

# THE FIDDLER in the Night



a novel

Christian Fennell

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ISBN: 978-1-7772810-2-1

The Fiddler in the Night/Christian Fennell—1<sup>st</sup> edition.  
The Real and the Imagined, Book Two

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author’s imagination.

Front cover art: Carolina Himmel  
[www.boutiqueartedecarolinah.mitiendanube.com](http://www.boutiqueartedecarolinah.mitiendanube.com)

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“He had with him that selfsame rifle you see with him now, all mounted in german silver and the name that he’d give it set with silver wire under the checkpiece in latin: Et In Arcadia Ego.”

- Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

## PART ONE

A perfect silence.

Night coming.

The cold damp air, reaching, and settling, and this man, he knew, and only by his own awareness did he know. Death coming.

Death waiting.

He lit a match. This unleashing of madness.

His name was Leonard. He was riding a bike. His arms held out to the sides of him, his mind never trapped by his own self, never buckling under the weight of what he should be, or shouldn't be, understanding the truth of himself, always, in this world, hard as that was, and of course, in this moment too, riding a bike through the lonely continuum of time. He smiled at his knowing, where others couldn't—or fucking wouldn't, and he was right, and knew he was right, and always would be.

He rode on, his arms still there, to the sides of him, and he said, come, cover me. Gliding and dipping and soaring, and we do, going on and on, down a lonely long road, and free now, or at least so he thought. Free and wanting.

Free and needing.

And who among us would not say, such a person as this.

He turned and looked and he smiled. The old woman's jewelry, prizes of his glory, adorning him. Her lipstick, a mess now, covering his mouth. This sweet taste of his taking. He

looked away and he reached his hands up to the breaking blue sky, and he said, yes yes yes, I am coming.

And in the darkness of the night, a young girl, endless in her time and lost to it, knows she'll dream soon, in a chair—her chair, an old armchair, threadbare, a blanket covering her. The warmth of the room with her and holding her still—holding her always. And she cried.

Tears she knows.

Tears she can't feel in these dreams of silence, of sunshine, dreams of a distance not yet known. Her mother there, and waiting. Always.

She woke. A noise in the night. Her father asleep, passed out on the couch across from her, beneath a blanket she had put there.

The sound of the garage door.

The car starting.

She got up and walked to the front window and watched the car driving away. And why wouldn't it be? And what could possibly be next? She didn't know. She looked behind her, at everything unseen and mostly unspoken. Her father, too, there in the quiet and lost to it. Taken. She turned back and looked to the darkness, and she knew, if she wanted to, she could see her own reflection, there in the glass before her, and waiting too.

She walked to the fireplace and stood for a while looking at the smoldering ash. She took up a long iron rod and poked at the burning ones. She put on another piece of firewood and climbed back onto her chair and pulled the blanket over her and she wondered, would it always be like this? She didn't know, but she thought it might be. She closed her eyes and slept again, and it was

running, always running, never there, never having, just running, and running now, in this falling of her emptiness.

Once again.

And he said, there is always love under a big moon.

Why wouldn't there be?

Of course there would, and he looked up to that everyone's one big moon.

Probably was, and just forgotten.

Probably was.

He was walking, the car he'd stolen left at the side of the road. He stopped and looked around, and he thought, what else might be out there?

So many endless possibilities of strange and wonderful things.

He walked on and he looked back up to that one big moon and he reached up to it. You're mine, though, aren't ya? Every bit mine. Sooner or later, things'll get better. Ain't that right?

Ain't it now, said the moon back to him.

Why I'm here.

And never not here.

True enough, never not here.

And he was happy, walking, and he thought again, love under a big moon.

On a night such as this.

A boy and his mother were walking, not speaking, the low moving sky darkening. And it darkened more yet, such that it roofed the dirt and gravel road and the travelers upon the road in a

manner that made this aged and distant Arcadian world appear constrictive, the travelers entrapped, a moment suggestive of past worlds—of those that had come before them. Lives harrowed in the dark vacancies of this place.

Beneath the light of the moon, the boy stopped and toed a faded and blackened bloodstain.

