

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 48

June 2011

Trash

Clark Knowles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Knowles, Clark (2011) "Trash," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 48.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol11/iss1/48>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Knowles: Trash

TRASH

BY

CLARK KNOWLES

**The John Gardner
Memorial Prize
for Fiction**

Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The

Knowles

104

Nick saw Pickle's mom kissing his mom in the kitchen. At first he didn't know what he was seeing because Pickle's mom was so much bigger than his mom, and he almost said, Hello, Mrs. Jenkins, but something made him hold his tongue and then Mrs. Jenkins turned to reveal his own mom with Mrs. Jenkins' hand running up her arm and coming to a stop at the base of her neck, and then the oven timer dinged and Nick was released from his fog, and Mrs. Jenkins backed away, and his mother leaned back against the sink where the sun coming through the window made it look like her hair was on fire. Pickle, who was fourteen, was down in the family room sitting on the couch that Nick's father had found on Bishop Street with a free sign on it and brought home and then beat it good with a broom in the backyard before lugging it inside and covering it with old army blankets that were scratchy as hell. Pickle and his mom came over all the time, and Pickle laid out on the couch like he owned it, but Nick didn't mind sitting on the floor on account of the couch still smelling like Bishop Street, which ran alongside Ragland Federal Penitentiary and had muddy ditches that everyone knew were full of convict piss and blood. Nick's father's nose was permanently stuffed up due to allergies and getting punched so many times, so the smell didn't bother him, and whenever Pickle said something about the smell of the couch or the whole basement, Nick kept quiet and then Pickle said, Must be your farts that stink up the room. The word 'fart' was terribly funny. Once he'd called Pickle a fartface, and then Pickle sat on him and choked him and punched him in the throat. Now, when Pickle was around, Nick didn't say much at all. The reason Nick was standing in the kitchen doorway waiting for his mother to say something about kissing Mrs. Jenkins was because Pickle ordered him to go up and get some Cheez-its. Hey, mom, he said, me and Pickle want some Cheez-its. Sure thing, sweetie, Nick's mother said. Benji Sullivan, a red-haired ninth-grader who lived down the block and was always hanging out at the pond

behind their houses smoking cigarettes had told Nick that his mother was fuckable, but Nick wasn't quite sure what it meant. He understood a rawness in the word and had heard many kids say it, even kids in his own class who whispered it on the playground so Mrs. Griffiths wouldn't hear and revoke recess privileges, and even uttered it aloud himself when he was alone in his room, but how or what fuck or fuckable or fucking meant beyond something his own dad said when he was working in the yard or stuck up under the kitchen sink, trying to fix the leaky trap that he should have just replaced with a new piece of PVC but didn't because he didn't know why he didn't, he just didn't, was beyond Nick. His mother was the youngest of all his friends' mothers, and everyone talked about it except her. Nick's grandmother talked about it all the time. Nick's dad said that he remembers when his Abbie was his own personal teenage bride. There is a picture of her in a school gym wearing a long black gown and square hat and she was pregnant, one hand supporting her belly at the bottom, the other resting on top, holding him like a running back who didn't want to fumble the ball. In the picture, she is sweating, and her hair is dark and stuck to her cheeks. On the playground by the old metal jungle gym that they took down over the summer—Benji Sullivan said it was because some kids got rust poisoning from it and died in Splain County Hospital and were cremated and had their ashes scattered from an airplane so that no one would find out they were gone—Pickle had told everyone that Nick's mom was so young that she didn't even have any hair between her legs. Nick had felt the need to correct Pickle in this but didn't want to be punched in the throat. He'd seen his mother naked many times, and there was indeed a patch of hair between her legs, and, when he thought of his mother in her room naked and pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes or holding her body still in the old wooden chair while she said her prayers, he remembered her like she was standing in the sunlight in the kitchen now,

of flatland literary hub and bore in her skin.

