

FOR TIO, THE WORST part about burying horses is having to quarter them, to cut them up so they fit in the hole. That's what gets to him most, even more than the shock and disappointment of finding them dead. More than the bloat or glazed eyes or how the lips part into a grisly yellow-tooth smile when you drag them. What really undoes him is all that sawing and hacking you have to do unless you have a backhoe. Tio doesn't own a backhoe. He has a tractor to haul the carcass all the way up from the highway. He has a truck, an old parked bus, and a 1953 De Soto, but he does not have a backhoe.

Tio is burying one of his horses. Not a good horse or a friend horse, but a horse who holds no memories for him, a bony, nameless roan that wandered out on the highway and got mowed down by a semi. No one was hurt, except the horse, who probably didn't feel a thing. At least that's what the driver kept saying. "He just stood there," he said, sipping coffee, nervous, moving a toothpick from side to side in his mouth. "Just stood there looking at me. Wasn't nothing I could do."

Tio didn't say anything because it wasn't worth it. The driver's pinpoint blue eyes and tremor told him enough. He was jacked up on some sort of shit for sure, and Tio didn't want any trouble. The horse was old, probably found a tear in one of the fences and wandered out in the road at the wrong time, in the wrong place. The semi wasn't damaged at all, except for some tangled hair and a large bend in the grill, so Tio shook the man's clammy hand and sent him on his way. Then he called his son, Len, to come help him clean up the mess.

They've already slung ropes around the horse and dragged him back down to the field. They've piled brush high on him so that he isn't so visible, only a brown heap down by the trees. It's late, the sun hanging low and watery, the color slipping out of the sky, making eerie slanted rays. In the streaked light, Tio finally gets a solid take on Len, who looks worn out with his red-rimmed eyes, his face gaunt. "Go home," Tio tells him, "You look like shit."

Len drops his hand over his face, rubs his eyes, "Thanks."

"We're not cutting today. Too late. So go on." For Tio, the horse is easier than any of this: Len looking so beat, the house growing

dark up on the hill, none of the windows lit, Helen sitting in the dark, waiting for them to come and turn on lights, shower, get ready to go. Tio would rather be here, stacking brush, not talking, not thinking about the viewing or anything beyond that. "Go on," he tells Len, "We can take care of this later. You should be there. Take your mother. She'll want you there."

"You should be there," Len says quietly, then he shrugs, turns back toward the house.

"I'll be there, I'll be there." Tio calls after him, but Len doesn't turn around, he jams his hands down into his pockets and keeps walking toward the house, looking smaller the closer he gets.

In places, Tio's field dips and swells down to where a row of apricot trees and a small wash hem it in. The slope rises gently up to the house, bare except for some loose rocks and scrub, chamisa skeletons, swirls of flattened and dry deer grass. Tio's other fields are more orderly, furrowed rows waiting for the next season, his piñon groves, his orchards, but this one sloping patch is left barren. Out here he has buried everything that's died on him, his horse, his first wife, some dogs. Under his feet, small silent graves radiate in every direction, and that, at least, is something he can understand. Tio doesn't have time for church or candles or all that smoke and bells. Church is somebody else's idea of a good time.

Just a few hours ago, he and Helen fought bitterly, on this spot, about where to bury their son, Bear. For now he's laid out in the chapel in a closed coffin covered with roses, lilies and larkspur. They can't agree on where to leave him. Tio wanted Bear to go to rest here, in the field with everybody else. Helen wouldn't hear of it. She cried. She spat words at him and at last she stumbled down onto her knees, clawing up handfuls of the rocky soil, spitting and choking on bitter words. Tio lifted her, rocked her, told her she could bury Bear where she wanted. But it saddens him to think of the narrow church grounds, closed in, carved granite dates announcing everything to anyone who might happen by. Tio can't understand that. Out here on the hill, they could let him spread out, thicken and move around in the mud, let the apricots soak down into him.