Blood and dirt and nothing more than that.

A red-tail hawk in the high winds.

His mother stopping, and looking back.

He'd watched this hawk hunt before.

She looked too.

Dark smoke caught his eye, and he dropped the paper bag he was holding, an assortment of groceries and truck parts spilling onto the road.

A gunshot.

The hawk pulling up, calling to the breaking of the darkening quiet.

Jonathan McLean moved quickly through the trees and over the low stone wall. He ran across their pastures, his sixteen year-old legs striding hard, his feet sturdy upon the uneven ground.

His father, Conor McLean, a tall man wearing a long dark coat with a hood stood watching the flames of his own making, a blood-soaked sheep stretched over his right shoulder.

Fired blood, boiling and running.

Long streams of it.

Heavy black smoke drifting, and rancid.

The boy yelling.

Flames cracking bones.

The man cleared the sweat from his face and thought, his own father would have done the same.

The fire exploding, embers and bits of flaming sheep pushing the boy back.

Not the father.

Madness, against the raging of madness, he called to his father.

The man looked partway over his shoulder, his dark squinting eyes burrowed deep, welled in this moment, impervious to the ways of reason and method, and he viewed the boy.

Jonathan knew his father's awareness of this place and time was often like nothing more than a quick glimpse of something that possibly was, or was not, there, and he yelled again, his voice drifting in the heavy black smoke, the sound of the sheep burning—these unholy sounds of hell itself, raging, and settling, like some form of next plague here now, fear driving, fear eating, in our minds, these flames burning still.

The man turned back and tried to lift the sheep from his shoulder, but he could not, his weakness and exhaustion made visible, and he knew not to try again.

Jonathan covered his mouth and nose with his shirt and stepped forward.

The man leaning forward, the sheep falling from his shoulder. He dropped his shotgun and placed his large cold hands on his thighs, and he coughed, hard and deep, and he discharged a long spittle of blood.

Jonathan looked at the sheep at his father's feet, blood running from the shot holes in its neck, small particles of dirt drifting to the thick surface of the running blood, the blood soaking into the ground, claimed by the dirt as its own.

God's own bounty.

That's what he'd been told.

That's what he thought.

Pinching the spittle from his lip he threw it away, and he looked at his son standing next to him, the boy only just shorter than the man. Burn em.

No.

They're poxed.

No, they're not.

Burn em.

No.

Boy—

I won't.

Send em all back to God.

He'll do it, and Kathleen McLean placed her hand to her husband's face, and in that moment, everything they were was there before them—visible, as if marked as one by the stain of this life.

Come inside.

He had no fight, no will past hers.

So beautiful. Her hand upon his face. The madness in his eyes dissipating, and yet, there still, holding on, wanting, waiting, and needing more.

Jonathan picked up the Winchester twenty-gauge over-under shotgun and cracked the gun, an un-shot shell in the lower chamber, and he watched his parents walking up the winding dirt path worn deep into the rocky grass hill towards their small stone house.

Should they look back, either one, they'd see a boy standing alone outside of their love for one another, their love for him a separate love, a love just as deep and full but incapable all the

same of saving him from the unavoidable and pending truth of all that is unseen and unanswerable, despite the intense desire otherwise that the last of his youngness still harbored.

He looked at the sheep at his feet, still breathing, its eye bulging large in its socket as if the uncertainty and fear pumping through its blood had crystallized it and turned it to glass. He put the gun to its head and pulled the trigger, the top of the sheep's head blowing forward, a sprayed trail of blood, brain matter, and bone fragment.

The sheep burning on.

The boy standing, and watching.

Flames reaching.

A gun in his hand.

There, and ringing still, in this calling to madness.

Lived no more than twenty-five families of mostly Gaelic origin. A world seemingly forgotten. The heaviness of its vacancies, pulling and calling. These people, seemingly lost to the constant coming of it.

On three sides was a long and steep drop to an unforgiving seaway, and where it adjoined with the mainland, it narrowed to less than a mile, and was from there a journey yet, not easily made to anywhere.