Mrs. Jenkins, who wasn't fat but wasn't small, leaned over Nick and squeezed him tight against her chest until he felt like he'd smother in her flowery perfume. You are so cute, she said, so cute, and it won't be long till you're a little jerk like Harris. Harris was Pickle's real name, but no one called him Harris but Mrs. Jenkins. Even Mr. Jenkins, who worked for the Public Works Department, driving a yellow service truck around doing God-knows-what, called Pickle Pickle. Nick never asked why he was called Pickle in the first place. Oh, Pickle's a good kid, Nick's mother said. Abbie, there's no such thing as a good teenage boy. They just think about their doodles all the time and expect you to wash their underwear even though it's not anywhere close to the hamper. The teen years are a burden, I'll say that much. The two women moved to opposite sides of the kitchen, and Nick's mother kept looking over as she pulled out the bowl and dumped Cheez-its from the box until they spilled over the edge and onto the counter. She handed Nick the bowl and told him to make sure he shared with Pickle, and then she turned away and opened the oven and reached in and removed the tray of lasagna that she'd made with spinach and cottage cheese instead of her regular way with meat and real cheese because she read in Reader's Digest that this was less fattening, and that spinach was full of iron and anti-oxidants, and because she just wanted to try something different as long as everyone was okay with it and didn't turn it into some major production and because it just sounded good, okay? She just wanted to see how it tasted. They'd had the conversation about it at the dinner table the night before, and Nick's father had said, Just calm down; I didn't mean to get you all aggravated. I was just saying that I like the regular lasagna and was it possible to put some meat in there somewhere, and his mother said that would ruin the whole purpose of not using meat in the first place, and then they stopped talking and looked at each other. They top of the lasagna was smooth and pale, not crispy and

Knowles: Trash

brown like it normally was. She set it on the stove and looked at it like it was the saddest thing she'd ever seen. Just pop it back in for another twenty minutes, Mrs. Jenkins said, it'll be fine. Nick shoveled two handfuls of Cheez-its into his mouth because Pickle always hogged the bowl. Those boys just get along so good, Mrs. Jenkins said. It's such a pleasure to bring Harris over here in the afternoon.

Nick's father took him to the dump on Saturday morning. He had this old truck that he'd got because it was in his own father's will that he get it, and even though all the other brothers wanted it, Nick's father told them to go pound sand because he helped rebuild the engine when everyone else was off doing fag stuff. He'd held up his knuckles and showed a scar that ran across all four fingers that he said came from getting his hand caught between one sharp metal thing and another sharp metal thing and his father pulling on his arm to help dislodge it and practically tearing off his fingers in the process. So, he said, I put my blood in this truck, and the rest of you can just go screw. He hadn't seen his brothers since that day, but they all sent each other Christmas cards. Last year, Nick's father had made Nick and his mother pose with him in front of the truck for their Christmas photo, and when he saw the finished print, he said, That'll chafe their asses. It was an old Ford F250, white with a red tailgate that came from the junkyard and didn't fit quite right. It took a good effort to get the truck started. It was rusting along the bottom of the doors and along the bed. Nick's father pushed down the clutch and pulled out the choke and pumped the gas and turned the key with a great deal of grunting and puffing, as if he had jammed the key into a brick. The garage filled with plumes of white smoke until both of them were coughing and Nick's father kept saying, Come on, baby, come on, baby, and then the motor caught and roared and sounded thick and powerful and the frame rattled and shook, and Nick could feel the shaking all the

The dump was the same as it always was. There were four or five trucks parked back by the heaps of metal, and Nick's father dropped it down into first and crawled past the different sectors of junk on his way back there. This Saturday, they stopped and looked at a rocking chair that was missing one rocker. Nick's father set it up on the tailgate and said he might have an extra rocker back in the garage and wouldn't it make a nice addition to the downstairs? Nick nodded and kept his eyes peeled for treasure. He saw a bowling ball in a pink bag that he wanted, and his father picked it up and studied the finger holes and then looked at Nick's hand for a moment, spreading out his fingers and squinting as he made some mental calculations and then held the ball and the hand out together and then set the ball in the bag next to the chair. Somebody'd be a fool not to snatch up a good bowling ball like that, he said.

When they got to the group of other men, his father got the small cooler from behind the seat and told Nick not to wander too far, but he was going to talk to the boys for a bit and to go off and explore and have fun. Nick wandered in and around the different mounds. Over near the junkyard edge, a half-mile away from his father, were the bottle collection bins. Most of the bottles seemed to have missed the mark and covered the ground in nearly every direction as though there had been a terrible accident in the land of bottles or a massive battle that left bottles spread across the asphalt like dead soldiers. Behind the bins was a sharp drop off with a small warning sign advising folks of the generally hazardous nature of the landscape. Nick leaned against the railing and swung his legs out over the gully. A lot of water ran from the junkyard to the sluice below, and the dirt looked like a sheet of brown fabric that'd been cut to ribbons. Thousands of bottles had been caught in the runoff and carried away. Sometimes the gully was full of water and looked more or less like a regular stream, but now, dry as it had been for months, there was nothing but

cracked dirt and plastic bottles as far as Nick could see—green and blue, clear and brown, Gatorade from the 7-11 and nips from the liquor store—every kind of bottle he could imagine.

