back to the table. Each concrete slab had to weigh at least 150 pounds. You'd either have to be built like a linebacker or have a pretty big chip on your shoulder to flip something like that. “So what'd this one man look like?” Tweed asked.

“Oh, you know,” Dwayne said. He stared down at his feet, then up at the ceiling, as if an answer might be hiding up there. “Mannish,” he said.

Tweed's pen didn't move. “Mannish?”

"Yeah," Dwayne said. He exchanged glances with Mike, Chastity no longer giving him the time of day. "Yay mannish tall, yay mannish wide. Mannish hair and stuff. You'd know him if you saw him."

Tweed's pen bled through a half dozen pages. "Maybe you could elaborate?"

"You should've never made that arrest last night," Zelda said. She blew on her freshly poured coffee. "You was entirely in the wrong, Tweed, and now you're more in the doghouse for this whole mess than Whitney is. Or should be, if you ask me. He's the victim here."

Chastity said Zelda's name with a scolding tone, and Mike asked his wife what the hell was wrong with her? Why'd she have to go and spill the beans on Whitney like that?

"Wait, you're telling me Whitney did that?" Tweed said. He again glanced back at the table, four angry Poseidons holding tridents for its legs, the whole thing totally out of place in the Arizona desert. Whitney had been the one who installed the table in exchange for a night of free drinks, and Tweed wondered at what cost it would now take to fix.

"You're saying Whitney came in here after I no-trespassed him last night and flipped that damn thing?"

Nobody answered. Everybody liked Whitney, the whole damn town, whether they were the 3,500 year-rounders or a-quarter-million rockhounds who lived out of their RVs during the winter months. And fact of the matter was between the speeding tickets, DUI checkpoints, vehicle registration fines, minor drug charges, major drug charges, dog-off-leash complaints, or whatever else Tweed wrote up--"as his job required," he always reminded everybody--*nobody* liked him.

Tweed asked again. Chastity kept standing where she stood, and Mike sat where he sat. Dwayne leaned where he leaned. Zelda took another sip of coffee. Everyone was in the exact spot where they had been the night before when Tweed had to make the DV arrest involving Whitney and his wife, Doreen. It was right in the middle of Fish Fry Friday, which was why Tweed was even at the bar so late in the first place. Otherwise, he would've been in bed already, getting his beauty sleep before his morning shift. Tweed checked his watch. It hadn't even been twelve hours yet. He figured Whitney would've still been hanging around the jail by then.

"Of course Whitney did it," Zelda said like she didn't give a damn for spilling the beans, because, Tweed knew, she didn't. "And it's your fault he did. He's fit to be tied with you, Tweed. He's a man and you undercut that in front of everybody. You know better. You should have not interjected yourself in the doings of other people's unions."

Tweed tucked his notepad back inside his pocket.

"You can't wail on your spouse like that," he told her. Told them all. Dwayne put up his hands like he wasn't arguing. "And you can't do it with me sitting right there in front of you. What'd you want me to do, Zelda? Mike? Chastity, *you* got something to say? *You* of all people want to keep interjecting *yourself* into somebody else's marriage? You wanted me to just let it happen? Let it go on like it was, that it?"

Zelda lifted her mug for another top off. "Oh, that's just how Whitney and Doreen love each other," she said. "It ain't a great way, but it's theirs. Maybe if you ever held on to a little passion yourself, you'd understand."

Chastity snorted scornfully as she filled Zelda's mug. Mike chuckled too. Even Dwayne coughed back a laugh. Over his radio, Tweed called in a 10-29A for Whitney. "And how long ago did this happen?" he asked while dispatch repeated his call.

Dwayne wiped away his smile. He stuck out his lower lip in thought. "About an hour ago," he said. "Right when I opened."

Dispatch asked for confirmation. Tweed checked his watch.

"If this happened an hour ago, how come I'm just now getting the call?"

"Because I knew Whitney'd still be here if I called earlier," Dwayne said. "And then you'd arrest him. This has nothing to do with me, Tweed, you two need to figure this out."

"*Tweed?*" dispatch crackled. "*Tweed, you there? Tweed, is this an emergency?*"

"Why'd you even make the call, Dwayne?" Tweed asked, after he told dispatch to cancel the search. "If you didn't want Whitney arrested for this, why're you even bothering?"

"Because I need a police report for the insurance," he said. "And besides--" He turned and peeled away a napkin taped to the bar mirror. "Whit asked me to give you this."

Tweed pulled the napkin taut. Scrawled over it, with tears from the weight of the pen, was written *I, Whitney Danielsdotter, of healthy mind and body, hereby challenge you, Officer of the Law Tweedle-Dee Johnston, to a duel. Pistols is the weapons. The time for dueling is of your choosing. Sincerely, Whitney Danielsdotter.*

"But let me know when you plan on meeting him," Dwayne added. "Because I promised Whit I'd be his second on this. Nothing personal, of course."

CHAPTER 5
PALINDROME

I had just moved into my new house when my neighbor's horse died.

Maybe I was there a couple weeks by then. Maybe it was all the boxes still stacked in every room that only made it feel like I had just moved in. I was afraid, back then, that if I unpacked my wife's belongings, if I cut the tape and opened the cardboard boxes with her things inside, then the smell of her would dissipate soon after. That her essence would really abandon me for good with her buried back in California.

And anyway, back then my neighbor wasn't so much a neighbor as he was an empty field. A dirt lot taking up the whole expanse of Prescott Valley from my view across the street, from a house I had purchased sight-unseen off a computer in Los Angeles. I had never even visited Prescott before buying that house. I had barely stepped foot in the state of Arizona except to see the Grand Canyon when the kids were little. Yet I moved anyway because the community college there needed a new math professor, and I could retire from my thirty-three years of doing the same thing in Los Angeles and conveniently pull a pension and salary at the same time. And, most convenient of all, Prescott did not offer the same restaurants and theaters, stores and beaches my wife and I had frequented for forty-nine years, six months, and eleven days. Prescott did not have the same neighbors whom we had lived next to during all that time.