In the cool dampness of the dark death house, Jonathan reached for a string that hung overhead from a bare bulb. He pulled the string and a hard light was cast. He dropped the sheep to the black granite floor worn smooth to a high gloss from a century and more of spilt blood and

foot traffic. The walls, the same thick limestone of the house. Large exposed hemlock timbers supporting the trusses of the tin roof.

In the middle of the room next to the sheep was an opening in the granite floor filled with gravel. Above it hung a gun style block and tackle with two double-sheave wooden pulleys and two hand-forged iron hooks. He pulled down one of the hooks and wrapped the rope around the sheep's legs and placed the hook back over the rope. With just a few hard pulls he had the sheep hanging and swinging several feet above the floor.

From a row of butchery tools set into designated holes along the back of a heavy table he selected a bone-handled skinning knife. He walked to the sheep, pulled back its head, and opened its neck.

He squatted against the cold stone wall and he watched the sheep bleeding out, and he thought, a covenant made and paid for.

Kathleen looked at her husband in the claw-footed tub before her, his white thin arms grasping his bony knees, startled and uncertain, and she washed him. She poured water over his head, rinsing him, and he rubbed the water from his eyes. She looked over her shoulder, at the silence holding memories between these walls. This falling of their days, faster than they should. Faster than they had any right to.

Jonathan looked to the other side of the hanging, blood-letting sheep, at two stools and a thick section of aged maple next to a cold rusted airtight stove, and he felt the vacancy of those stools now more than ever.

So many days, and so young, and he remembered.

He always would.

The flare of a wooden match, the good smell of it, his grandfather's words: What matters, boy, is what you do with your life, not what happens after you're dead.

Narrowed dark eyes behind thick blue pipe smoke: And how will you live your life?

With dignity.

Why?

No matter what happens, I'll always have it.

Cold thick fingers on his chin: In the old language?

Urram.

A smile and the smell of whiskey: Aye, boy, Urram.

Kathleen finished bathing Conor and he stood, oversized and frail, and there was strength in his bones yet, some, but that was all there was.

Jonathan walked to the sheep and cut it open the length of its underside, his hands working inside the warmth of it, taking away its entrails.

Kathleen wiped clean the end of a hypodermic needle and drew ten milligrams of morphine from a small bottle. She put the bottle back on the night table and pushed down on the plunger, a steady stream of liquid squirting in the air. She pulled down Conor's pajama bottoms and inserted the needle into the muscle of his buttocks, and she plunged the morphine in.

She helped him into bed and kissed his forehead, and he watched his wife leaving, his breathing faint and shallow with a slight sporadic rattle. He closed his eyes and he wondered, of the fires of hell. Of death coming. Death here. And he remembered, the flames of his purging.

Blood running—that burning.

Fear and death and that burning.

Kathleen dropped her bathrobe to the floor of the bathroom. She was slender, falling just on the side of tall, her thick honey-colored hair running to a length just past her shoulders. She put her hair up and stepped into a new tub venting steam from the hot running water. She leaned back and pulled her knees to her and looked at the room filled with a low soft light spilling out from a single shaded lamp, and in the absence of the moon and stars, the world beyond the thin glass of the window appeared to be a moving black, the drifting fog, a harbinger, perhaps, from an abyss unknown of all things to be feared, real and imagined. She slid her legs beneath the water and leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Beyond here was nowhere.

Not anymore. She was sure of it.

For her son too. She was sure of it.

Leonard stopped. There was a house set back from the road.

He walked up the long gravel driveway.

The house was white stucco, cracked and chipped and stained with dirt. Tall weeds running up the walls.

To the right of the house, a clapboard garage the same color as the house.

He looked for a dog, or any sign of a dog. There wasn't one. Not that he could tell.

He walked toward the garage and stopped and looked back at the house. He reached for the garage door handle and pulled, the door lifting up from the ground toward him, a stack of aluminum folding chairs tipping over. He paused, holding the door handle, two weighted cylinders filled with rocks, one on either side of the door, swaying from thin strands of twisted wire.

A second-story light came on and he let go of the handle to see if the door would stay. It did, and he moved to the back of the house.