Depending on what he's burying, Tio usually digs more than one hole. When he buried his best dog, Pooch, he dug seven, filling the slope with small shallow ponds. It depends on how much he wants to forget. Usually, he digs until his brain is numb, until he can only feel the ache of muscles, and the shovel becomes an

automatic part of breathing. Then, when he's not really thinking, he puts the body into one of the holes. By then, flesh is one more step, part of the endless digging, tossing dirt, stepping down, stepping up, smoothing the dirt in circles. He doesn't have to think about the body, he just thinks about filling the holes back up, patting all those holes shut with the underside of his shovel so that they all look the same. No one, not even Tio, can remember what has gone in where. Of course, by then the slope is full of brown mounds and scars, but a season of hard weather takes care of that.

Tio marks a plot for the roan down near the edge of the field beneath a tree. He counts off an eight-stride by six-stride hole and digs in, breaking through soil frozen for the first inch or so. Lights in his house go on one by one, then back off. A motor starts, makes its way down the drive, then fades out into a whine on the main road. He digs until his arms begin to burn and ache, until the ridge of the blade bites into his foot, until he's standing one foot down in the ground, drenched with sweat. Only then does he leave his shovel standing up in the center of the shallow hole, starting back up to the house to shower, shave and go sit with his boy.

Under bright lights, Bear's casket wavers, bursting with flowers, waxy and unreal, blooming bright in the night. Wild roses spill down the side between bright patches of purple and yellow, baby's breath fanning out in a cloud. The coffin is polished, smooth and glossy, and Tio knows what kind of wood it is, but he can't think of the name. Yesterday he stood there beside Helen and nodded his head yes in front of the right coffin, but now he can't think of what it is called. Faces unpeel and swim back toward him one by one, shining and floating in the candlelight, filing out. Helen walks out leaning on Len's arm and Tio lets them pass. He studies the small moons of dirt under his fingernails, pulls a horsehair off his pants. Father Joe walks up slowly, his face flushed red, and he reaches out to hold onto Tio's shoulder, grips him to his bone with fleshy fingers, then walks on.

Cedar. The casket is cedar, smooth to the touch, fragrant. That's what the scrawny woman with the black swooping hair told them. At the funeral home she told them all about the different types of wood available, listing prices and virtues spiraling all the way up to mahogany, which was way beyond them. That room was filled with

caskets, like barges, shining, about to let loose from their moorings and embark. Tio didn't really listen, except for the part about \$950 and thirty days to pay the bill. They sat opposite her long desk sunk into oversized chairs while she arranged everything in her date book. Tio watched her eyebrows lift and lower, swimming around on her forehead while she talked on and on about the flowers, the visitation, the plot, the church, flipping back and forth through her file, her fingers loaded with large turquoise rings. It was cold, there, in her office, with only a high narrow window up behind her desk, a brilliant square of blue. An electric space heater blew on her feet and Tio stared at it, the grill growing cherry red, fading back out, then swelling orange into red again.

More faces pass by, more hands press his shoulder, his cheek, reach for his hand. There are some cousins and friends and people he doesn't know. He studies the altar, narrow and confined, as they keep shuffling by until there is one head left near the front. Bear's wife, Wendy, suddenly turns to go, fists clenched. Her hair stands up, frizzy on top, floating behind her. Tio knows that certain people have broken something inside of their heads and they just wait for a chance to get rid of it, to lay it down and walk away. He has known this all along about Bear's wife. When she stops at his pew and sits down next to him, he doesn't move. He doesn't say anything.

"You can have them," she says quietly.

Tio nods and stares up at the white wall with the heavy wood cross hanging from it. When he closes his eyes he can see crazy crosses in wild bright colors, burnt deep on his lids.

"I hate this." She spits the words out. They both stare up at the front as if something moved, maybe changed. She adds quietly, "I can't come tomorrow. I'm not doing this again. I'll be here when they put him down but I'm not going to sit like this again," she says firmly, as if Tio might argue, but he doesn't move, not even his hands.

"You can have them all," she says.

Tio turns and stares at her, looking just to one side of her face.

"His shoes," she says and stands back up. "Everything. Come tomorrow." She backs out of the pew and walks on, never once turning back.

