

THE SOONER'S SON

JOSEPH CELIZIC

He dreams of the Oklahoma fields where they used to live, bronze and blackened, the sun failing past distant hills. There's a continuous panic, never starting nor stopping. There's a force, a pressure behind him, but he does not turn around. Slowly, the horses come. They begin as shadows ambling over hills, gathering around him like water, surrounding him until there is no ground. He swears he can smell their bodies, feel their breath, even here in the dream. And they are watching him, waiting to see what he will do.

It's his father behind him and he does not move; his presence is enough. His father has the gun and the gun fires and a spray of bullets spins him like a stormed wind mane. They force him to face his father's menace, his eyes, the horses, his father, the horses.

He is dying in these dreams, always traveling from life to death, can feel the transformation even before the bullets hit. When he dies he enters a stasis, a soundless place, and he lies there as a witness permanently embedded in the ground. He watches the field, his father, the horses; he is dead and watching. He never vanishes, never fades away into space or fire or clouds. He remains a witness, here in his death, where he is somehow still alive.

The old sallow curtains in the boys' bedroom stirred when the Lincoln Navigator crunched onto the ranch's gravel driveway, the driver a formless conjecture behind the car's black windows until the opening of the door and his brash emergence into hot Kentucky June. The stranger moved quickly as if dodging the sunlight, and he circumvented the porch where the doorbell hung loosely by one screw. Eliot Coldfield could only glimpse the man's tan dress shirt, his hat and jeans, before he turned the corner of the house. He was heading to the backyard, to the barn where an old El Camino growled and sputtered, Mr. Coldfield beneath it cursing just as gruffly, and so Eliot followed through the house. At the kitchen, he propped himself on the sink and peered out the window, face half-hidden by the frame.

This ain't no monkey tree, Mrs. Coldfield said. She pulled him down by his shirt until he slid off the sink.

Who's he?

Who's who?

Man who pulled up.

Mrs. Coldfield shrugged. Someone for your father.

But what's he here for?

What are you here for, aside from bothering me with your questions?

Eliot climbed back up the sink and looked out the window. The man was standing at the barn's doublewide entry, sleeves rolled snug on his brazen hairy arms. Mr. Coldfield met him, wiped his gray hands on either side of his jeans. He was smiling thinly. With the El Camino dead, Eliot could almost hear their words through the glass.

Boy, you're begging for it.

Mrs. Coldfield yanked him down again. She blocked the sink with her body, her sturdy hips, and Eliot dodged them carefully, uncomfortable with their shape. She was rinsing plates from breakfast and the running water shushed the room.

He's here for Scram, ain't he?
Mrs. Coldfield didn't answer.
But Pa said they couldn't take him.
Things change.
How so?

On account of your father meeting some new folks at
Curly's. Said they can make it more feasible.

What's that mean?

Are you going to do something, Lee? Or are you planning
to sit and hassle me all day?

I don't want them to take Scram.

Mrs. Coldfield ripped the grocery list off the refrigerator.
The paper tore with a pop.

Here. Go down to the store and get me some cornmeal.
Make Buck do it.

Buck's out with that Abels girl. No telling when he'll be
back.

Eliot frowned. He didn't like when Buck went out with
Sarah Abels, didn't like having to hear about the things they
did together, where Buck said she let him touch her, the words
he used, the way he laughed almost like a mockery, a game he
was playing without her knowledge.

I want to watch over Scram.

Nonsense. You need to get out of the house. You can stop
by Matt Decker's on the way.

Eliot thought it over while pretending to read the list. He
remembered the hole of baby rabbits he and Matt had found
the day before and wondered if they were still there, their
small warm bodies, the downy fur that reminded him of great
white clouds that bulged like distant mountains, like towers of
heaven. "Kingdom clouds," their preacher called them.

Will he still be here when I get back?

Who?

Scram.

Mrs. Coldfield sighed heavily.

Come off it, Lee. They're not taking him today. But it's going to happen and you can't get upset about it. Dying's part of living. Lots of animals get slaughtered.

Scram's different.