About the horse, I couldn't tell you much besides "huge" and "yellow." I will be seventy-three in August, but I did not have much experience with horses in L.A. Sure, there are ranches in Burbank and Pasadena where you can take riding lessons, but I never

did. What I can tell you is this: before it died, that horse was the entire reason I purchased my house in the first place.

Long story short, I had committed to moving to Prescott before I actually decided to do so. I think it was only a week from the time I saw the college's posting online and sent in a CV on a whim until the interview and offer came, which was unheard of, other faculty told me in the lounge that semester. But there I was. Everything happened so fast that as soon as I signed the contract, I had to go straight to work on moving. School started in a week. There was no time to meander. I sold our home in Sherman Oaks where we raised our children before they went off and raised children of their own, and I packed everything Susan and I had accumulated during our life together. Then I spent my evenings searching online listings for properties in a place I had never been. Whole nights spent scrolling through rooms with other people's furniture, closets with other people's clothes, until I found a new subdivision on the outskirts of town.

It wasn't anything special, that house I bought. Still isn't, I imagine. It's been a year since the day I'm telling you about, the day my neighbor's horse died, and I moved again right after. The home was no different than any other house in the same development. Same stucco walls, same red tile roofs. Every house an exact replica of the next. However, at the time, the neighborhood stopped at the end of my driveway. There were no houses built across the street. I don't know if they've built any since, I know they were planning on it, but back then there was nothing but an empty field, I saw, when I opened Google Maps and looked down upon the property. Not another soul around.

Of course, I looked at other listings too. Other homes, other neighborhoods. But I soon realized I had started comparing every new house I looked at to the one I would

eventually buy. I was even referring to it as "my" house in my head. This bathroom isn't as nice as the one in "my" house. This one doesn't have the extra bedrooms where our grandkids could stay when they came down to visit like "mine."

I went back to the listing. I paused on a picture of the kitchen. Granted, I can't cook at all, but I do make a good pie for the holidays. Pumpkin, pecan. I used to make a blueberry cheesecake which the Dawsons, our neighbors in L.A., requested every time they came over. Maybe it was because I dealt with numbers for a living and that's why I enjoyed baking like I did. The measuring out of ingredients, the calculating of the right ratios between time and heat. Susan always did the turkey at Thanksgiving. It was the surgeon in her, she used to say, that made her efficient at carving out the breast with the upmost precision.

Anyway, I don't know how long I spent looking at those same pictures of what would become my kitchen in Prescott like anything about them might change. This was the night before I moved. It was near midnight, the latest I had stayed up in years, and I was practically delirious from packing all day. I should've just gone to bed. Got a little shuteye before I tried steering a U-Haul through L.A. rush hour a few hours later. But standing there at our old counter, my laptop the only light in our old empty kitchen, our old empty home, everything of importance packed inside the moving truck out front, I found myself typing in the address for the Prescott property on Google Earth. I found I already knew it by heart.

I still don't know what I expected to find when I pressed enter. A house was just a house. A yard, a yard. It wasn't until I turned the camera 180 degrees from the driveway that I found it. There it stood, huge and golden in the field across the street: the horse,

staring back at me, as if the Google truck with all its cameras and gadgets had disturbed the animal from eating grass at that very instant just so me and it could share this moment together, whatever this moment was.

I put in an offer right then-and-there. Like a maniac, I called my realtor while the horse stared back at me and instructed him to not even haggle on the price, just give the seller everything they wanted. And my Realtor, Rex Spurgin was his name--what a name for a Realtor from Prescott--said, "Sure thing, hoss." Hoss, can you believe it? Over the line I then listened to him scribble some notes before he added, "soon as the rooster crows."

The horse died after that. A couple weeks, maybe? A month? I saw it in the field the morning it died, at the exact spot where I first saw it on my computer. It was lying there when I got in my truck, a brand-new F-150 Lariat Edition, the most expensive waste of money in which I have ever indulged. I don't even like trucks. I'm not a "truck guy." We always had sedans in L.A. A minivan too when the kids were little. Susan was always very practical in that regard. She was never concerned with appearances, with pretending she cared what other people thought. She never even let me upgrade whatever Toyota or Honda she was driving for a Lexus or Acura. Not until she got sick, anyway. And that was only because I traded in her car without asking. I was desperate to make her happy.

Anyway, I bought the F-150 after moving to Prescott. With the winters there, I figured four-wheel drive made sense. I imagined Susan would be happy with my fidelity to her practicality. However, after the salesman talked me into the heated seats, fog lights, automatic braking--"You just *never* know when an elk might jump in front of you," he

convinced me on the test drive--I found myself spending more for that one truck than I had spent on all our other vehicles combined. Well, that's not true. And anyway, had I kept that Lexus, which didn't have a tow hitch let alone enough power to drag a dead horse into the desert, I never would've met my neighbor that night, the night his horse died. I never would have this story to tell you. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. I'm meandering too long.

The day the horse died, I saw it in the morning laying in the field. I thought it was asleep and didn't give it a second thought. Instead, I just hopped in my truck and went to work. I taught two sections of Algebra, my classes mostly made up of kids who didn't do so hot in high school, or adults returning to school for a raise at work. It was the same when I taught in L.A., just people trying to better their situation somehow, somehow.

So I taught my classes and held my office hours, and after a cup of coffee in the teachers' lounge--not because I wanted the coffee, it was really too late in the day by then, but because sitting there allowed me to share a few words with any faculty who might pass through to make copies--I went home. But when I pulled into my driveway, the horse was still in the field. Still on its side. So it was then that I realized something was wrong. Flies hovered over it and in the glow of the setting sun their wings shone like prisms with their spiraling angles of flight. The horse's ribs arched under its skin, and I assumed it was due to all the gases which had festered inside it during the day. As soon I got out of my truck, I pulled my shirt over my nose, and while breathing shallow breaths and watching the flies, I saw my neighbor for the first time.