Bear's shoes are in a muddy heap on the bottom of a closet. There aren't so many, not like Tio imagined all night and through

the morning while he stood outside digging and digging. Every time the shovel bit into the sole of his foot he saw shoes walking, shoes clumping, shoes with holes and one wet foot. He shoveled a mountain of shoes. But there are only a few, a couple pair of scuffed boots, sneakers with tangled laces, one pair of black and white dancing shoes.

"Tell me a story," Lena sits on the edge of the bed hugging a stuffed sock monkey. She is fresh from her bath, pink, and in blue pajamas with feet, a robe belted around her middle. She fixes her monkey's hat so that it pulls down over his eyes. Tio hates that monkey. He hated it when Helen gave it to Lena for Christmas three years ago and he still hates it. It's sewn out of some kind of brown sock material and has a jaunty silly hat with a red tassel. Worse, are the red lips on its face and the same obscene red lips where its tail leaves its body. It has stringy arms and legs and bright black eyes. Lena calls it Munk-a-lunk.

"Tell us a story," she says in her Munk-a-lunk voice and wiggles the monkey in the air.

Tio carefully unfolds each sheet of newspaper, lays it out flat before he wraps the shoes, one at a time. He stretches and winces at his digging muscles, "About what?" he asks her.

"About you, silly," she says and falls back laughing. Munk-a-lunk peers over the edge of the bed. "What are you doing with Dad's shoes?" Munk-a-lunk asks. "Going somewhere with Dad?"

The shoes are very dirty, very very dirty, and it takes Tio a while to wipe all the mud, so carefully, from the place where it's caked between the heel and the sole. He thumps the heels slowly on the floor to knock the dirt out, then he sweeps the dirt into a little cone. Each shoe gets two sheets of paper, the ends tucked neatly down into the hole before they slide into brown shopping bags. One pair to a bag. Lena and Munk-a-lunk stare over the edge of the bed, a patch of shiny drool on Lena's cheek.

"Don't know no stories?" she asks finally.

He starts to tell her about the dead roan they just dragged in, but he stops in time. He folds a shoe up in a piece of paper. "I was in a fire once," he says, grabbing onto the first words appearing in his mind. "A big one, but I didn't die."

"Here?"

"No, far away, once, in California."

"When you were little?"

"No, when I was big. I was out working. Building a house."

"House?"

Tio nods, "It was early, morning. I was mixing cement when I saw a fast fire coming, a brush fire with a wind. It was jumping up at me, chasing me. I knew I couldn't run fast enough. No one could run that fast, so I turned on the hose and stood under the water. That fire blew right by me, a big tall wall of fire, pulled the air right out of my lungs, singed my hair. And right when the fire came I felt a rush at my feet, a rustling, and you know what that was?"

"The fire," Lena says, breathless.

"No, rabbits. Those rabbits were running as fast as they could and when they smelled that water they dove all around my feet. I had rabbits up to my knees squirming and squiggling to get next to me, under that water. Then the fire hit, a wall that almost knocked me down. Then it was gone. Just like that. All gone."

"Gone," Lena says faintly.

Tio wraps a boot slowly, thinking of that burnt and smoking field, how clear and beautiful everything was, dreamlike, a world he didn't belong in. He took a step. "And those rabbits," he adds softly, "were dead. Every one." He can see the shriveled-up raisin eyes, how peaceful and heavy the bodies were as he stepped out of them, piled high around his feet, the roar of the fire already dim behind him.

"All dead?" she asks, "All dead?" her eyes widening, hugging her Munk-a-lunk closer to her, shrinking into the bed.

Tio drops a boot into a bag, embarrassed. This wasn't what he wanted to tell her at all. It was the moment, incandescent and pure, his eyelashes singed, smoke all around him. Out there in that field no one knowing whether he was dead or alive, and in that instant he realized fully that his existence was his idea and his alone. Everything that he was or would be rested in that moment, in that idea of himself.

"All...Of...Them...Died?" Lena spells this out, leaning forward to make sure, her head and neck sticking out, some hair fallen into her eyes.