No he ain't. Not anymore. Same as any other horse.

Eliot went quiet, sat that way for a long time. He eventually looked at the list in his hand, went to the kitchen where the newspaper was dismembered on the table like old gift-wrap, and dug for coupons. He found bargains for milk, broccoli and cooking spray, each on the list. In the kitchen, the running water stopped. He went back to see if his mother was gone, if he could get another look at the man in the hat before he left, but halfway there his mother cut him off and grabbed his wrist with her hard, wet fingers.

How many times I got to tell you? Coupons are for gritters. This family may be a lot of things, but we're not gritters.

He dropped the flimsy paper squares on the counter and Mrs. Coldfield snatched them—her hands like hawk feet—and threw them in the trash.

Take some pride in yourself, Lee. Don't you care what people think when they look at you? Your father's given you a good name and you carry it around wherever you go. Don't go dragging it through mud by making people think we need a handout.

Eliot looked in his mother's eyes. They were flat eyes, sagging in their sockets, and she looked like she thought he was the dumbest boy in the world. He considered what she said about his father's name, what her eyes said, and he realized she knew nothing. His father was a fool; even Eliot knew that. And the way Mrs. Coldfield spoke, as if she couldn't recognize something so obvious, as if she were willingly believing something she knew wasn't so, made him angry. He'd been feeling this way more often, a restive wildness rising up in his chest and hands, distinct from childhood rage, and it made him uncomfortable. But he grabbed hold of himself, said nothing

and went out the front door.

Eliot was still in the driveway wiping his wet wrist on his pant leg when he walked headlong into the chest of the stranger.

Cuidado! the man said, then, Lo siento. Sorry.

His tone was unforgiving, accent stuffy like he had a cold. Eliot sidestepped to get a look at his face in the sunlight. A thin black mustache ran unevenly above his upper lip, nose dipping over it like a hook. His cheeks wrinkled in long lines as he smiled, the skin dark and leathery, beaten from the sun, and everything about the man—his sunglasses, his hat, his dress shirt, his tinted windows—tried to hide that fact. He was the type of man who worked outside and dirtied his hands but didn't want others to know it. The type of man who did things he wouldn't talk about afterward.

He wanted to speak, say something to stop the man from doing whatever he would do with Scram, but he had no words. The stranger said nothing beyond his smile, had no other obligation to an eleven-year-old boy, and Eliot watched him get in his Navigator, watched him think nothing of kicking up their driveway stones with his oversized tires, the amputation of a hundred gravestones, leaving only dust to hover in his place.

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Before leaving on his bike, Eliot stopped by the barn. He heard the El Camino sputtering, the industrial clank of metal on metal. He didn't want to see his father, but didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to Scram, didn't trust his mother enough to believe the horse would be here when he returned. So he circled the outside of the barn and rested his back against boards bedraggled with peeling red paint. Splinters tugged at the fibers of his shirt as he slid down to a seat, hugging his knees, and he waited for breaks between his father's futile working so he could hear Scram's hoofsteps, his breathing. He denied his own breath to hear it, held old air tight within himself. And when he exhaled, gasping, he mouthed

things to Scram he wouldn't say to people, things about himself and his father that he didn't yet understand. Things he wanted only heard, nothing more.

In Hester, Oklahoma, Mr. Coldfield had been known as a con-man.

He had been a mortician. Started at a small funeral parlor selling caskets he claimed delayed decomposition. He pointed to the rubber seals that supposedly kept out the air, sold separate bottles of anti-aging chemicals to keep loved ones' bodies rot-free for fifty years guaranteed. He opened his own company where he marked up plots three-hundred percent, sometimes four. They made a kind of money foreign to Eliot now, and whenever someone in the family brought up his father's old job, Eliot pictured him dressed in a suit, his brown hair oiled black, perhaps twenty or thirty pounds thinner. He pictured him pretending to sympathize with crying widows, grieving sons and daughters, while tenderly pushing grave robbers' insurance. Eliot was only three when they had to move, fleeing the state before the rumors of lawsuits manifested real, before his father could be found out for his falsified NFDA license, his fake degree from Central Oklahoma framed in his office.