About a hundred yards across the field was an old clapboard house made of cedar planks and shingles. It looked nothing like the new stucco builds of my development, or

CHAPTER 6

BETWEEN THE SMOKE AND THE FIRE, THE TIDE AND THE SEA

It was the first time Fredrick visited Papaw's since the wildfire rolled through the year before, the Rodeo-Chediski, the largest conflagration the state of Arizona ever suffered. Papaw's acreage of Ponderosa pines once teeming with life--squirrel and elk, javelina and mountain lion--was now a field of ash. The pristinely manicured gravel road which led to the cabin at the back of the property was now a crooked trench, a rut left like a scar from a firetruck's hapless search for traction the year before.

Despite what Fredrick saw outside his windshield, he still had a hard time believing Papaw's cabin survived like it had. That a fire could simply jump a home after decimating the whole world around it first. Yet, there it stood. It and nothing else. Except for Heber-Overgaard bouncing in Fredrick's rearview mirror--the towns only spared because the highway had acted like a fire line against the winds--Papaw's home, blackened and charred but still standing, might as well have been a lone outpost at the edge of an otherwise unbearable world.

None of this should have been a surprise. His mother had told Fredrick how bad the fire was before he got in his car and drove the two hours north from Phoenix, but he still never expected this. Couldn't have imagined it if he tried. Where Pawpaw's corral and stable once stood was now an outline of stumps spread out like gravestones. Where the chicken coop once stood, the old rickety shack in which Fredrick used to crawl as a child and collect eggs for breakfast when visiting, was now nothing, just nothing at all.

Fredrick switch-backed the rut and hoped through white knuckles he wouldn't bottom out completely. When he finally pulled up to the house, he parked behind Papaw's old Grand Caravan and just sat there, getting his bearings. Everything was ruined. There was no birdsong when he got out of his car. He could feel the high mountain wind, but there were no trees to hear it through. Under the carport, the tires on the minivan were so flat that for a moment Fredrick mistakenly thought the vehicle had melted into the ground.

Everything had changed since the last time Fredrick visited. He was still in high school back then. He hadn't dropped out of college or joined the Navy yet. His whole world was still ahead of him. His mother had arranged everything that day eight years earlier, Frederick remembered as he walked up the porch's handicapped ramp. The priest from the Mormon temple. The flowers. The pastries with pink and blue icing shaped like delicate cherubs which were served to those who had come to mourn his grandmother. Pawpaw was still in the hospital then, his doctors still holding out hope he would walk. They were still optimistic they could save the eye Papaw would ultimately lose after he had hit black ice and flipped the truck which killed Fredrick's grandmother.

Fredrick opened the screen and knocked. He rocked on his heels and buried his hands in his pockets. He pressed his keys for the Camry he and his wife had purchased to be their family vehicle after they got married, its lights flashing twice in the middle of the barren field.

"Papaw?" Fredrick called out, after he tested the doorknob and found it unlocked. "Prudence?" He hoped that was the name of his grandfather's current nurse, and not the one from before.

Inside the home, everything was the same. It was like the whole world beyond the walls hadn't exist, hadn't happened. The couch where Fredrick used to sleep when visiting still had his grandmother's knitted blanket over the back. His school pictures were still lined up on the hutch, his elementary, middle, and high school selves smiling back at him. In the kitchen, however, the dining table had been pushed up against the wall and was covered in unopened mail. And instead of his grandmother's cooking made in abundance in the fridge and stored in Tupperware, inside were only three Keystone Lights, baloney, expired Miracle Whip, and a half-empty gallon of whole milk.

"You're lucky you look like your mother," Papaw's voice said behind him.

Milk in hand, Fredrick closed the refrigerator. In the doorway for the den sat his grandfather in his electric wheelchair. Papaw's one eye bulged like his skull was filled with a terrible pressure, and the patch that covered his lost eye had yellowed with time. His nose was a burst capillary. He looked just like Rooster Cogburn, Fredrick thought, remembering the old VHS tapes Papaw would play when Fredrick was visiting, if John Wayne had returned from the grave to play the part.

Papaw pulled his flannel shirt closed over his chest. "You ever hear of knocking?" he said, then motioned to the door with one hand while his other laid motionless under his blanket. Fredrick hadn't remembered his mother saying Papaw had lost his upper dexterity like that, but maybe she had. It seemed lately everyone had a habit of saying things Fredrick didn't hear.

"You didn't answer," Fredrick said. He sniffed the milk and got a glass from the cabinet.

"You ever change a colostomy bag by yourself?" Papaw said. "It ain't exactly quick."

"Why isn't Prudence helping you?"

"Fired her," Papaw said. "Your mother knows how to pick them, that woman was stealing."

"So who's your nurse now?"

"If it ain't you, why you here?"

Fredrick filled his glass and took a sip. He licked away his white mustache and was pretty sure the milk had soured. "Mom was supposed to call and tell you I was coming."

Papaw snorted. "Your mother don't call," he said. "She don't write."

"You ever call her her?"

Papaw leaned back, his collar falling back open. "Why you here, boy?"

Fredrick poured the milk down the drain. "Getting divorced," he said. He ran the glass under the faucet. He set it in the strainer then leaned against the counter and crossed his arms, as if bracing for impact. "Probably getting divorced. We're separated, I mean. I moved in with Mom until things got settled. Had some time on my hands, so figured I'd come up and see you."

Papaw ran his tongue under his lips like he was tasting his words before spitting them. "Didn't know you was married," he said finally.