By the time his father honked the truck horn, Nick had made his way to the yard waste. There were mounds of brown grass and leaves and uprooted bushes and stacks of Christmas trees so tall that the bottom trees had to have come from before Nick was born. Deep inside the pile he could see glimmers and gleams of tinsel and forgotten ornaments. He was halfway up a pile of leaf bags and grass clippings when he saw the truck coming around the bend. In the bed next to the broken rocking chair was a giant stuffed deer. Parts of the body had no fur and one of the eyes was missing, but the rack had sixteen points, and whoever posed the deer made it look as though it was jumping and both of its front legs were frozen, bent in mid-air, the body supported by a thin rod extending from the chest to the base. The road through the junkyard was full of divots, and the buck rocked back and forth as if it was gearing up for one final leap, out of the Ford and into freedom. Nick pictured it running down through the gully, bottles flashing in the sun as it danced through the plastic river. What do you say about that? his father said. He'd only been a few beers into the six-pack when he saw something that looked like an antler sticking out from a pile of trash bags. He and Mr. Jenkins had dug it out, but Nick's father claimed it before any of those other jokers because he saw it first and 'first comes first serves' was a motto he lived by. It's missing some stuff, Nick said, and what happened to its hair? We'll turn it sideways or put the bald spots up against the couch downstairs so that you can't see them. I think I got an old marble that I can paint for the eyehole. I've always wanted a deer like this. Who'd want to get rid of such a thing? Why not just set it on the street? Some sucker would've paid money for it! Of course, then it wouldn't be ours, now would it? Lucky for us I have a keen eye. It's something all the Turnell men have, you know. You'll

Mr. Jenkins came over that night with Mrs. Jenkins and Pickle. He said he needed to check on the deer because he had a stake in it, but he winked at Nick's father, and they both laughed despite the fact that no one said anything funny. Pickle was mad because his mother hadn't let him go to the dump that morning. She told the other adults that he was under a punishment for abusing himself. Nick overheard them talking on the back patio. Mr. Jenkins and his father laughed some more, and Nick's father said, Keeping him at home is only going to give him more time for that. Pickle just sat on the couch and picked at a scab on his knee. After a while, he lay back and told Nick to turn on the TV because he wanted to watch the All-Star game, and then he stuck his hand down his pants and stopped talking. Mr. Jenkins told Nick's mother that she was looking fine, and she told him that he was smooth as a con-man. I've never conned a man in my life, he said. I wasn't talking about men, Nick's mother said. My honor is being impugned, Mr. Jenkins said. I bet you conned your way into some skirts, said Nick's father, and they all laughed. Pickle's mother said, Poor Harris doesn't stand a chance. You two are grown men still thinking about your doodles. Jackie, Nick's father said, I have whole minutes when I'm not thinking about my doodle. And Mr. Jenkins said, But then you're thinking about muffins and melons, and they all laughed again, and Mrs. Jenkins slapped Mr. Jenkins on the shoulder and told him he was just awful. They were around the table on the patio. Nick's father had found the table outside a foreclosed house. It sat crooked so there was a 2x4 under one leg, and Nick's mother had draped an old tablecloth over it, and a pitcher of margaritas was on the table, and each adult drank from a wide-mouthed glass caked with salt. The bug zapper hissed and popped. Just out of the circle of the porch light, the deer sat

poised. It sat in the yard. Nick's mother was certain it was riddled with fleas, ticks, bedbugs, mites, chiggers, lice, crabs, and all sorts of unfathomable disease bearing microbes. She told the Jenkinses that she couldn't for the life of herself think of one reason why anyone would want to dig an old, dead deer out of a pile of garbage and bring it home, though she'd been married to Bill for almost seven years and should be used to just about anything coming home from the dump or God knows where because Bill Turnell didn't have to go to the dump to find trash; he could find it anywhere. Nick's father said that he brought her home once and that didn't turn out too bad, and his mother stopped talking for a while, and Nick watched her face change shape while she tried to think of what to say, and he saw Mrs. Jenkins raise her foot below the table and rub it on his mother's foot and her face settled into itself, and she said, Anyway, I can't see why anyone would want to kill a deer and stuff its big dumb body in the first place. They drank their drinks for a while then his mother stood up and went into the kitchen to get some ice. Pickle pulled his hands out of his pants and went upstairs. Nick followed him but stayed just out of sight. His mother was standing at the sink, looking out the windows, watching her company out back. She seemed to look past them for a moment as if there was something far away that only she could see. Pickle came in and pressed himself against the cabinets. Help you with something, Pickle? his mother said. No, ma'am, he said and pressed harder, pushing his hips forward. I got things to do, Pickle. Why don't you and Nick go out front? Pickle kept pressing, moving a bit so that the knob of the knife drawer hit right at his zipper. Nick's mother narrowed her eyes and drew tight her lips, and although Nick rarely saw his mother angry, he knew that she was beginning to boil, much in the same way that she did when she'd entrusted him with the care of a cake on the way to his father's family reunion. She'd put the cake on the backseat and told Nick to make sure that it didn't slide onto the floor, and he