When they arrived in Ravenna, Mr. Coldfield came with a fresh name, but he wasn't so successful. He bought a two-story fixer-upper in the hills but couldn't get the plumbing right, water always brown. Tried to flip another by the railroad tracks before finding its cracked foundation, home broken to the core. He refused to hire professionals, couldn't afford the taxes, and sold both for less than he paid. It was later when they bought their ranch, when Mrs. Coldfield started working as a lunch lady at the boys' school, leaving their father home to invest in old cars he thought he could fix, horses he thought would race again.

Most recently, he bought guns: .223 Remingtons, .30-30 Winchesters, old .22's and varmint rifles. Those hillbillies love

their firearms, he'd said, though most of the guns still littered their garage and closets. He taught Buck and Eliot to shoot the .22's, let them work up to thirty-calibers. Eliot's favorite was the .338 Winchester Magnum, though he was never allowed to shoot it. Kicks like a bull, Mr. Coldfield said, but Eliot knew the real reason, had watched his father try to shoot it once, the kick knocking him backwards, butt in the dirt. He'd laughed at his dad, couldn't help it, and Mr. Coldfield marched inside. Nobody touches that gun, he ordered. It's hazardous. Though Eliot was sure his father didn't know what the word meant.

The boys cut through the torrid sycamores and shingle oaks where the Decker's property-line dissipated into tall green hills. There, at the opening of the forests' dark and cool underbelly, Eliot and Matt returned to their day-old finding: a shallow brown notch in the dirt, no bigger or deeper than a man's footprint, its contents warmly covered. They removed the protective makeshift bedding of dry grass and branches just as tenderly as they'd laid it, pulling back the last few leaves to reveal small newborn rabbits. There were four of them, all balled up tightly against each other to form one mass, one beating heart the size of a fist. Eliot reached down and touched them, their soft fur, and found their bodies cold and lifeless, no longer beating. Died the night before.

Eliot picked one up and examined its face: eyes scrunched, mouth propped with two teeth. He felt sadder than he thought he should. They were only rabbits, and he'd anticipated them not lasting through the night, imagined what it might be like to find them this way. But these bodies were new, were designed to be lived in, the teeth and fur still intact, still useful. To be abandoned so prematurely was a waste.

The boys ran to the house and told Mr. Decker about the dead rabbits. He poured three ginger ales and they sat at the table as he explained the science of decomposition, about autolysis and the way enzymes and bacteria in the rabbits' own

bodies would eat away at the flesh before enlisting worms and insects to finish the job, breaking the carcasses down into carbon dioxide and water, food for the earth. Eliot listened, wide eyes stinging. He wouldn't blink, refused the demands his sore drying eyes made of him, and his pupils tightened, layering the world with blurs, transforming it into something new.

He bought the groceries from the superstore that hummed with fluorescent lights and voices. He paid in cash, left with two dollars and seven cents, and decided to use the change at Fat Morrow's on the corner where they sold comics in the back. Eliot liked going there, liked listening to the men as they came in and out for coffee and talked about work.

He swung the door open, bell chiming, and Fat Morrow was leaning on the counter, giant belly poured out on the surface. He glanced up from his car magazine as he grunted, "G'afternoon," and Eliot smiled politely. It was mostly gas station rations filling the shelves in dramatic packaging. At the end of the aisle, Eliot leafed through the comics' bright pages, heroes filled with purpose, clear expressions he could understand. On the same shelves sat the tops of dirty magazines, the issues stacked, and their women stared at him with cat-like eyes darkly lined. They sat like tigers in a jungle, eyes out, remainder of their bodies concealed, and he turned his back to them. He'd looked at those magazines once before, alone, and had been equally rapt and confused by what he'd seen. He'd felt a strange frustration: wanted to keep looking, didn't want to see more before he could make sense of their faces, their parted lips, that incongruous mix of distress and aggression that made him feel weak, unsatisfied.

The bell chimed again. Thick boots thumped on the tile, keys clinking.