Fredrick adjusted the glass so it balanced better in the strainer. Not telling Papaw had been Fredrick's mother's idea. Demand, really. It had been a tiny ceremony in San Diego, more an elopement than anything else, and Papaw wouldn't have made it as it

was, not with his health, Fredrick's mother insisted. Of course, that was beside the point. Papaw was his grandfather, Fredrick had argued. His flesh and blood. He had tried convincing his mother that she couldn't keep blaming Papaw for the black ice, that it was irrational to hate someone on account of a collision with nature, but his mother stopped him right then-and-there over the phone. She made clear that when it came to family, blame and hatred were the most natural things of all.

Papaw's tongue did another rotation under his mouth as he considered Fredrick. Finally, his motionless hand pulled his snubbed-nose .38 from under the blanket. He tossed it on the table, the gun landing on the unopened mail with a thud.

"Cord a wood round back needs split," Papaw said. "Had to buy it this year. If another tree round here burns down, won't be until New Mexico for squirrels to find their nuts. Wouldn't worry about them finding yours, letting a woman run out on you like that. Hope the ceremony was nice."

Papaw hit the knob and wheeled himself into the den. Fredrick watched him go. The last time he had stepped foot in that room was to help carry in his grandmother's coffin. The funeral home director had told Fredrick's mother in the driveway that there was simply no way to make his grandmother presentable for an open casket, what with nobody finding her and Papaw for three days after they went off road. He had apologized if Fredrick's mother was not happy with the result. His mother had just nodded as the technicians struggled to remove the coffin from the hearse, the crew two men short after both called in sick. "I was always taught to keep my gratitude higher than my expectations," his mother had told the director, then volunteered Fredrick's help before excusing herself to meet the arriving guests.

CHAPTER 7

FOSSIL CREEK

A few hours before my father's heart gave out, before a tiny and otherwise insignificant fragment of plaque dislodged itself and dammed up what should have been the rest of his life, he stood smiling like an idiot--like a dummy who had no idea what was coming for him--under the Ponderosa pines swaying over our front yard.

"Two more are on order," he said, when he heard me open the screen door and come on out. In our gravel driveway, a delivery truck driver backed an ATV off a flatbed trailer. "But the dealership said we could take this one home today." Then my father signed some papers and reviewed the carbon copies. "It's a quarter till noon," he said when he finally looked up and saw me. I was still in my pajamas, because I had still been asleep until the delivery truck hissed its brakes outside my window. My father's smile crept away as he squinted over his glasses, and while I remember thinking he looked like an old man doing that, on that day he was forty-four, only a few years older than I am now. "Go get dressed before you waste your whole life in bed."

Inside our brand-new house built to look like a rugged, old-timey cabin, my mother blew on a steamless cup of tea while she watched my father through the window above the sink.

"Make him stop," I begged her.

By then it had been one month since my father cashed in his life spent as an accountant--a career path I unsuccessfully swore I would never follow--and relocated us from our Scottsdale neighborhood to the tiny mountain town of Strawberry, population

no one, in hopes of reconciling us into the family he suddenly realized we were not. I was sixteen then--as old as my own son is now--and, as I am learning is typical of that age, hellbent on being miserable.

At the sink, my mother held her mug to her lips even after she swallowed, as if waiting for the taste to change. She shook her wrist and checked the Cartier my father had given her years earlier, either for an anniversary or an apology or both.

"Don't make your father wait," she said.

The delivery truck was gone by the time I returned outside in a polo shirt and athletic shorts from my old high school in Scottsdale, as if to make it clear to my father about where I would rather be. Ironically, my own son now does the same thing when he lists all the video games he plays at his stepfather's house every time it is my weekend with him, except in March and April, tax season, because he is with his mother full-time and I am busy calculating the investments and returns of other people.

"Here we go," my father said as he sat on the quad and peered at the controls before finding the ignition button. He looked ridiculous doing that. In Scottsdale, my father had worn neatly pressed buttoned downs tucked into his khakis, even around the house. But in Strawberry he wore *Life is Good* shirts and hiking boots. He had replaced his Omega--which I now wear, and which only keeps perfect time twice a day--with a Casio on a paracord band. He bought a wide-brimmed Stetson. That's because in Strawberry my father tried to reinvent himself after he woke up one day and apparently saw something about our lives he did not like.

Once he got the motor going, my father swung his leg widely to dismount the quad, as if he was unsure how to move around with such an awkward machine between

his legs. Then he stood next to the ATV, and I stood next to him, and the engine idled between us.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, what?" I answered.

My mother opened the door and stood like a sentry behind the screen, her tea cupped in both hands. Since the move I had ignored her many pleas to give my father a chance, just give the move a chance, give it time, she had said, which I knew were half-hearted requests because I also knew she did not want to be there either. And knowing that had made it easy to ignore my father every time he asked me to grab the field manual he ordered for just the occasion and help him identify which animal shit in our yard during the night. It was no effort at all to lock myself in my room and instant message my friends when he asked for help raking pine needles or chopping wood. In the evenings, when he tried to cajole me out on nature walks so we could see the elk and javelina bed down in the forest, I had no problem plopping on the couch and watching the same movies over and over again, until one day the premium channels were canceled. Until the basic channels went next. Until the modem disappeared.

And then, on that day, my father set out early and came home with a brand-new ATV as some grand gesture for this new life he wanted for us. This romanticized version of ourselves up in the mountains and a hundred miles away from all the distractions he decided had only kept us from being the family he now wanted us to be. A hundred miles away from my friends and school, my teams and clubs, my mother's happy hours and spinning classes, and--I learned later from my mother when we moved back to the Valley after his funeral--my father's girlfriends and affairs and repeated betrayals.

Standing next to the ATV, my father revved the motor again. He pursed his lips to say something--I assumed the "talk" he had wanted to have since the move--so I jumped on the quad before he could say a word. "*Fun!*" I said sarcastically, swinging my foot widely as I mounted to mimic my father's movements and show him how little we were alike. At the time, this made sense to me.