The back light came on, mosquitoes swarming the brightness. An old man wearing pajamas, and a frayed, striped bathrobe appeared. His grey hair disheveled. His watery, hooded eyes squinting. A single-barrel shotgun in his hand. Who's there?

He pushed open the screen door to the hum of the evening heat and the sound of the mosquitoes bouncing off the glass of the small light. Well?

He stepped onto the porch boards, the screen door slapping shut behind him. I won't ask again.

He walked forward and Leonard stepped out from behind the house, wrapping his left arm around the man's neck. Shh, he said.

The old man eye's widening. He didn't struggle.

Leonard pressed the cold tip of a clip-blade knife to the man's throat. It's me.

The old man. Who?

The one ya been waitin for, and he ran the knife through the thin, slack skin of the old man's neck.

He looked at the blood, pooling on the broken patio stones. He looked at the closed screen door and the light behind the door.

An old woman called from the house. Horace?

He looked to the second-story window.

Is everything all right?

He stepped over the man bleeding out beneath him and he entered the house.

The old woman appeared at the window, the soft bedroom light behind her highlighting the frailness of her thin frame beneath her long white nightgown. Horace?

Leonard appeared in the window, approaching the woman from behind, the old woman turning, and screaming.

Jonathan entered the mudroom spilling over with coats and boots and assorted other pieces of outer clothing, bits of tack and various outdoor implements and tools. He closed the door.

The gun rack mounted on the wall had an empty space just above a Lee-Enfield .303 and just below a Browning semi-automatic .22. He placed the Winchester there. Resting on the bottom of the gun rack was an SAA Colt .45 Peacemaker with a chipped pearl handle and several boxes of ammunition. He sat on a narrow wooden bench and removed his boots.

He scrubbed clean the blood covering his hands and lower arms and he dried himself with a dish towel and removed a warm plate of stew from the oven. He picked up the waiting utensils from the counter and walked to the front room.

He sat in an armchair next to a large Rumford-style fireplace with a small fire burning and he placed his plate of food and utensils before him on the wooden coffee table and he leaned forward and began to eat.

A carriage clock on the mantel ticked.

The warm light of the fire and the flickering of tall heavy candles burning on the coffee table highlighted Kathleen wrapped in a heavy white bathrobe sitting on the couch.

The worn and tired-looking features of her face.

You're upset.

He didn't answer and he didn't look up.

Don't be.

She waited.

Why, because he's sick?

She pulled her legs to her, on their sides in front of her, and she looked at her son. She looked at her paintings of the farm mounted on the wall next to the fireplace. This is all you know.

It's all I need to know, and he went back to eating.

No, she said quietly, and she watched him. It's not true.

He didn't look up.

There could be more. At least there could be, if we wanted there to.

He placed his utensils across his plate and stood. We'll figure it out.

Jonathan.

He stopped and looked back. Mom, please.

Check on your father before you go to bed.

All right, I will. Goodnight.

She watched him leave the room and she looked at a painting on the wall, the three of them walking, their shadows stretching long on the road before them.

Jonathan pushed open the bedroom door to the paneled room, small and shadowy with only a bedside lamp on. The air still and somewhat stale.

He entered the room and sat in a straight back chair next to the bed. On the bedside table were his father's pill bottles of different sizes, the hypodermic needle, the small bottle of morphine, a bowl filled with water. He looked at his father's pale face, his sunken chest, rising and falling, and he waited to see if he'd open his eyes.

He sat for a while.

He looked at his father's hand reaching out from under the covers, and he watched him try to speak. He leaned closer.

Keep an eye on her.

I will, Da, I promise. He waited to see if his father would speak again, and he looked at his father's hand, thin and bony and aged, long crooked fingers. He lifted it. It was cold, and he put it back under the covers.

He got up and walked to the door and looked back. He waited again, and he closed the door behind him.

The warmth of the fire surrounded Kathleen's coiled body like some form of healing she wished she could will deep to her bones or beyond, should such a place exist. She was tired, and she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Leonard woke in the night and sat up in the old couple's bed and looked at the woman beneath the window on the floor, her nightgown soaked in blood, a long stream of it having run from her. He turned on the bed and placed his boots on the well waxed hardwood floor and he

lowered his head and closed his eyes and ruffled his hair. He looked up at an antique vanity desk across from the bed.