How's the wife, Deputy?

Dry and cranky.

Eliot peeked his head out from behind the end of the aisle.

Deputy Brown's tan and russet uniform shifted in front of the counter, shirt tucked tight in his pants, pants tucked tight in his boots. The uniform was neatly pressed, firm lines leading down his pant legs.

Just a coffee, he said.

No hotdog today?

Coffee's fine.

He wiped his face with a red kerchief and dug at his nostrils, stretching them and scowling as if a bug had flown up his nose.

Found a dead mare on the Riggins' property.

When?

This morning.

That's two in a month, Fat Morrow said. He furrowed his brow. Foxes get to it?

Starvation. Had dry scat all 'round its mouth, probably all the creature had to eat for weeks. Left the foulest odor I've come across.

Awful way to go.

Deputy Brown rubbed his coffee with his hands and he looked happy to have it. He ripped the tops off three sugar packets, poured them all in at once.

Worst part, said the Deputy, is she would've brought in a couple hundred selling to the Cavel plant not three years ago. Would've been taken care of right. Until they slaughtered her.

Eliot had heard similar stories in school this year, dead horses found all across the state. Teachers said when owners couldn't afford to feed the horses, they released them to the wild rather than waiting to ship them to Mexico or Canada where slaughter was still legal.

Deputy Brown sipped at his coffee as he surveyed the store. He locked eyes with Eliot.

Say. Is that little Lee Coldfield?

Eliot stepped out from behind the aisle, stood straighter, though he didn't know why. He was still playing with the

comic, took a second to realize what his hands were doing, put it away.

Not so small these days, are you Lee? How's your pa doing?

All right.

Your pap's a no 'count Sooner and you can tell him I said so, Fat Morrow told him. Got no more horse sense than a Hindu cattle farmer. Fat Morrow laughed at himself.

Both men frequented Curly's, played poker with Mr. Coldfield on Fridays. Eliot often passed the old red wooden building in town, its low black roof and dim tinted windows, a place he'd always pictured as noisy and smoky inside, where men drank and spoke loudly, saying things they normally wouldn't, outing their true natures. On Fridays, Mr. Coldfield came back tired and drunk, usually broke, and Eliot wanted to go just once with him, wanted to see the transformations, what men became in dark recesses, women and children barred.

The Deputy motioned for Eliot to join them at the counter. Up close, Eliot could see the skin creases splaying from the corners of the Deputy's eyes, gray hairs mixed up in his flattop.

Your old man still got that racehorse pent up? Scram?

Yessir.

You know what that horse is named after, don't you?

Yessir. Named after the Scramjet. Fastest plane in the world.

Deputy Brown smiled.

That's right. First owner was an old NASA man. I'd say the horse nearly lived up to the name, too. You know he got third in the ninety-six Derby.

Eliot nodded. Got fourth a couple years later, too.

Deputy Brown made an impressed 'm' sound with his closed mouth and shook his head. He didn't mention Scram's last race, the Kentucky Oaks in 2001 when the jockey pushed him hard through a turn, leaned too far and rolled them into a violent collision with the dirt, breaking Scram's left hind leg.

Two months later, Mr. Coldfield bought the horse thinking he could get him racing again, or at least sell rides to kids in town, though the only riding he got was from Eliot and Buck, taking turns plodding around the yard no faster than they could walk.

A bad investment, Deputy Brown said. A great horse, but a bad investment. Of course, your pa's gambled away that horse ten times over. Could've had a whole stable full for what he's bet on pocket queens over the years.

How much could he sell for now? Eliot asked.

Singles don't get much at the foreign plants. Too expensive to ship. Couple hundred, maybe. But they have to wait for the trailers to make their rounds.

Conditions are pretty bad in Mexico, Fat Morrow said. They pack'em like sardines there, and I've heard they get cut and stabbed if they move too slow.

Does anyone still slaughter around here? Eliot asked. Illegally?

Illegally?

Eliot nodded. Deputy Brown shifted his stance, looked at Fat Morrow who was gawking at him with the same curious expression as Eliot.