"Now take her easy, okay?" my father said as he walked me through the controls. He showed me how to turn the ATV on and off, and how to rock it back and forth if it wouldn't get in gear. He used terms like "foot brake" and "gear shaft," which I figured the delivery driver had just taught him. "And remember, I used half the tank on the test drive this morning, so just give her a quick spin. We got two more coming this week, so we can all go out together then. And son," he said, even though he never referred to me as "son" back home. He had always just called me by my name, which was his name, too. "Don't go too far out, okay? I want to talk about some stuff later, and I don't want you getting stuck out in the woods when this thing runs out of gas."

Then he put his hand on my forearm and squeezed.

I would not remember that touch with anything but contempt until my mother similarly squeezed my arm as I led her away from my father's casket days later; when she froze in the church aisle and stared down my father's former secretary, the woman who had worked directly under him before the move, the woman wearing the exact same dress as my mother. Even today I can see that woman's grief-stricken face half-contort into something like a sad, lonely smile when she saw me there, the spitting image of my dad. At the time, I did not understand what a smile like that meant, what a smile like that

could mean at my father's funeral, but like my father's squeeze--the last time he would ever touch me--it took me a lifetime to realize it as love.

Then my father let go of my arm and started to say something else, but I revved the motor to drown out his voice. I nodded mockingly at whatever he said, then gunned the ATV down the driveway and to the street.

A mile later was the intersection for Fossil Creek Road, which led to the interstate one way and namesake creek the other. A few years ago, when planning a camping trip with my son, I learned the creek was named for how its calcium rich waters fossilize anything that falls into it, thus preserving old life forms as tiny, travertine impressions. I also learned the creek was one of the largest suppliers of the travertine used by my clients in the construction industry to tile the floors of upscale remodels, the same floors my father had laid in our Scottsdale house before moving, the same floors my wife and I had before our divorce. The camping trip with my son never happened though. My ex-wife's husband bought tickets to the Dbacks game that weekend, and my son wanted to go. I didn't even know he liked baseball.

At the intersection, cars and pickups passed by, their drivers waving a country hello that I did not reciprocate. Idling there, I remember wondering what my friends were doing back home, if they knew what had happened at Tiffany Castro's party two weeks earlier, the last time we had chatted before Dad cut the internet. My friends and I were not the types to be invited to the parties held by the Tiffany Castros of our school, but I knew they would have at least heard about it by then, heard who paired up with whom and snuck off into the bathrooms and closets and did all the awesome things my friends

CHAPTER 8
WATERSHED

Even if his life depended on it, Samuel McMurtee could not comprehend why three Germans stood arguing in the river. The three men, one just a kid, a boy no older than Samuel's own sons would've been if they were still alive, yelled and pointed fingers while a ramshackle canoe--a slop of tar over some wood and canvas--sat beached at their feet in the two-inch-wide trickle known as the Gila.

Samuel watched the Germans from behind a mesquite and over the barrels of his 16-gauge side-by-side. All day he had been tracking a coyote that made a bad habit of running off with a chicken every other week when he heard the men's yelling and ran over to help. The coyote was just a nuisance initially--"It'll move on," he kept telling his wife--until it committed the egregious sin of slaughtering their whole roost four days earlier on Christmas Eve. And that had caused Samuel and Rosemarie to celebrate the birth of their Lord with nothing but bowls of Post Toasties and the rich aromas of cleaning oil after Samuel unlocked their sons' wardrobe and fetched the shotgun.

One of the older Germans snatched a piece of paper from the younger one and shook it in the boy's face. Samuel figured it must've been a map after the older one waved it to everything around them before slapping it with the back of his hand to add emphasis to each word he spat.

It was the strangest thing, Samuel thought, hearing that German tongue. How similar it was to English but wasn't. How every word sounded like something Samuel knew, should've known, once knew; but didn't, hadn't, never would. Then the older

German waved the map to all the saguaro and mesquite, creosote and caliche as the other older one just stood there smiling while wearing the damnedest canary yellow sports coat Samuel ever saw.

When he first heard the yelling, Samuel thought someone was hurt. A twisted ankle or snake bit, maybe. But the closer he ran to help, the more it sounded like men were fighting. Really going at it too. And not knowing what he was rushing toward, Samuel had fumbled for his birdshot, a couple paper shells falling from his pocket, the mens' tracks leading right past him in the dirt, an odd "V" at the tip of each boot print. Then, after creeping up behind a mesquite and realizing it was German the men yelled--*German*, of all things--Samuel convinced himself that these three must've been on the run from Papago, the POW camp past the mill and teacher's college in Tempe some twenty miles away. But he hadn't heard of any escapes lately--their neighbors, the Richters, usually warned them of things like that because they knew the McMurtees' radio was busted--and these three didn't look like prisoners. Not what prisoners should look like, anyway. Peering over the beads of his shotgun, Samuel saw clearly that the two of them wore coveralls same as him. And then there was that yellow sports coat...

In fact, all three looked like they could've come straight off the Feed & Seed lot in Phoenix. That man with the jacket could've owned the lot, what with how nice that coat was. And the other older one could've passed for Buffalo Charlie behind the register at Cobb's, if Charlie ever did something about that extra hundred pounds on him. And the boy? Samuel considered that. The boy could've been either of his sons. The resemblance was unsettling. But his eldest, Michael, was killed in Naples, and his youngest, Isaiah, was still missing a year after he was last seen at some dot on a French map that neither

Samuel nor his wife could pronounce. "He'll tell you how to say it when he gets back," Rosemarie made clear whenever Samuel tried to sound it out. "If you want to say it so badly, when he gets home you can learn it then."

In the mostly dry river, the man in the yellow coat apparently had enough of his companions bickering and stepped between them. He wagged his fingers so they would move back. Then he straddled the canoe. He gyrated back-and-forth and made wild gestures like he was paddling, his feet kicking up tiny splashes in the puddle beneath him. The boy doubled over laughing. The other one slowly folded the map. Then the younger one jumped behind the one in the coat and they gyrated together, the kid smiling a boyish grin and making some remark in their language until the angry one put his hand to his cheek in dismay. Then he threw the map over his shoulder, which caused them all to practically fall over.