holder over and helped himself to as much icing as he could scrape away without her seeing him, which was easy because she and his father were arguing the whole way, and his mother kept folding and unfolding the map and comparing it to the directions she'd written on the back of the electric bill envelope, and his father kept saying, For the love of Jesus, Abbie, I know where we're going. Can you please stop with the map? You're driving me nuts. And his mother apologized each time and said, I just want to be sure, or, Have you ever tried to fold up one of these things? I'd like to see you do better. Nick kept running his finger across the top of the cake again and again while keeping an eye on the backs of his parents' necks above their seat backs, and just before they pulled into the driveway of his Uncle's house, before his father's moonfaced brother loped over to the window and talked his gibberish and his father said, Stuart, you're looking sharp, Nick had slipped the lid back in place and then his mother had turned around and said, That cake do alright? Nick had seen her lips tighten and her eyes narrow and her whole body get stiff as she stared right at his mouth, and he raised a finger to his lips to find icing dried there, and then he looked down and saw that he'd also got icing on his shirt, and he didn't have time to look back up at his mother because she was out of the car and opening the back door and sliding back the cake lid and seeing the icing, which looked like a plowed field. That's the look she had now as Pickle rubbed himself and closed his eyes and Nick remembered how she had beat him right there in the driveway in front of his father's family and how no one had even looked twice as she yanked him from the car and held his wrist above his head and smacked his butt again and again so hard that his feet nearly came off the ground with each blow. It was like she kept him from shooting off into space by holding his arm. She'd taken the cake inside and later he'd seen it on the table with new icing, and, by the time they left to drive home in the

dark, his mother had forgotten all about it and rode the whole way home with her head on her father's shoulder. But Pickle didn't see her getting mad. He had both hands in his pockets and he was just pushing and moving against the knob and then his mother broke free from the sink and was standing next to him with her face right in his ear. She snatched one of his hands from his pocket and slapped it down on the counter and Pickle looked over at her with his mouth open. She was talking soft, all air, so mad that she lost her voice, and Pickle tried to lean away but his hand was pressed to the counter and Nick heard the words, Don't try to run now, you little pervert, and then the sounds were gone again, and she was talking so fast and quiet and mad that it looked like a wind was blowing in Pickle's face, and then Nick's mother released Pickle's hand, and he brought it to his face and wiped it across his lips and cheeks as Nick's mother spun him around to face her and swung her arm down hard and hit him right between the legs, and Nick's own knees buckled a little even though it wasn't him that was being punched. Pickle was trying to sink to the ground but Nick's mother, who was stronger than she looked, held him up by his shoulders as he gulped his breaths and whimpered. She never stopped talking to him the whole time, just running a stream of words at him until he was standing on his own again. Outside, the other adults were laughing. The crickets were beginning their songs. Somehow it had got to be pitch black even though it seemed only a few moments ago since the Jenkinses had got there. His mother released Pickle, and he covered his stomach with both hands and walked to the upstairs bathroom and saw Nick standing by the stairs and said, What are you looking at? but didn't wait for an answer before going into the bathroom and closing the door. Then his mother was standing in front of him. She'd pulled all her hair back and was carrying a bowl of chips and a pitcher of drinks. She looked down and smiled and said, Sweetie, do me a favor and get that salsa on the counter and bring it down to us,

of Pal? He nodded and smiled, and then he studied his face. She was back to normal, with just a bit of red in her cheeks, and her voice was regular, but she looked at him as if he was a kid she just met and wasn't sure what to think of, and then she shook herself a bit and said, Your father makes a strong margarita, and walked down the stairs past the series of Norman Rockwell plates she'd got from her mother and hung in the stairwell. From each plate, sad and courageous faces watched over her as she passed.