"Great," Wendy says grimly, stepping into the room, setting a box down in the middle of the floor, "Know any others?" She sits on the edge of the bed and pulls Lena next to her. The box is a tumble of clothes, a bright red shirt, a tan hat, some jeans. "You can have those too," she says.

"That's Dad's hat..." Lena says solemnly, pointing. Wendy pulls her to her feet and heads her out of the room, Lena and the monkey straining to see what's behind her.

"I didn't mean..." he starts.

"Forget it," Wendy says and drags Lena out. "Forget it." She starts down the hall and calls behind her, "We're having dinner if you want something to eat."

Tio finishes packing the shoes and straightens out all the bags, lines them up in a row by the door. He can't imagine what they could be eating. He can't imagine what she's told the child. In the kitchen, Lena's shrill voice rises on the word "shoes," then tops out on "bunnies."

He couldn't eat even if he wanted to. Already there is too much inside of him, all these boxes of Bear's clothes and shoes, where to put them so that Helen isn't upset, Bear's coffin and the funeral, the horse stretched out at the end of the hill, waiting. He can't imagine what they could be eating.

Bright yolk pools on both their plates. Lena holds a piece of tortilla up to her mouth and looks at him blackly. She chews slowly, studying the food in her hand. Without looking at him, she folds and folds the rest of the entire tortilla into her mouth. She chews with her cheeks bulging, turning her hands in front of her, showing herself they're empty.

Tio accepts coffee, turning the mug so that the faint orange lip mark on the rim faces away from him. Wendy wipes the counters, the walls, the baby's face and takes her to bed leaving behind only two wet circles on the table where their plates were. Tio takes it all in, the bright alphabet letter magnets on the refrigerator, postcards of small sunny beaches tacked up neatly in a row above the sink, a sprouting avocado seed. His mind spins, wondering when all of this could possibly have happened.

Down at the end of the hall he can hear Wendy starting back, closing doors and switching off lights, making her way through the house. Tio tries to see her differently for a moment, not as the surly woman from Seattle who always stayed out in the car while Bear poked his head in to say hello. He tries to imagine her the way Bear saw her.

She swings around the corner and drops the box of clothes down on the table in between them. Then she brings the bags of shoes and boots, one by one, piling them up on the table, too. Tio watches her disappear behind the mound of Bear's belongings. Although she tries to hide it, he can see the strain in her face, puffy and pink around the nose, a slight give in the way she walks, almost a limp, and he knows that this is what Bear saw too, a thin woman with a limp, walking toward

him. She sits down, breathing a little heavily, and reaches for a cigarette.

"When he was small," he tells her, "he looked like that, like Lena. Once when we were planting he found a packet of carrot seeds. He dumped the whole packet down in one row and grew the most enormous carrots I'd ever seen." Tio holds up his hands to measure out an absurdly long carrot, "Bursting right up out of the ground."

Wendy lights her cigarette, taps her foot, puts her thumbnail between her two front teeth, tries to smile.

"Enormous," he adds.

Tio knows that he should be asking the important questions, questions about the immediate future and the welfare of the child, but her face stops him. He tries again with a story about how one time Bear ate a bee, but Wendy's face is smooth and uncomprehending, staring at him like he is speaking in another language. This isn't the Bear that she knew at all; her Bear wore these clothes, stood at that stove, sat in this chair. Tio realizes, slowly, he didn't know Bear either. They are not the same person. They are not even the same idea.

When Tio thinks on these two men, it feels as if Bear never existed. He sips his coffee once, then again quickly. In his palm, the beginning swell of a blister throbs, pink and angry. His nails are caked with dirt. He can see how easy it would be for Bear to spin off into nothing, that sharing his memories with her is like ripping Bear up into smaller and smaller pieces. Tio's boots hang heavy, out of place on the bright orange throw rug. He would like to be in his car, on his way home to his horse waiting for him to come and finish the job. It is when he thinks of the horse, collapsed under the tree, that he knows what he will give her: a little jagged splinter he's lodged down inside of him for years. It isn't a story about Bear, but that's not what she wants. She wants her own notion of Bear, something she can keep for her own.