He sat on the chair and opened a jewelry box and ran his fingers through it, an old broach, a charm bracelet, several pairs of earrings, a pearl necklace, and matching pearl earrings. He fisted it all and put it in his coat pocket. He looked back at the old woman and he stood and walked to her.

He squatted and took her left hand into his, sizing up her diamond ring and wedding band. He tried to pull them off. They wouldn't come. He pulled harder. He took his knife out and opened the blade. He folded back the other fingers of her hand and pressed her hand to the floor and pushed the blade through the crunch of bone. He slid the rings off the backside of her freed finger and dropped the finger to the floor. He cleaned the blade on her nightgown and folded the knife closed. He tilted his head, looking at the old woman's opened eyes, and he wondered, what was in there still?

Anything?

Doubt it.

Would it make a difference?

Probably not.

I bet they're thankin ya?

Bet they are.

If they could.

Why wouldn't they?

She seemed like someone's nice old grandma.

He stood and pocketed the rings, and he walked down the stairs.

Like they'd lived here a long time.

I guess.

And they might of been happy.

I didn't put em in my path, someone else done that. And if there's a reason for that, there's a reason for me.

No doubt. Everything else is just made up, ain't it?

True enough, just made up. Heaven or hell. Except I ain't, and I never will be.

He lifted the kettle from the stove and poured out the water and refilled it. He placed it back on the stove, turned the element on, and looked in the fridge. He closed it and walked out the back door.

He stepped back over the dead old man and the patio stone blood and walked to the garage. He lifted the garage door and looked at the cluttered mess. There wasn't even a car. Nothing much at all.

He walked back to the house, up the stairs, and walked inside.

He lifted the whistling kettle from the stove and searched the cupboards until he found a jar of instant coffee. He made a strong mug of black coffee and carried it to the table. He sat and crossed his legs and took a sip. He lit a cigarette, and he smoked, and he drank his coffee.

Conor turned in the bed and stood slowly. He made it to the window and he put his hands to either side of the frame to support himself, and he looked to the darkness and what he saw there, and beyond that, and what he wanted most.

A cold dark hole.

In a box.

This fate of his coming soon, and yet he did not know hers, although he should have, for why wouldn't they be the same? Of course they would. The two of them as one, and always having been, especially now, in these long cold nights of their certainties.

With the hood of his oilskin Mac pulled over his head, Jonathan walked in the hard morning rain from the house to the barn. He opened the man-door and stepped inside. The animals stirred and rustled. He dropped his hood and switched on the overhead lights and somewhere pigeons fluttered and flew to a perch overhead. The sound of the rain striking the large tin roof echoed and magnified throughout the barn. The smell of ancient timbers, worn floorboards, aged and wet white pine siding, the animals, slightly soiled straw bedding, the feed, and the steady cool draft of damp air all blended to one smell that was both familiar and welcoming to him.

The right side of the barn housed the Katahdin sheep, what was left, all of them congregated towards the far end. Across the wide walkway was the tack and feed room. Next to it, a Holstein cow. Stalled separately, three quarter horses, all mares. The tallest at fifteen-and-a-half hands was a beautiful hunter bay with well-groomed black points. The other two were sorrel cutters, standing between fourteen and fifteen hands.

He entered the sheep pen and walked to the large center doors. He unbolted and unlatched and pushed them open to the rainy darkness. Beyond the doors was a barnyard corral. He didn't pasture the sheep due to the rain and he fed and watered them there. He walked toward the Holstein and entered the stall and saw the tin cup on the milking stool. He hung it on a nail above the stool. He milked the Holstein and with only a partially filled pail of milk he left the stall and exited the barn.

He collected the eggs from the chicken coop and started across the compound toward the house.

The basement was damp and cool and he pulled on an overhead light. From a stack of empty egg cartons, he removed one and placed the eggs he collected into it. He opened the fridge marked eggs and put the carton inside. He poured the milk into a ten gallon stainless steel milk can with a spigot sitting on a wooden stool next to a large utility sink and he rinsed out the pail. He turned the light off and walked from the basement back to the barn.