That night, when everyone else in the world was sleeping, his mother left. He learned this the next morning while he was waiting for someone to get him breakfast. His father came into the kitchen still wearing his boxers and t-shirt, though it was nearly time to leave for church. No church today, buddy, he said. Just get yourself a bowl of cereal, okay? How come? Your mother needed to visit her mother for a while, his father said. He rubbed his stubble and put coffee into a filter and poured water into the machine. That was all the answer he provided and, for the next month, that was all he said about the matter. Several weeks into her absence, Nick asked when she was coming back, and his father set his pipe wrench onto the floor and stared into the open cabinet as if the answer was written on the leaking pipes, and then after a few minutes he stopped staring and picked up the wrench and went back to work on the trap without saying anything, and Nick watched for a while from the hallway, but once his father went beneath the sink there was no talking to him if you didn't want to get a load of swears in response and him saying, If you're going to blab at me at least be useful, but then he'd give no indication of what useful looked like, and even though it was a sink and not a toilet, it smelled bad, damp and old, and all the tools were wet or covered in plumber's goop, which his father used like he owned the goop company, and he'd eventually say, Never mind, never mind, I'll get it myself, and he'd reach back behind

himself and flail around until he had lashed on some tool that Nick wouldn't have known what to call anyway, and then he'd say, Stupid fucking sink and this stupid fucking house, until Nick would decide he'd be best served to occupy himself in another part of the house.

Life without his mother wasn't really all that different than life with her. It was August and the ground was dusty from the summer's drought. He got up and ate cereal and watched television and went to the playground to wait for the neighborhood kids and came home and ate peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, and in the afternoon Mrs. Jenkins still came over with Pickle and sat in the living room like Nick's mother had just run out to the store, and sometimes she brought her knitting but mostly she did crossword puzzles and did laundry for Nick and his father, which they kept in big piles in their rooms because there was no one to put it away. If Mr. Jenkins was working late, Mrs. Jenkins would stay and make dinner, and Pickle would sometimes sleep on the couch, and the next morning Mrs. Jenkins would get there before anyone woke up and already be doing laundry or cooking a chicken that she would strip and turn into chicken salad for lunch, and they'd all eat on the patio, the chicken still warm and stuffed between two pieces of bread with onions and celery and salt and globs of mayonnaise. One day, after Mrs. Jenkins had been there all afternoon but finally gone home, Mr. Jenkins came by and sat at the curb in his yellow city truck. Nick was by himself and he watched Mr. Jenkins hold the steering wheel with one hand and tap his fingers on it and smoke a cigarette with the other hand, blowing smoke out the window. It was nearly dark and Nick didn't know where his father was, and no one would tell him anything about his mother and, even though he'd known Mr. Jenkins all his life, he didn't like the way he was sitting there. The streetlight eventually came on over the truck, and Mr. Jenkins opened the door and walked up the driveway, rubbing his hands over his hair and talking to himself. He

Nick latched the screen door and hid behind the Bishop St. couch and stuck his head just around the corner a bit to where he could see clear to the back fence. Fireflies were already out and a few stars burned low in the sky. Mr. Jenkins walked over to the screen door and jiggled the catch. He cupped his hands and peered inside, his face an ink spot. He was still wearing his work clothes. He took out a cigarette and lit it and blew the smoke in through the screen. The couch fabric made Nick's skin itch. He was sweating. Finally, Mr. Jenkins moved away from the screen and walked over to the edge of the patio and put his hand on the deer. He stroked its fur and rubbed all the way up its neck and stuck a finger in the empty eye hole. He took a long pull on his cigarette and then tossed it into the yard. He kept his hand on the deer's snout and at first it looked like he was going to kiss it, but then he punched it right below the missing eye and the whole deer wobbled on its stand, and Mr. Jenkins grabbed his fist with his other hand and bent over with his hands cupped together at his waist like he was trying to fold into himself and he muttered to himself some words that Nick didn't understand but that didn't sound good, and then he stood up again and started kicking at the deer. He kicked the front jumping legs until one was crooked, and then he kicked the belly and then the back legs, but it just absorbed the kicks and rocked back and forth as the night grew darker and the fireflies thicker, and then he stopped kicking and stood leaning against the deer, breathing hard and saying over and over again Nick's mother's name—Abbie, Abbie, Abbie—in between his breaths, and then he stood up straight and rubbed his eyes. Nick stayed a silent witness to an adult having an attack of what his grandmother called 'nerves.' He'd never seen such a thing before. He wasn't afraid, just curious as to what Mr. Jenkins was doing and why he was saying 'Abbie' and where Mrs. Jenkins was, and Pickle, and his own mother and father, and to why he was suddenly alone. Even being alone

didn't frighten him and Knowledge didn't frighten him. The deer stopped wobbling. It was just there always in mid-jump but never landing. Around its rack, fireflies blinked on and off. He could see its one good eye, and, although it was dark and the eye nearly black, it gleamed at Nick, pulsed even, as though the deer was winking, telling him to be courageous. Mr. Jenkins patted the deer on the side and reached up and ran his hands over the rack. Then he went to the side of the deer and pushed until it fell over, the black eye now facing the ground. He kicked it twice more and then straightened his clothes and took several deep breaths and left the yard.