"One year, the rio froze early. Like now, October, the ice thick and cold," his voice booms, startling them both. He stops, clears his throat, begins again. "The boys, of course, all piled down there to play. This is the Rio Hondo, not the Grande, the one out back," he says and nods over his way so she'll know. "Sometimes it used to freeze solid, all the way down to the bottom, but not so often. Other times it floods, you know." He feels like he's wasting words so he gets quiet. Wendy inhales, blows her smoke

up in the air and waves it slowly away with one hand. "So..." she prompts, her voice flat, a smudge of lipstick on her front tooth.

"So this one time, all the boys they go off down there to run around. Only the ice, it's not so thick, see, not so thick. They get this idea, like boys, to throw some boulders down in there. They launched them good, too, real high so they came down, punched big holes right through that ice. Big round craters. Some of them didn't break all the way through, just rolled out there and got stuck. The ice was littered with rocks, big rocks, holes, a real mess." He stops, sips his coffee. Wendy is listening now, leaning a little forward. She wets her tooth, wipes the lipstick away with her tongue. Her smell is faint, like a vegetable, nothing like it should be. He taps the side of his cup slowly, "But then, they got bored so they start spinning each other around, and Bear, he decides to go a little crazy with his younger cousin, Celso. He takes him by the hands and starts spinning fast and faster in a circle. Only thing, his hands slip and Celso, he goes flying through the air, spinning around, sails right out onto the ice, slides a ways, slips right down one of them holes. Slick. Right down. Kerplunk."

He can see Bear in his mind, turning, then feeling those small hot hands, that weight spinning off, whistling through the air, knocking Bear down into the snow. "Bear, he fell down. Sat right down. But those other boys went running out across the ice to get Celso out. One big kid, Lalo, he comes skimming and running across that ice, feet flying and slipping, then tripping. He shot right into one of those rocks, split his head open like a melon. Smack. Broke it right open."

Wendy winces, but Tio keeps on going because he's just getting to the good part. "So Bear gets up. Them other boys are all gathered around the kid with the broken head, so Bear runs out on the ice to the hole Celso sunk through. He reaches down into that black water, pulls Celso up, soaking and gasping from the cold. Carries him home, too, warm inside of his jacket. Didn't even catch a cold."

Of course, the real story is much simpler than this. When Tio was small he watched while two older boys chased each other out on the river. One tripped and fell, snapped his neck and died. Tio stood, rooted on the bank, hidden behind a tree. He knew the boy was dead from the way the other boy ran, wide-eyed and breathing hard, right past him, back for help. Tio did not run.

He clenched his hands, turned away and walked quickly, without stopping, all the way home, into his house, then into a closet where he pretended to be asleep. He didn't even open his eyes after his mother threw open the door, screaming about the mud and snow he tracked all through the house, melting on her nice shoes and stockings.

But, for a moment, Tio can see this other story, too. Now that he's told it, it seems like it might have happened, Bear and Celso out there spinning around on the bank, sailing through the air. He watches Celso slide backwards, the surprise on his face as he tips down into the hole, his red mittens sinking down into the water. He watches all of it happen just like he said. They can both see him now, Bear standing straight and tall, scooping his cousin up out of that ice, striding back home with Celso wrapped up next to him. They sit quietly, neither stirring. Tio finishes his coffee, gets up to rinse out his cup and leave.

Wendy stabs her cigarette out. "Wait," her voice so faint he can hardly hear her over the water running. "I have more," she says. "I'll show you."

Wendy opens up one of her closets and hands him a box full of sharp tools. Tio lifts it, sets it down by the door, but when he goes back she hands him another, this one a tangle of electrical wire. She hands him a box full of Christmas ornaments and one of wrapping paper. She gives him a half-used bag of alfalfa pellets and a leash, a box of belts and rags. They move faster and faster. Wendy digs out boxes, empties drawers, scoops out shelves. She gives him blankets and pillows, wire hangers and garden hoses, half-empty buckets of paint. She clears the closets and when they are done, she helps him carry everything out to the car.