He tacked up the bay they called Destiny and took her from the stall, her hooves clipping on the wide worn floorboards, the sound hanging long and lonely in the cold barn air.

Kathleen stood at the front room window watching her son ride over the empty pastures, his hands folded over the pommel, his shoulders hunched forward, his head down, such that he and the horse appeared silhouetted as one against the rainy blue-black of the early morning, engaged in what looked to be like the entrusted burden of carrying upon their backs the death of yesterday's darkness.

And she spoke his name, to the coming of the day.

Daddie?

She waited.

I made some tea and toast, and she placed them on the coffee table and she sat in a chair across from her father, and she waited for him to wake.

He didn't move.

You should eat something.

He opened his eyes, and he squinted them closed again. He rubbed his face. Thanks. He sat up and rested his arms on his legs. He looked at Rachael. I overslept.

That's all right.

Did you have something?

The same, tea and toast.

He sipped his tea.

Daddie.

Yeah.

Last night, someone took the car.

They what?

They took the car. I heard the garage door and then I saw them drive away.

Jesus Christ.

Daddie!

Sorry. He took a bite of toast. That's okay, they won't get far.

They won't?

Nope. Ignition relay is shot, among other things. Did you see which way they turned?

Right.

Okay, good. We'll look for it later, or maybe tomorrow. We've got that woman coming today.

Rachael didn't answer.

He looked at her. It'll be okay.

She nodded.

Start your school work. I'll be there in just a minute.

Jonathan dismounted at the low stonewall running alongside the road, and he tethered the horse to a heavy hanging branch. He watched the Doc's grey Saxon Eighty-Eight drive by, sending remnants of the bag and its contents he dropped on the road yesterday whirling to either side of the dewy road.

He searched through the wet debris looking for truck parts and usable food. He couldn't find either one. He looked back toward the house and watched the car driving up their long gravel driveway, the sun highlighting the polish of the car and reflecting from the windows and chrome, and he tried not to think of his dad.

He rode the tree line next to the road and where the woods began to widen he reined the horse and entered the woods at the mouth of a trail. He took up his binoculars and panned the trees.

He kicked the horse and they moved down the trail.

It was quiet, the first light of day penetrating the treetops, giving the forest the appearance of a damp and dripping canopy. Everywhere were fallen and broken trees in varying degrees of decay, some caught up in standing trees and waiting to fall yet. Widow-makers, his father called them.

He dismounted and picked up a stick and walked toward the three sheep grazing in the woods and he herded them toward the field.

The sky was starting to break apart disclosing a distant and nearly forgotten shade of washed blue. Jonathan stood the horse and with his hands folded over the pommel, the sheep

grazing before him, he surveyed the land of Urram Hill. It was these moments now, he liked best, everything still and quiet, with nothing before him, he could not understand.

The farthest point of the farm ran ten acres across in its width. A thin line of trees followed the road back to their house and beyond, forming the southwest border. From the woods moving towards the middle of the point was the family cemetery, a white picket fence corralling hundreds of tombstones, all the same shape and size and cut from the same type of stone. The land to the northeast followed the line of a high cliff back past the house and farther yet, such that it appeared as if the farm on this side was bordered only by the sky.

He looked at the graveyard and he thought of his grandfather. He thought of his father. Keep an eye on her.

He leaned from the saddle and unlatched and swung open the paddock door from the pasture side. He looped behind the corralled herd and moved them through the open gate and drove the sheep toward the farthest pasture east where he'd left the other sheep grazing. As he rode, he watched the Doc's car leaving.

Walking from the house with a laundry basket, the wind pushing on her, crows circling, Kathleen watched Jonathan herd the sheep, up and over the rolling pastures, weathered and crumbling dry stonewalls encased in thistles and other common field weeds rising and falling and intersecting like some well thought out testimony to purpose and will. She remained standing, long past the point of his riding from her sight. The crows there, some having settled on the clothesline, and watching too. Go on, she told them. We don't need any more of your news. Not that kind. Not the kind you'll bring. Go on, she said again.