The Deputy smirked.

No one I know. Of course, I'd be about the last person they'd tell. I imagine there'd be more than a fine for a crime like that. For both parties. A boy down in Florida just got five years for killing horses, and they're still looking for the folks he bought them from.

Some could get away with it, though. Couldn't they?

He wouldn't look at the Deputy, stared at the dark clouds forming outside, grays swirling like the iris of an eye.

The Deputy drank, swallowed hard.

I don't know. But there'd be a lot of money in it for them if they did.

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He rode over tracks on his way home, the old train station

mounted down by the river, that wide and living road. He wished the train still ran, that he could see it snake through the forests, get lost in distant hills. If the station still ran, if it were more than just a landmark, a venue for the Ravenna Railroad Festival, the train would come eight times a day, his teachers said. It would roar through the tracks and tunnel the earth, its whistle fading in and out like dying breaths. It would rotate passengers and cargo, would circulate the state's resources the way blood circulates oxygen. And Eliot imagined it would roll into town angry, trumpeting as in conquest, less than a god, less than an army or lightning, but still with a purpose carried by bullhead rail steel and diesel. And the first time people heard the distant wail of the whistle, for that brief second before they could place the sound, it would bring fear to them. They would wonder if judgment was coming, if this was the end. They would look at their hands and feet. And if his father would've heard it eight times a day for all these years, he'd be a different man. All that fear stored up inside, building reverence for a greater good, one that surely does not approve of who he has been allowed to be.

The sky was dark. He could feel the storm before it met him: humid air, damp smell. There was no thunder, no lightning. Only the flash of rain, heavy streams dropping savagely, a gray and white curtain. He struggled to keep his tires straight against the current, handle bars weighted by the groceries, and water soaked through his shirt until the heavy fabric made a new skin. But he wasn't bothered, knew his body was sixty-percent water, knew it was just a body and that souls didn't get wet, weren't altered that way. The rain raged and he couldn't see the road ahead. It would be the same, whether he saw it or not.

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He entered the house with the plastic bags heavy and beaded with rain. He dropped them in the kitchen. Where have you been? his mother demanded, but Eliot ignored her, went to

shower. He immersed his head in running water, closed his eyes, the heat and noise a place all its own.

He finished and went to the bedroom he shared with his brother. Buck was changing, brown and purple bruises dirtying his bare chest and neck. They were marks he'd demonstrated on his own arm once, showing Eliot how he'd gotten them. Still in his towel, Eliot turned his back to him and went to his own dresser.

Nice bacne, Lee, Buck scoffed. You could make a roadmap with all those bimples.

He poked at Eliot's swollen red spots and named off cities: Richmond, Frankfurt, Mount Vernon.

Stop. That hurts.

I never heard of a sixth grader with back pimples, Buck chuckled. You're like some sort of mutant. It looks like Dad's back.

Shut up.

I'm serious. You look just like Dad from behind.

I said stop!

Eliot shoved his brother to the wall, Buck losing balance. He hadn't fought Buck in years. He felt lighter, like someone closer to his own age, not five years older. Eliot kept shoving. He pushed Buck into his dresser. Pushed him back to their closet, kept grabbing him and shoving until his brother was deep inside, covered in hanging clothes. Buck took swipes at Eliot's face, some landing solidly, but Eliot stood and met them, kept pushing until Buck was on the ground. There was a kick—Eliot didn't see which leg—and Eliot went down, Buck fast on top of him. He felt punches in the face and stomach, each more painful than the last. Eliot cried when it got to be too much and Buck relented. He left Eliot laying in the quiet of the room, left him to hold the warm and throbbing areas he'd been hit, and Eliot almost regretted what he'd done. But he'd do it again, he knew. He'd do much worse.

They sat in the dining room without light. Shreds of the plunging sun captured their empty plates in orange, the bowls of potatoes, salad and breaded chicken still full. The steam poured up only to die in the shadows, the air smelling sweetly of butter and chicken fat. The boys shifted in their seats, heads cradled in their hands.

Can't we eat? Buck groaned.

We wait for your father.