Watching them get on like that, Samuel determined the three men weren't *Germans*, just German. Arizona wasn't like Texas where Rosemarie's people lived, where old world settlements had popped up like a rash since before the Alamo. Samuel remembered going through some of those towns to visit his in-laws outside of New Braunfels after he and Rosemarie were first married, all the men in lederhosen and clearing their throats because nobody knew a lick of English. He knew there were settlements near Tucson like that, pockets near the border where folks ate schnitzel, so he figured these three must've come from there. One of the mining towns maybe. That they were probably told of the good fishing on the Gila by some GIs training for Africa the year before, GIs who just wanted to bust some German balls before heading overseas. That they probably jerry-rigged that canoe on such advice and hauled it up to this spot.

The three men took turns straddling the canoe and laughing. Samuel caught himself laughing along with them, then laughed some more when he thought about how his sons would've been just the type to tell such a yarn. Fishing on the Gila, bring your canoe. Good grief.

Finally, the Germans broke down their vessel. They hoisted its wood and canvas parts over their shoulders while hurraing each other. Samuel couldn't help but remember his own boys' smiles when they would do that, usually when the three of them were out tending cotton or castrating the new steers on branding day, Samuel always telling them to knock it off and never letting on for one second that he thought his sons' mean comments to each other were just as funny as they did.

Then the boy started a marching song that the other two joined in on, and as the three men marched downriver, Samuel took his fingers off the triggers. He lowered the shotgun. From behind the mesquite, he watched them go, the three just laughing and singing and carrying on without a care in the world, as if nobody was quite ready to set down that useless raft and haul around the grudge the truth would only make them carry instead.

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The night was heavy with frost when Samuel wandered in from the desert. The moon shone dimmer than normal due to the penumbral eclipse he had read about in the last paper he purchased from Cobb's a week earlier. It hovered dull and low over South Mountain in the distance, as well as Samuel's fields of cotton and alfalfa, his stable and corral, the garden up near the house where Rosemarie grew so much asparagus and

tomatoes that she usually had to send some over to the Richters lest it spoil, which would've been a terrible waste given all their children running around.

Samuel's whole body ached as he crossed the fields and approached the gate for their yard--his feet and back, the scratches that covered him head-to-toe. His collar and sleeves were stiff with dried blood because after the Germans he had tracked the coyote to a grove of chaparral and crawled inside to see if this was where it had made its den. Besides maybe a sandwich and a couple pages of that newspaper concerning the eclipse for when nature called, Samuel also wished he would have grabbed a coat when setting out that morning, not just because the temps were near freezing by the time he returned home, but because a coat would've protected him better than a flannel shirt when his efforts were for naught, the coyote long gone.

Samuel could smell dinner was ready as he closed the gate behind him, government fatback over beans and whatever Rosemarie picked from the garden. With the rationing in effect, it was the same dinner his wife grudgingly prepared every evening, except for their feast of Post Toasties on Christmas, and she had been even less thrilled by that. Samuel's stomach panged, and for a moment he was happy to be home. Yet standing at the precipice for his yard, he looked up at the house, the same clapboard house his father had built when Samuel was born, and not a light shone inside. Not a sound stirred. And the smell of dinner, Samuel realized, was just the stench of animal fat left to burn in a pan.

Samuel wondered what Rosemarie was doing just then. Where she was. What she had done in his absence. For the last year his wife had spent whole days in bed, only getting up to make their meals or relieve herself, and at first not even for that. In the early

CHAPTER 9
SAD COUNTRY SONGS

Davy was still in full Waylon Jennings attire when he pulled into the gas station, his white button-down opened to his sternum, his leather vest riding his armpits, his tight blue jeans cinched around his belly by a big brass buckle shaped like the famous Flying W. He could've changed into his regular clothes in the bar's bathroom after his show, but he had not wanted to waste a single minute rushing home in case his son stumbled out of bed from a bad dream and discovered his presents under the tree. Davy wanted to make sure he saw his little boy's face on Christmas morning at least once more in this lifetime.

Davy intentionally left his gambler's hat on his truck's passenger seat before heading inside. He always figured it was one thing to impersonate somebody on Halloween or under the blinding lights of a barroom stage--like at the Buffalo Chip, where he had just finished a set of Outlaw covers and holiday standards followed by a brief meet-and-greet while still in-character--but something else entirely if a man did it in the real world. Something sad and pitiful. However, in the moment Davy's reflection stared back at him before the gas station's glass doors automatically opened, he saw his crow-black hair was so greased with sweat that he might as well have just walked off an album cover. He saw he somehow appeared even more like he was pretending to be somebody else than if he had just worn the damn hat.

"Can't believe they're making you work Christmas Eve," Davy said as he put money on the counter for Parliaments and Powerball tickets and just enough gas to get him the sixty miles home to Apache Junction. The cashier didn't even look at Davy while

he rang him up, and kept his eyes peeled to the boob tube behind the counter, the Christmas Story marathon in full swing.

"Technically, I'm working Christmas *Day*," the cashier said. He pointed to the digital clock above the lottery machine. The time read nearly 4 AM. "And if they didn't make a buck today, I'd wouldn't be." Then his finger went back to beating the register while on the TV Flick's tongue got stuck on the pole for the latest of only God knew how many times that night.

Davy leaned over the counter to get a better view of the TV. Also because his feet were throbbing from standing in boots all night while singing sad songs and strumming his homemade Partscaster--the guitar he had painstakingly painted black-and-white to resemble Waylon's leather clad custom--then setting up shop near the bar after last call so old drunk ladies could give him smooches while their just-as-drunk husbands took pictures.

