

Home

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The sky is too open and the land is too empty. Tractors mumble across fields. Crows fill up trees. The mailman takes all day to come. We find ourselves surrounded by pastures and telephone poles. Leaves. Scraps of metal and strips of lumber piled against make-shift sheds. Everything waits to be put to use.

Too much blue above, too much green beneath. We feel the friction of open space, how too much of nothing can weigh you down. People pray for things to come.

We fix the same lawn mower for twenty years. Everything's as good as new. It doesn't take much to live, it just takes enough to get by. One grows weary.

Days take their sweet time to end, but at night, stars break through, twinkling so fiercely we can't help but look up.

You get what's on sale at the store, don't bother with lists, only vague desires. You drive out as far as your gas tank will allow, always turning back sooner than you'd like. You dig beneath car seats for change. You take clothes that are given to you, try to make them fit. You have no allegiance to brands. You buy in bulk. You become attached to the things that once were nice, hold on to them like fond memories. The recliner's worn out now. But wear and tear are inevitable. The point is, two decades ago, your mother bought it new.

Mother's inside, doing up dishes. She stands on swollen legs, squeezing a soapy rag in and out of cups, rubbing it against plates, pinching it along the blades of knives. Pans of pork fat.

Misshapen, microwaved bowls. Tupperware from her childhood, as good now as it was then. The sink water turns from clear to burnt sienna after the plates pass through. She drains the water, picks out pieces of gristle and meat from the drain, replugs and refills. Bubbles come up like clouds. Sun hits the room with everything its got, but still, things seem dark. A thread of silk is illuminated in the window, holding a spider as it moves further down.

We play God to these dead cars, try to give them back their lives. Father stands before raised hoods, reaching his hands in tight spaces, feeling for a pulse. He brings up a screw, holds it between thick fingers up to the sun. Squints. He removes the car's organs, one by one, laying them out in the grass. Some things can wait to be replaced, some things can't. A belt not yet entirely worn; the aching carburetor; tires stripped bare.

One thing at a time. Meanwhile, we buckle up and pray for things to hold.

Let an apple go soft on the counter and a new generation of fruit flies evolves in a single afternoon. June bugs cling to door screens, their claws gripping the mesh of wire. The croak of cicadas, the held breath of the sky. Nothing moves. Granted, honeysuckles unfold, turn sweet inside, wait to be plucked, pulled and sucked dry. Life gets listless. Fireflies wobble beneath the silhouette of tree branches. A tire swing hangs. Mayflies live just one day, dying to fuck. Sweat collects on all of us. The heat comes and comes and comes.

A pack of cigarettes helps ease disappointment. Sitting on the porch chair, sister watches trucks roll by, dust rise up, clouds drift through the blue. Sometimes the phone rings, but she doesn't answer. There is Judge Judy on the TV, solitaire on the computer,

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pasta waiting to be boiled. There's the vacuuming that needs done, the book that needs reading, the pot roast she could thaw. Two towns over, there's a community college she could attend, a new self she could find, one that's better. Mother says there's still time to make something of herself. Mother believes sister's smart enough to become a teacher if she'd only apply herself. And in the meantime, Wal-Mart's hiring. And maybe sister should try Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Dollar Tree, some gas stations in town. She could waitress just like everybody else does, for crying out loud. Sister brings things on herself. There are plenty of options out there, she's just not looking.

Mother rushes off to work.

Sister lights another cigarette, considering her options.

Barn cats slink up through the yard, approaching the house like it's prey. A paper plate left on the porch, filled with rust-colored cat food. A white sauce pan placed next to it, scummy on the bottom, hairs of algae rising up through its water. Heads down, the kittens come, glut themselves, and turn back.

Cost is near sixty to spay the mother. That's two tanks of gas in the truck. That's the phone bill.

Father approaches the barn, carrying a cage, and spends the afternoon gathering the furry ones. All the way to the pound, they sit in the backseat, paws pressed against wire, eyes bright or else matted closed, slick with green and yellow. Unfortunate to have been born into such conditions. They meow in solidarity, imply that they never wanted it to come to this. But to Father, wanting's irrelevant. Things come just the same.

There are also the dead here. Antlers drug in by dogs, a squirrel beneath a power line, the heads of mice left on the welcome mat. There was the blackbird that interrupted the afternoon, flying into the window, startling Sister out of her slump. I followed her

outside to find the bird on its back, face turned to the side, beak flush with the earth, and two gray legs sticking straight up. Sister picked the bird up by its leg and carried it through the yard and tossed it over a fence. As it landed in the field, a murder of crows rose up from the yellow weeds and filled the branches of an oak. Watching us walk back, they shuffled from stem to stem, lifting and lowering their wings, all of them dressed in black, everyone quietly mourning.

From the kitchen window, you can see it coming. An approaching wall of gray mist moving closer over the field until it is in your yard and suddenly, splattering raindrops on the window you are looking through. You go outside on the carport and look out at the land, the horses standing beneath the trees in their pasture, heads down, grazing. The dirt road turns a deeper brown, the cars turn shiny, and a wet cat rubs along your leg, leaving a trail of white fur against your skin. Frogs leap up from the grass. Scents are stirred. Manure. Hay. Wet bark and leaves. Rain pounds lightly against the roof, swirls out the gutter, slips over the concrete and fills the space in between your splayed, naked toes.

A sprinkler twitches in the back yard. Luminescent pearls fan up then disappear. A young girl in her bathing suit runs through the wall of light, squealing. Sister brings out a bowl of watermelon and sets it on a table. Watermelon, she calls out. Her daughter prances through the yard, blonde hair flat along the curves of her forehead and cheeks. She reaches for a pink carving, brings it to her mouth, and sinks her teeth into it. Pink juice runs out, gathering and quivering on her chin. She takes another piece and walks to the porch steps, sits, and holds the watermelon with both hands up to her mouth. She bites into it and looks out at the yard. A black seed soars from her mouth. Another falls out after, attaching to her chin. She wipes the mess away with the back of her hand, turns to her mother, and smiles.