By the De Soto, boxes lean and totter, piled up on each other, sinking into the icy mud. It will take at least two trips back and forth to get so many boxes back home. Wendy sets the last carton down. "Wait," she says, and runs into the house, comes back to the door. "Everything will fit in there," she calls, tossing the keys to Bear's yellow truck from the door. She rubs her arms, like she's numb, her pale face lashed with one mud streak. Her hair hangs limp around her shoulders, pushing against her face, fallen and confused. "I'll see you tomorrow then," she says finally. Then she closes and locks the door.

When the back door swings open, icy water rushes out, then the

dank, clammy smell of fish. In the dim light, blocks of ice glint, covered with the sleek bodies and tails of fish. Bags of cubed ice and bright packages of frozen fish are stacked, slanted, waiting. Tio hadn't thought about this, the deliveries. There's maybe half a load of fish in there on ice, but nothing to do about it now except shove it over and begin loading up the boxes of Bear's belongings. Tio stacks and packs the boxes, side by side with the ice, enough room so nothing will slide around, then he lurches the truck up onto the road, on his way home.

His lights catch trees, phone poles and mailboxes. The curves jump up at him, driving a different way home. Tio knows the road well, but it feels unfamiliar from inside the cab, the seat too far back, the wheel loose. Loud, head-banging guitars thrash on the radio where Bear left it. Tio gropes for the knob, spins the music up too loud, then turns it down low, but he leaves it on the station. The cab smells musty, of goats and coffee, of fish. He cracks the window and lets the heater blast on his feet, smelling the night rushing by.

Tio doesn't touch anything that has been left behind, not the ashtray full of twisted cigarette ends, a woman's lipstick on the seat, an empty, split styrofoam cup. It is enough that he must find a place for all the fish and the boxes down in the extra shed without Helen seeing and growing upset. He can't think about that, already it is rushing closer to him. Here he is, roaring through the night in his son's place. He's not sorry that he told Wendy the story that he did, leaving Bear walking back across the ice. He can see it again, Bear picking up Celso and walking across the ice, when he lifts his foot off the gas because he's not seeing Bear grown, carrying his cousin, he is seeing Bear tiny, just a moon head, dark eyes and a blue snowsuit, cold and whining. Walking, they were walking down over the bank, a shortcut across the rio, over to the back road. The thaw was on, early spring, ice and mud, everywhere. The rio rushed by, swollen. They crossed the way they always had, on a long felled tree that spanned the width of the river. The huge gnarled roots provided a step up onto the thick trunk, worn from so many crossings. Footholds were hacked into the trunk so they could cross.

Bear was heavy in Tio's arms but he held him tightly. He could feel Bear's body tense, his arm squeezing Tio's neck while behind them, Helen waited. Tio kept telling her to wait until he crossed so that the log wouldn't bounce or jog. It was easy until about halfway out when Tio could feel a light spray on his face and smell

the water black and fast, small pieces of ice broken up, pooling, rushing under the log. Bear shifted, fussed, and Tio slowed down to edging one foot next to the other, the log a little slick in places. He was almost across when he felt the pressure of Helen stepping up onto the log behind them, her weight coming up through his leg. Bear twisted back to see her, calling her name. Tio tried to catch himself, leaning first one way, then the other, but Bear kept twisting and turning. Tio swerved to one side and felt his foot slip, reach out and sink into air.

Tio rolls the window down farther and lets the wind dig into him. He leans forward into the wheel, high beams curving and leaning, following the white lines up and down, pulling him down the road, swinging left, then jogging down a small dirt drive. Tio pulls into a lot where two dull eyes stare back at him until he gropes for a knob, shuts his lights off. He is out of the cab, standing out in the cold before he realizes where he is, in the church lot. Frozen, rutted tracks crisscross all around him, but the only other car out there is Father Joe's. The church's high thick walls face him blankly, and the heavy wooden door pulls back at him when he tries to open it, but he wrenches it open.