The next thing Nick remembers was being woken up by his father. He was lying on the couch in a cocoon of old blankets. The deer was standing upright, and his father didn't mention anything about it. Hey, Nicky, he said, why don't you go on up to your room? What time is it? Nick said. Late. Where'd you go? It's late, his father said again. Time for bed. I want to stay here, Nick said. His father patted him on his leg. Suit yourself, he said. I told you it was a good idea to get that couch.

The next day, the deer came inside. His father moved the couch and set the deer against the wall and pushed the couch against the deer. Its marble eye facing out, its front legs and hooves above the back so that when Nick laid on his back and looked up at just the right angle, it appeared that the deer was leaping over him. No matter where he went in the room, the marble eye followed him. Nick and his father stood and admired both the deer itself, which barely fit into the room, its rack grazing the ceiling tiles, and Nick's father's own genius in claiming the deer and the couch and filling the room with cast-off things that made it feel homey and alive. Mrs. Jenkins stopped by with a casserole. She and Pickle were on their way to the public pool, and Pickle wore his long blue trunks and no shirt. His belly was white and pudgy. He didn't have pockets for his hands, so he stuck the tips of his fingers into his

valued a literary journal usually with tab, oil, and she wore a shirt over her swimsuit, but it wasn't buttoned except for the bottom two buttons, and she didn't wear any pants or shorts. She wore flip-flops and her toenails were painted a dark red. She was very tan, and Nick wished he could lay his head down between her breasts, which swayed beneath her open shirt. I can't believe you brought it inside, she said, that awful thing. There was some vandals around, Nick's father said. Probably teens from the other side of the pond, Mrs. Jenkins said. They weren't looking at each other and their voices were louder than usual, and they said each word very clearly, like they were reading from a book. They looked at each other and Nick's father kept his eyes on Mrs. Jenkins' face. She stood close to him. I don't know, his father said. I don't know what to think anymore. Harris, Mrs. Jenkins said, you don't know of any boys that might want to hurt Mr. Turnell's deer, do you? Pickle was staring out the sliding glass door down the long slope of the yard. He didn't answer. Mrs. Jenkins was looking at Nick's father and at the deer and, for a few moments, no one said anything. Finally, Mrs. Jenkins said, Harris! so loud and sharp that it was like a cap pistol going off, and all of them jumped, even Mrs. Jenkins, who seemed surprised, too. A bright swath of red bloomed down her neck toward her chest. What? Pickle said. Answer my question. What question? Never mind, Mrs. Jenkins said. They all went upstairs, and Mrs. Jenkins unwrapped a casserole and told Nick's father that it was ready to eat but that he'd have to warm it up himself for dinner unless he'd like her to come back and get it ready. And his father took Mrs. Jenkins by the elbow and pulled her close and whispered something in her ear that Nick couldn't understand but which made Mrs. Jenkins face flush again and, she said, Oh, my, and then his father said, Me and Nick are going on a quest, but we should be back by supper, and Mrs. Jenkins said, Well, I'll stop by if I have time. As they were leaving, Pickle punched Nick on the shoulder. See you around, shithead, he said.

Nick and his father got Knowles Trash after a prolonged battle with the ignition, foot pumping hard on the gas pedal and the smell of gas filling the cab, the engine turned over, and they drove off toward Parkson, leaving the garage in a plume of smoke. His father turned the radio to a talk station where they were talking about taxes and freedom, and, every once in a while, Nick's father would slap the steering wheel in agreement with the talker and say, Exactly, or, This guy knows what's what, and each time he'd slap the steering wheel, Nick would look over to see if his father required his attention or his input, but his father seemed quite content to be separated by the three feet of threadbare fabric, so Nick returned his gaze to the countryside flowing outside the window. They stayed on I-95 for a short time, and then they were on increasingly skinny, winding roads that led through towns with big churches and grange halls and post offices built right up close to the road and houses that looked run-down but which had big cars in the driveways and front yards full of wildflowers and unpainted barns three or four times the size of the houses they served. Soon, the road was straight and hilly, and Nick's father was going a bit too fast, up and down, the wind coming in hot and fast and the radio drowned out by its roar. Nick's hair flew in all directions, bits of it catching the corners of his eyes, but even though his eyes watered from the wind and the fluttering hair and the sun that seemed to be in his eyes no matter which way he looked, and even though a nub of longing for his mother was unfurling in his belly, making it hard to see, he would not roll his window shut. He didn't know why he was thinking of his mother and where she had gone. This was the first time the thought had occurred to Nick—that his mother wasn't at his grandmother's but some other place, perhaps to get away from him, or maybe the deer, or any of the other trash his father brought home, and that maybe the quest his father was taking him on was to a place where his mother was, and that she'd see them both and realize how much she