She picked up the basket and walked back to the house.

Rachael told the state sponsored woman, she came out there.

The woman looked at the house.

I saw her from my window. It was dark but there was a big moon and she was wearing her long white nightgown.

Your mother went into the garage?

Yes, and Rachael pushed off the ground with her foot, pulling back on the chains, the swing going, the rusted chains squeaking.

The too dark garage, afraid to turn the light on, afraid to wake them, and so she stumbled, even though she knew where it was—exactly where it was, that which she had come for, and would not put off. Not anymore.

Did you see her come out of the garage?

Rachael looked at the garage, the squeak of the chains slowing.

Rachael?

She looked at the woman. She had something in her hand, but I couldn't see what it was.

In the dark she reached the workbench and placed a pitcher of lemonade and ice on it. She bent down and looked beneath the bench, her hand searching and then finding that which she had come for. She struggled to lift it with one hand and bent over more, using both hands to place it on the bench.

The swing was hardly moving now, just drifting, slowly, back-and-forth, as if there was a big moon up there, that very same moon, and it was dark, and it was quiet, and she was alone and waiting. And she'd say, Momma.

Rachael looked at the woman, at her nice hair. Her nice clothes.

Your momma?

Yes. She looked at the house. I think Daddie's upset because he was supposed to be watching her.

Is that what he said?

No, but I know he was.

Why?

Because he left his job so he could.

He was a teacher?

Yes, the only one and he taught us all.

Who's the teacher now?

It's a lady, but I don't go, so I don't know. My daddie teaches me here.

He does?

Yes, mostly, but not every day.

Was your daddie sleeping when your momma went outside?

He didn't wake up until we heard her fall in the hallway.

She left the garage?

Yes, but she was there a long time.

Sitting on the high wooden stool, her legs crossed, she sipped her mixed drink of lemonade and antifreeze. And in the dim blue light of the moon slipping through the side door window, she stared into the darkness of new hope, and she began to hum, You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. And she hummed on, her foot tapping on, the music in her head—playing on, and she forced down another sip.

Rachael stopped the swing. I should get supper goin.

I can give you a hand.

That's all right.

No, I'd like too, if that's all right?

Did your daddie talk to you about your momma?

Not too much, said Rachael. Would you like a cup of tea?

Yes, please.

I'll put the kettle on.

Thank you.

You're welcome. He just said, did I know she died of a broken heart?

A broken heart?

Yes, that's what he said. Because the world made her sad.

I'm sorry.

That's okay. But it wasn't just the world that made her sad.

It wasn't?

No. She told me why.

She did?

Yes. She said, sometimes she got sad because another world, not this one, another one, would come and settle upon her. But I wasn't to worry because it would never come for me. She said she just knew, and I would be okay. She promised.

She said that?

Yes.

She promised?

Yes.

Do you worry about that?

She looked at the woman. The state sponsored woman.

Rachael?

She heard her name, but she wasn't there, she was on her swing.

Under a big moon.

That very same moon.

In the dark, in the quiet, waiting.

That calling. That pulling. The chains squeaking.

Standing at the top of a large outcropping of granite rock, shadows of big birds flying, Leonard sighted the land, a warm breeze coming, and he thought, that was enough, more than enough, for him to know he was right for being here. In this place now.

Of course it was, he thought, and he closed his eyes, and he tilted his head back, and he let the breeze take him.

A coyote watching.

More shadows of big birds flying.

Conor coughed.

Kathleen woke.

He coughed again.

She sat around and poured a glass of water. She nudged his shoulder. Conor. She nudged him again.

He opened his eyes and tried to push himself up.

She held the glass to his mouth and tipped it back. I'll get your shot.

Not yet fully awake, Kathleen felt her anger returning, anger she thought had passed and gone long ago, given way to the acceptance of what they had become, the gutted and hollowed sleeves of that which they once were, and worse yet, of what she thought they might become. Anger nurtured by her own shortcomings and self-betrayal, seeing always still, in his sick and ruined self: the boy, the man, the husband, the father, he once was.