Eliot sighed loudly, enough to get a glare from his mother, though not so brassy that she would say something about it. But they made eye contact, and Eliot did not look away from her. She was tired, used, had already spent herself in the kitchen, and for a moment Eliot entertained who she was, what her life was like, and he felt hopeless for her.

And wasn't it fear they felt? When they heard him, the slamming of the bedroom door at the other end of the house, his steps pounding the floor? The room choked with their silence, and he entered, body swaying as if he were dodging blows on either side of his body. He sat with an apparent authority, and he looked over the table, the food, the faces that waited for him.

His words were not words, but weather, formations that could be neither created nor killed.

Let's pray.

They bowed their heads.

He spoke to God like a salesman. Explained his needs. Lifted up the family, his boys' future, rationalized why they should be blessed by "financial peace" and security. He thanked very little. He didn't bother to mention who God was, why He might be one to hear such prayers, and Eliot wondered if He wasn't, if God didn't think even less of his father's words than he did.

Mr. Coldfield served himself first, started eating before they were finished passing. He ate the chicken first, tore the

flesh apart. He ate with his mouth open and Eliot watched as he chewed the flesh, the white and brown mixing with his saliva, mashed into a vile scum that swam in the crevices of his mouth, new pieces of flesh added and destroyed. Eliot sat frozen in fear and he did not know why.

Should be next few days when they haul off the horse, Mr. Coldfield finally said. Mush whirled inside his mouth.

Scram, said Eliot.

Mr. Coldfield grunted, chewed.

You mean *Scam*? Buck said, grinning at himself.

Mr. Coldfield smacked the back of Buck's head for talking with his mouthful. He chuckled a moment later, though, thinking of the clever nickname. He began giving Scram his own names. Daddy's New Transmission. Old Retirement Fund. Mrs. Coldfield caught on, added New Bathtub and Weekend Trip, giggling her way to the words. Before long, all three were laughing at themselves, acting out the names, clapping and eating and drinking and laughing, and they asked Eliot what name he would replace Scram's with, what he would do with the money, but all Eliot could think about was the time when he was four years old and he had wanted to charge his toy rifle in an electrical socket, wanted to make it shoot lightning and so he'd created an elaborate plug using paperclips and tinfoil, came so close to sticking it in before his mother caught him and tore it apart, told him he could've died, could've burned the house down, and she made him sit in his room in the dark, with no light, until he learned to respect the power of electricity, of the fragility of life, of things he didn't understand.

Before he grabbed the gun and went to the barn—before he put on his shoes, loaded the .338 Winchester with four rounds and cut through the dark yard with a flashlight—Eliot defecated. He didn't want to go, didn't want to sit ankle-tied by denim, waiting, prisoner to the discomfort, the strain of it. But it was coming, and he had to sit and wait. After, there was a

sharp odor, more sordid than most. He flushed, cleaned himself, left as quickly as he could, but the smell seemed to stay with him. He remembered learning that odors were actually microscopic molecules in the air, that we breathed these small pieces inside of us and that by the time we were aware of the smells the molecules were already part of our bodies whether we wanted them or not.

Eliot was quiet as he left the house, as he walked over moist patches of grass in the yard, small window of light in front of him. He would need to stay quiet for most of it, he thought. At the end, though, he wanted to be loud. To wake them with fear. Show them what he'd done.

He stepped onto the barn's concrete floor, into smells of hay and motor oil. He took slow steps, the flashlight painting faint ocher renditions of the wooden walls, ceiling rafters, and the gold El Camino. The barn seemed to breathe, panting humidly in the after-storm, but Eliot knew it was really the horse breathing so heavily, exhausted from its long life, these last few miserable years in the Coldfield's barn, and it was as if it were waiting for him. Eliot aimed the light to where the horse's head drooped over the stall's frame in the back corner, light reflected in its eye, a perfect pin. Eliot kept his gaze on it to orient himself. The gun lay heavy in his hands.