missed them, especially him, her son, who loved her even more when she was gone, who needed her, too, and she'd climb into the cab and he'd be squeezed in the middle, his legs pressed against his mother's legs because that's how you had to sit in the truck on account of the gearshift, the winch controls, and the four-wheel drive controls all sticking up from the floor. At the base of the gearshift, where a rubber gasket had dry-rot and flaked away, Nick could see the road blurring by in a black and gray streak.

Up ahead, a group of low buildings grew out of a thicket of bushes. His father slowed down because there were two thirty-yard dumpsters outside the house full of what appeared to be items useful to Billy Turnell. The house had a 'For Sale' sign in its window, but no one was around and none of the windows had curtains, and you could see from the front all the way to the back, down through a long field bordered by a line of fat trees. His father stopped the truck next to one of the dumpsters and got out. Nick stayed in for a moment, but when he saw his father climb up the green wall of the dumpster and jump over the lip and disappear into a tangle of metal and wood, he knew they'd be staying for a while. He got out, too, and the dust rose around his ankles. The house was larger than it first appeared, but it also seemed like it was one house made out of many different buildings with several smaller roofs extending in different directions and a long section that had a flat roof connected to another section that sloped away from the main house. The main house even looked cobbled together and its roof set atop the mess like a cap or an afterthought. Nick walked around to the backyard and found what was left of an old barn foundation, massive field stones that seemed to have sprouted rather than been set by farmers. The barn would have been huge, but all that was left was an empty pit and a few piles of unpainted barn boards stacked in rotting piles. All around the foundation grew broad-leaved weeds and purple flowers and goldenrod. Dozens of birds chattered in the

trees and in the grasses as well as squirrels and chipmunks, which darted in and out of the gaps between the old stones, many of which were longer and thicker than two or three of his own body.

Nick gained access to the house through a door that was attached by one set of hinges and which hung loosely in its frame. It swung open at his touch, and he stepped into a musty backroom. He found shovels and vacuum cleaners and tool boxes. Someone had spray painted instructions on the walls—Keep, or Load Bearing, or Demo. The floors squeaked under his feet. One side of the room was full of trash, boxes of old newspapers and mason jars and wine bottles and rags and parts of doors and thick beams filled with hooks and nails. Further inside, he moved into another, darker room, and there he found steps that led down to a cellar. Nick crouched at the top of the stairs and looked into the darkness, wondering if people were down there. He evaluated the amount of bravery it would require to chance a descent, but even though he was drawn toward the opening, he resisted and turned to go. He wasn't exactly frightened by the raccoon, but, after having stared so long into the basement, its bright eyes and raised paws and open mouth with sharp teeth surprised him so much so that he yelped. Part of him knew that the animal was stuffed but his heart still roared in his chest. His fingers tingled and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. After a few moments, he walked closer to the raccoon and touched its soft snout. It was surprisingly light, and he lifted it easily off the box on which it sat. He opened the box and inside were half a dozen stuffed birds, including a small white owl with large eyes that lay on its back, waiting just for him. He took the raccoon outside and came back for the birds, and even though it felt like stealing, he told himself that no one else could possibly want these old things, no one but him. He took his treasure around front, where his father had nearly filled the back of the truck with things from the dumpsters. He'd found an old desk

dozen empty picture frames and another rocking chair that was missing a rocker and an old army footlocker with the name Cpl. Arthur Day painted in black letters under the hasp, and a steamer trunk and two vases, one of which was filled with dusty silk flowers and several come-alongs and a metal pail full of chains and three baskets of mason jars and boxes of nails and bottles of cleaning supplies and two brooms that he'd shoved upright in between the tailgate and the rest of the trash, where they stood like straw flags. He was still in the dumpster rustling around, so Nick set his treasure by the rear bumper and climbed up the side of the dumpster and looked in to see his father dusty and sweaty, his shirt soaked through and a small cut on his hand that bled a little red stream down his wrist and up his forearm. He was working on a piece of pipe that was buried beneath what didn't interest him. He'd give the pipe a good pull and shake it loose a bit. Then he'd clear away a bit more debris—plaster and lathe, squares of linoleum, old rags, empty cans—and then yank the pipe again until he'd worked it mostly clear. Finally, he gave one last heave and the whole mess pulled free and sent him flying backwards onto the pile he'd been rummaging through. A great cloud bloomed inside the dumpster walls. Nick very nearly lost sight of his father. It was like looking through a dirty bed sheet. When his father started to move, his body was a shadow, a ray gliding over the sand in cloudy waters. He waved his arms and coughed and spit and said, Jesus H. Christ, but when he finally got to where he could stand up, he was smiling, his teeth glowing. What did I tell you? he said. What did I tell you about having an eye for finding the right stuff? He reached down and picked up the pipe and held up one end to show Nick the curved elbow joint. I knew I'd find it, he said. I just knew it when I climbed up here in the first place. I could feel it in my guts. I said, Billy, the piece you need to fix that God-blamed sink is in this dumpster, and you ain't leaving till