She couldn't get back to sleep, and so she watched her husband sleeping.

She leaned to him. Conor.

He didn't wake.

Can you remember? And she ran her finger down the hard outline of his weathered face. All those years when we were just young? She kissed him, in the dark, and she put her head next to his, this shell of the man she loved. She closed her eyes and she took him in. She closed her eyes and she took him in, all of him, that long ago boy, and she did not see the tear that came to his eye. She did not see the lessening of him yet. And she remembered, that time, not the day, not

the season, not the year, just the feel of his finger writing small words on her back, and then his rolling her over, looking into her eyes—all of her before him. Words, she thought, she was lost to still.

Beneath the light of the moon and the stars Jonathan swung a sledgehammer onto a metal wedge, splitting another block of hardwood. The fire behind him burning high and hot, reaching far into the night. He picked up the wedge and set it into one of the halves of the split block and brought it down again. He set the wedge onto the other half and split it. He leaned the sledgehammer against the log and picked up the chunks of split wood and tossed them onto the fire, a spray of embers reaching to the darkness, and beyond, and farther yet, in search of some unknown celestial map of this world, setting alight the way of the future. A future this night that was his, and his alone.

Jonathan?

Kathleen woke.

Conor tried to sit up.

She put her hand to his forehead. He was hot and sweating. She told him, he's still out there.

He looked at his wife.

Try and get back to sleep.

He's upset?

He'll be fine.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. You were right.

Oh?

There should be more to this than just what we inherit.

I inherited you, didn't I?

There wasn't much choice, was there? Besides, I thought it was the other way around?

It was, and she moved her head next to his.

Every day, he said.

Every day?

Those days when we were just young.

We've had a full life. And now there was tears in her eyes.

There's still Jonathan.

Is there?

He's a good boy. You'll be fine.

Will we?

You know I'd take you with me, if I could. We might find a field up there like your father's?

That'd be nice, wouldn't it?

Yes it would.

They closed their eyes and they slept, the two of them together, dreaming as one, of those days when they were just young, under their forever skies.

Death waits patiently.

Jonathan swung the sledgehammer onto the metal wedge, splitting the last block of hardwood. He was shirtless and sweating. Tired, he leaned the sledgehammer against the log bench and pitched the last of the wood he'd split onto the fire.

A fire to light the way to what?

He didn't know.

Eternity is not a question for the young.

And so he burned the night like a scream for help, consumed as he was by a darkness he did not understand. A darkness fueled by his hatred and inability to comprehend the events of his life now laid bare before him, like so many slow deaths of familiar and constant sounds and the awareness that comes with new sounds, that once heard are difficult to ignore and harder yet to contain. Sounds that burn and blind, leading him to this field alight as it was with the full glory of the stars and the moon such that it be a perfect night for the taking of a stand, yelling: Fuck you, God.

Kathleen opened her eyes, momentarily uncertain and confused. Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, she looked at Conor, awake next to her, his left hand pressed flat to the blankets, his other hand attempting to steady the hypodermic needle above a vein in his hand. The chamber of the needle filled with only air.

She laid her hand upon his, her tears falling, and she whispered, wait for me, and in the dim blue light of the night breaking through the open window, touching, and holding to them, adjoining them, she pressed her hand down upon his.

Leonard stopped walking. He took a drag from his cigarette and flicked it to the side of the road. He was wearing the old woman's jewelry, several necklaces, pairs of clip-on earrings, bracelets, and rings on his pinky fingers.

He looked to the sky. To the moon. He squinted. His red-rimmed eyes milky white and faded blue. He had a tattoo at the nape of his neck, the opened and blood dripping jaws of some beast, a dog perhaps, from some other place and time. And just like that, he began to soar, tucking and weaving, his arms held out to his sides, the lipstick and jewelry being all that kept him there, otherwise, he would fly away, like a big bird, the biggest one, over the treetops, and in the wind.

No games here along fences.

No, not here.

And he flew more. On and on.

The biggest one.

An eagle.

Soaring and happy. Spiraling. Spiraling over a long hard road, and he said, yes yes yes, I am here now.