The horse was a bag of an animal, torso sagging between his legs, thin mane matted to its neck like a bandage and mouth hung agape with its breathing. It looked wise, in a way, as if a portion of the world's intimacies had been entrusted to it. God knew it held some of Eliot's. He prayed for the horse, prayed more like his preacher and less like his father. He thanked God for the animal. He recognized much of God in it, its strength and patience, and he only asked that God keep its soul, its honor, that death would not rob the horse of all it had been to him. And wasn't the horse's head made for that barrel? That hollow tip of the metal that nestled so perfectly between its jaw bone, flesh pinched between? And yes, this was a better

way to go, here with Eliot and God and the gun, where the stranger with the leather skin would not touch him.

He turned the light off so he wouldn't have to see.

When Eliot fired the rifle he immediately regretted it. There was the flash, the bang, what he'd expected. But there was a startling explosion of liquid, buckets-full, splattering the barn black in the night. It soaked Eliot's face, his shirt, the concrete and El Camino, all sticky and warm. The horse's blood was in his eyes, dripped off his lips and chin, and he ducked away from the body already fallen, twitching briefly on the ground like it had been interrupted while in the middle of something. He wiped his face, grabbed the light. He didn't have much time.

He ran out to the yard and to the end of their property. There was an acre of knee-high brush behind him, weeds and bushes and long dead grass that glowed a pale and ghostly white. And at the end lay the forest, a black thickness waiting for him.

The lights came on in the house. First the bedrooms in the back, then, the hallway and the kitchen, each new light a heartbeat. They were coming closer. He stood there in the dark, still holding the gun, barrel kissing the dirt, and the blood was thickening on his hands, gluing them to the stock. He listened for their movement in the house and as he waited for the first figure to emerge, he prayed again to God, this time selfishly. He prayed his father would be the first one out.

He came forth like a bear. Large and quick, limbs moving in tandem, a smooth descent down their steps to the yard and barn. He moved faster than Eliot thought he would, and Eliot went cold for a second, thought his father would catch him there in the yard, would punish him without mercy, no witnesses in the dark. But Eliot managed to lift the heavy rifle and balance the butt on his shoulder. And though he fired at the sky, the sound was for his father. A rapture sound. He couldn't see, but he heard his father dive to the grass, cursing and mad

with fear.

Buck and his mother were close to follow on the back steps, bodies silhouetted by the house lights. He told them not to move. Told them that after he left, they were to look in the barn, at Scram, at the truth of things. And then he rattled off what he'd heard earlier that day, facts about decomposition, autolysis, what happens to a body after it dies, and that this is only a body, that the horse is God's, and all these things are not for them to understand yet for he barely understands them himself. All while his father scrambled on the ground, cursing in the dark.

And this is when Eliot leaves, enters that field that leads to the forest. He'll be back, maybe brought back, either by his family or Deputy Brown. Most likely he'll return by his own concession. There are consequences for what he's done, but he does not fear them. There are consequences, but they are for some other boy. He's with Scram, screeching across the sky, his tail slicing both time and space. The consequences are for the Sooner's son. But he is somewhere else.

He walks in the darkness carrying the rifle. He holds it straight, barrel parallel to the ground. It is heavy in his arms and the muscles in his hands cramp around the wooden stock, tight like a lifepreserver hugging a child's neck. It is a victory to hold it, a gun his father could never handle, and he is upright walking with it. He walks and he cannot see his feet or the grass or the dirt as he approaches the mouth of the forest, trees looming in front of him, their black trunks and susurrant heads. He stops before them, stands and waits as if to ask entry into some great foreign castle, anticipating their king. The trees acquiesce in a stillness of their own, permitting him, a new citizen. He will enter it unafraid. He will live there. He will find a cavity in the side of the Kentucky hills and he will make a home that will not rust or splinter. He'll make a life with what the forest gives him, always sufficient, and he won't think of his old life, his

parents or his brother. He'll carry the gun, rule over the animals with patience and discernment, the way all things should be done, and he'll be his own father. He'll grow a beard. And in time, he'll take a woman—not his mother, but a woman—and they will live together unafraid. They will have a son. And the son will be him. The son will be his.