you find it. They don't call me the trash man for nothing. He was holding the elbow joint and studying it with pure love. Nick couldn't see anything special. It looked exactly like the piece that was always leaking, but his father looked so pleased that Nick found himself smiling, too. His father climbed out of the dumpster and set the pipe carefully in between the army trunk and the boxes of bottles. I found something, too, Nick said. The apple don't fall far, his father said. Nick showed him the raccoon first, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever seen his father more pleased. He smiled even wider than he had in the dumpster. He was like a different man than the man Nick had started the trip with. But wait, Nick said, there's more. He made a big show of opening the box and revealing its feathery contents. He knelt down in the dusty driveway and undid the flaps and tipped the box forward very slowly and watched dusty lines crackle across his father's face. It wasn't just his mouth, but his whole body was smiling. This, Nick thought, must've been what his father looked like when he found the deer at the dump, or what he might have looked like when he'd first seen Nick's mother outside 7-11, where her high school boyfriend had left her after a fight over a Slurpee. She'd expected the boy to come back and when Nick's father saw her—and sometimes when he told the story, he said she was standing there with her hands on her hips like she was Queen of the World, tapping her flip-flop foot like a royal might if her carriage was late, and sometimes when he told the story, she was sitting on the curb, hunched into herself, the saddest, prettiest little lostling ever—he pulled his car right over and offered her a ride. The rest, he liked to say, is historic. Where'd you find all these wonderful birds, he said in a hush. Out back, Nick said. They're so little and so pretty, his father said. They'll go beautiful with the deer. All but the owl, Nick said. He's mine. He's going in my room. His father looked at him, studied him was more like it, like he'd never seen Nick before, like he'd been in a coma for a long time and was just coming to and recognizing the boy in front

that he looked like he was wearing a mask. Of course, he said. Of course. They're all yours. You found them and you can do anything you want with them. They can all go with the deer, Nick said. All but the owl. His father clapped him on the back and said, This is good stuff. Show me where you got it. So Nick took his father back around to the loose door, and they both went inside, and, as they passed the tools and the vacuums, his father said not to touch them because they weren't for taking. They belonged to someone working for a living. How that differed from the birds and the raccoons, Nick didn't know. When they got to the room with the stairs that led to the basement, his father opened boxes and threw some garbage around until he uncovered another army trunk. He opened the lid and the inside was full of fabrics, curtains, and bolts of red cloth with small, yellow flowers and blue cloth with tiny, light-blue dots and pairs of pants and shirts that Nick's father said hadn't been worn since probably World War II and, below all of that, a layer of floral print dresses that they pulled out and held up and pushed their noses into and smelled like they were expecting some particular smell that wasn't the musty old smell they got. Nick's father pulled out all the dresses and a sewing basket that was inside the trunk that rattled with its spools of thread and tins of needles and thimbles and pins. He looked around once more before turning to leave. They walked back around to the front and the dresses went into the cab, in the middle of the bench, a pile of colors and patterns. He set the birds carefully down into the last remaining open spot in the bed and set the raccoon down into an open bucket near the tailgate so that it looked like they were just giving it a ride. Come on, Nick's father said, we got a ways to go. You mean this wasn't where we was going? Of course this wasn't where we was going. I just stopped here. They were in the truck and they stopped talking while Nick's father pumped the gas and cranked the key and listened to the slow grinding of the

ignition, and then he began. Please start, please start, and of course it did, just like always, and the dumpsters were swallowed in that first cloud of smog and then they were off down the road. The dresses would not stay stacked and flowed out between them like water seeking its level. Nick rested his hand on the material and rubbed it between his fingers. After a while, he said, So, where are we going? His father didn't take his eyes off the road. They were focused way off in the distance, scanning for his next great find. Well, he finally said, now we're going to get your mother.