"I hear that," Davy said once the cashier handed him his change. "About working Christmas, I mean." Davy hadn't wanted the gig that night, but the \$200 holiday greasing the Buffalo Chip offered on top of his normal fee wasn't something to shake a stick at, even if he did calculate his time driving to, setting up, singing, breaking down, then driving from Cave Creek back home into an hourly pay. Especially since he had already spent far more than two bills on all the gifts his son would open in only a few short hours.

Davy tried tucking his change into his pockets, but his jeans were too tight, so he slipped the coins into his vest. He looked back at the lottery clock and rocked on his heels. Two A.M. cutoff had been nearly two hours earlier.

"Think I could grab a bottle of wine too?" he said, nodding to the liquor shelves behind the cashier. "Maybe by some sort of Christmas miracle?"

Annoyed, the cashier finally turned to Davy. He looked him up and down, then did it again as if he was just noticing him standing there for the very first time. "Saw you when you was playing JD's," the cashier said, then put his hands to his knees and exhaled as he stood. "Back when you was alive, anyhow. That had to be what, '69? '70?"

Davy smiled. That always happened, whether at a bar or during Bike Week or at a birthday party he was booked to play, usually a 60th or 70th, although there had been a surge of thirty-somethings lately requesting him too, as if there were still folks in this world who could see past the bullshit they played on the radio. As if there were still people around who longed for something real.

Regardless, when he was in character, everybody was quick to tell Davy their stories from back in the day, from Waylon's time in Arizona. In the 60s, before moving to Nashville, he had lived in Scottsdale just south of Indian School, Davy had heard so many times it had to be true, and we used to hear him arguing with his first wife or practicing his guitar in their front yard. Yes sir, just crooning away for everyone to hear. Davy had heard that one so many times he didn't think there were enough houses built in that neighborhood to hold so many people. Another classic was, "back in high school, he took me home after one of his JD shows, and we did some heavy-petting in his car on the way back." It was always the brick-house women in their 70s with short haircuts like men who told that one, usually with margarita-heavy breaths as they leaned in close and snuck a pinch on Davy's keister right before their husbands took their photo.

Even the thirty-somethings had their own stories lately, their own myths and legends. That very night, Davy had heard firsthand from a man not much younger than him how, back in pre-k, he used to see the General Lee zooming around Chandler, which everyone knew was where Waylon lived after he kicked cocaine in the 80s. As a little kid he used to think that was so cool, the guy told Davy, the General Lee right here in Chandler, right where I live too. Like the Dukes of Hazzard on my own street. Then, years later, the guy learned the producers had given Waylon a car of his own as a thank you for balladeering the show, and Hoss used to drive it around the Valley and honk his horn to Dixie for everyone to hear.

Davy loved that story. He loved it so much he made the guy tell it again when he was through. There was something sweet and innocent to it, a little boy living out his make-believe. And anyway, it was a lot better than the other stuff he heard, the same stories over and over again about how every February folks rode their Harleys out to Mesa Cemetery and commemorated the day he died by polishing off a sixer or shooting a speedball on his grave.

"What year was that again?" the cashier asked. He tapped his fingers on the counter. At first Davy thought he was just tapping out his thoughts, as if trying to recall that time and place from the ether of memory, but then he caught wind of the baseline from "Just to Satisfy You." "What year did I see you play JDs?"

Davy kept smiling. That was the other part to the stories. You never contradicted somebody. You never got in the way of what a person wanted to believe. You never told somebody they never saw Waylon play Ziggy's in '59 because Waylon wasn't in Arizona in '59 yet. He was still too busy giving up his seat to the Big Bopper on the plane that

went down the day the music died. Just like you never told a person they didn't see Waylon play JDs in '69 because he had already up and left Phoenix for Nashville by '65. After all, Davy wasn't getting paid to be a history teacher. His job was to let people have the lies they wanted to live.

So, "One of those years, no doubt," was all Davy said.

Then the cashier tapped out a few more bars and stared into the blank space between them. Davy could tell the cashier was seeing that old show at JDs or wherever it was behind the lenses of his thick glasses, and not really Davy standing right there in front of him. So after letting him tap out a few more bars, Davy cleared his throat and pointed to the shelves of wine.

"One with the kangaroo, please?" he said. "A red one, if you don't mind?" Then he whoop-whooped like Waylon used to, and the cashier returned to Earth. He studied Davy a second, then turned around.

As the cashier rang him up again, Davy asked if he had any wrapping paper.

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Orange lamp light simmered behind the curtains as Davy pulled into his driveway an hour later and parked next to his mother's Odyssey. He cut the headlights but sat there so he could hear the end of "Can't You See" one more time. He had already sung the song twice that evening--the first because it was on the set list, the second because the crowd chanted for an encore--then listened to it a half-dozen times on the way home. It was actually a Marshall Tucker original, but after Waylon recorded his cover in '76, pretty much everyone agreed the song was his. Like Johnny Cash and "Hurt" a few decades later. Or Roger Miller's "Loving Her Was Easier Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again,"

CHAPTER 10

BORDERS

I was already awake when Mom turned on our light and told us it was time to go. I started pulling on my shorts, but she told me to put on pants because it was cold outside. Fede hated getting up and groaned as Mom shook him. I didn't know how he had slept at all, Dad outside our window all night loading up our truck with his tools and Mom's mattress and plastic garbage bags filled with our clothes and photo albums and anything else he could fit inside.

"Federico," Mom scolded, after Fede pulled his pillow over his head. "Ahora." She yanked off his sheets. She rolled them up then turned to me and said, "Javier, he better be dressed by the time I get back." She only called me Javier when I was in trouble.

"Fede, get up," I said, and slid open our mirrored closet. Half our clothes were still on their hangers because there wasn't enough room to take everything. I pulled down a shirt, then saw my Larry Fitzgerald jersey balled up on the pile of dirty clothes in the corner, the white eleven cracked and peeling because I wore it so much. Outside, Dad was still wearing his coach's uniform and hat and tossed ropes over our stuff. The night before we had rushed home after my Little League game after all the parents met in the middle of the field and told us kids to wait in the dugout or bleachers so we couldn't hear what they were saying, and immediately started packing. Fede tucked his hands between his knees and buried his face in the mattress. "Now," I said, then slid on my Fitz jersey and pulled a hoodie over it. "Or Dad's gonna leave you here."

~

After Dad finished loading the truck, he showered and got dressed. His hair was still wet when he locked the front door, our porch light turned off even though it was still dark out, our furniture and TV and most of our toys still inside where we had left them. Fede was asleep before we even pulled out of the driveway. Dad rolled down his window so he could adjust his mirror and see around our stuff piled up in the back. In the front yard, Spongebob was tied to the tree, and he barked and barked because we didn't have any room for him in the truck. Dad assured us he had left enough food out until the pound came, and Mom nodded when he said that, but as we drove away Mom silently watched her side mirror, at Spongebob and our house getting smaller and smaller, and every time we passed a streetlight, I could see she was crying.

When we passed the Circle K, Mom asked Dad if he wanted to pull over and fill up, her voice cracking when she said it, but Dad said we had enough gas to get to Uncle Nino's. That he didn't want to stop until after we had crossed the border. Then we got on the highway and passed the turnoff for our school, for the Cardinals stadium, and then we were in the middle of the desert, the sun coming up in our mirrors and blinding us.

~

Fede finally woke up after he smelled the McDonald's in Quartzsite and said he was hungry. Fede was always hungry.

"Not now," Mom said, looking over her seat at me like it was my fault he had said something. Dad drove with both hands on the wheel, his eyes on his side mirror.

"Todavía está allí?" Mom asked, turning forward to watch the road behind us in her mirror.

"What's going on?" Fede asked. He tried getting up to look, but I grabbed his pants and yanked him back.

"Sit down," I said. "And shut up."

"Don't tell your brother to shut up," Dad said.

"Ya se está moviendo," Mom said. Dad's knuckles tightened around the steering wheel.

"A cop's behind us," I whispered.

"Cool," Fede said, and got up again. Dad didn't say anything, so I unbuckled my belt and did the same. Our stuff in the back was in the way so we couldn't see anything. I turned around and peered at Mom's mirror. The cop was passing the Mustang behind us. I thought he would keep going and pass us too, but instead he brought his radio to his mouth.

"Está hablando con alguien," Mom said. Dad breathed in heavily through his nose. "Vas muy rápido?"

Dad said he'd get pulled over anyway if he went any slower, and Mom said don't say "anyway." Then the cop's lights came on, red and blue. Fede put his hands over his ears and fell on his butt as Dad hit the brakes, the sirens screaming and then going quiet as they passed us. The cop pulled off at the next exit and Mom started laughing. Dad didn't even smile.

~

A few minutes later, Dad was praying for the truck not to run out of gas. Fede snored. When we came through the mountains, jagged and brown, we passed the turnoff

for a rest stop and then crossed a bridge, the Colorado River shallow and green and gross beneath us.

"Puedes hacerlo," Dad told the car. He patted the dash. "Shhhhhhh."

We passed the blue Welcome to California sign and came to a checkpoint where officers behind mirrored sunglasses waved us through. After the checkpoint, Dad pulled off onto a smaller road that ran along the highway. "Puedes hacerlo, puedes hacerlo," Dad told the truck, and when we couldn't see the checkpoint anymore, we pulled over and parked in a dirt field. Mom said *síguele*, but Dad said we were broke down.

"At least we made it to Blythe," he said, after he took the key from the ignition. He pulled his cellphone from his belt and gave it to Mom. "Call Nino." He opened his door and hot air filled the cab. "Come on," he told us as he leaned his seat forward. I crawled over Fede while he undid his belt, and then the three of us got in a line and peed in the bushes, laughing at who could go the farthest.

~

An hour later, Uncle Nino's truck rumbled down the road, a cloud of dust behind him.

"La migra!" he yelled after he parked and hugged my parents. He wore a cowboy hat and stained beater. Dark tan lines ran across his biceps. He pulled a red gas can from his truck bed. "Qué pasa?" he said after Fede hugged him. "Qué tal, Javy?" he said to me, and even from a few feet away I could smell his armpits.

"Good," I said.

"Bien?" he asked, and raised an eyebrow.

"Bien," I said.

"Bieeeeeeen."

While Dad counted out dollars from his pocket, Uncle Nino emptied the can into our tank. He said he wouldn't take any money from his big brother, and that he wasn't the charity case. When he was done, we got back in our truck and followed Uncle Nino past dirt fields and homes surrounded by chain link fences with plywood boards nailed over their windows. At Uncle Nino's house we parked beside his three dead trucks. In the empty dirt lot next door, my cousins and their friends played basketball.

~

Uncle Nino stood on our back tire and untied the ropes holding down our stuff. He yelled for Eduardo and Junior to put down the fucking ball and get over here. Eddie took one more shot but missed. He had gotten huge in the two summers since I saw him last, when we had stopped on our way to Disneyland and stayed for the night. He was half-a-head taller than me now, and his hands were like baseball mitts. When Uncle Nino tossed down the ropes, Eddie grabbed my mother's pristine white mattress and set it in the dirt.

"En su cuarto," Uncle Nino told him. He handed Junior my mom's blanket, and Junior followed Eddie with the blanket dragging on the ground. Dad handed me Mom's pillows and motioned me to follow my cousins. Fede kicked rocks under the truck.

Inside, Aunt Yolanda yelled as Eddie and his friend tried to turn the mattress in the hall. "Quítenlo del piso! Lo van a ensuciar!" she yelled, her one hand on her pregnant belly and her other pointing and directing. "Mi hijito Javy," she said when she saw me, and hugged me against her side. "Les fue bien de viaje?"

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