The room smells cold and sickly with perfumed flowers. Candles smoke in the corners, pale and exposed in the small glare of an electric light. Only the father is there, in a regular shirt and pants, pulling on a jacket. He looks up, startled. "They've gone home, Tio," he says. "They all left. Go on home. We'll see you in the morning." In his voice there is a whiff, a suspicion that he thinks Tio is all messed up or drunk. The father doesn't want any trouble. Tio has several things he could say right then, but he's not sure if they would make sense, so he tries to explain why he is there. But before he can work it all the way through, he starts to feel wobbly. The cold, damp air on his face pushes on his eyes, and for the first time all day he feels cold, really cold. The walls should be warm, but they are only frozen mud, not any kind of earth holding in the heat.

"I need to sit for a minute," Tio lowers himself gingerly, startled, like he's catching up to himself from a long distance. The room is blindingly bright, every single pew defined, the flowers illuminated, even old Joe's face pink, almost translucent, seems focused, vital. The priest comes closer, leans down and looks at Tio, draws in a sharp little breath. His slack eyes wander from Tio's mouth to his face. He stands, then shrugs. "Can I do something?" he asks in a tired voice.

The father, Tio knows, is a drinker. He would like to go to his house out back and build a nice little fire, pour some brandy and lemon into some hot water, fill it to the brim a couple of times, then begin to drink in earnest, two fingers deep, straight from his coffee mug. He is not lost on Tio.

Tio smiles and shakes his head no. "I just want to sit for a bit. Not long. You go home. I'll tell you when I leave."

The father looks around, relieved, then smiles, pats Tio on the shoulder, "Have it your way," he says, "Knock when you go."

The door booms shut, the priest fades away, a shuffle in the gravel, back to his house. In the corner, a bald electric light throws ridiculous shadows. The lamp, an old iron rooster, beak open, foolishly crowing, has no lampshade and makes no noise as Tio snaps it off. Moonlight jumps into the room, casting hard blue and white shadows. The altar, half in shadow, half in light, swells. The casket is shiny, satin-smooth, dense under his hands. Flowers brush up against his face, the petals fleshy and cool, the bouquets surprisingly light. He lays them gently, one at a time, on the railing and the ground around him. He just wants to see the coffin, bare, sleek, glowing pale in the muted light. The lid isn't so heavy. It glides up on oiled hinges, easily, in one lift.

Tio hears Helen's long wail, then the shock of cold. The swift current tumbled them, but Tio grabbed hold of his boy, struggling for air, so they were pulled feet-first downstream. Down in that green ringing cold, Tio saw Bear's dark mouth, his eyes blurred at first, then growing whiter. Tio pulled him closer but Bear grabbed a fistful of hair, next to the roots and pulled as hard as he could. Tio couldn't get his footing, and as his movements slowed, a stillness filled him, so that the ache in his head and ears softened, and Bear's thrashing so close, filled him with a clear surge.

It wasn't love or anger that rushed into him, fusing their two bodies together, it was something just beyond them, unrecognized, beyond the cold beating into them, an idea of themselves which was inseparable. If he squeezed hard enough, they would reach it, that single moment, transformed, he could squeeze it into them, reaching beyond who they were, spinning around and around, floating, without weight.

So he did, pulling his son closer in an embrace, holding them down, lungs bursting. And even after he could feel the rock and gravel solid under his feet, Tio let the moment carry them a bit further, crouched on the river bottom, feeling the force strangling him in his chest, his arms locked around Bear.

One arm around his shoulders and the other under his knees, Tio rises, in one swift movement, and carries him out. He walks in an even line straight down the aisle, pushing open the door, carrying Bear back out to the ice, to the back of his truck.

Tio pulls fish out, one at a time, dropping them with heavy thuds around his feet. He grabs bags of cubed ice and larger blocks. He heaps fish and ice, scooping them out of the truck and piles them around his feet. Then he quietly trudges back and forth, again and again, wiping his feet carefully at the doorway of the church so as not to track any mud down the aisle.

Up there, at the altar he breathes heavily, but in the moonlight it is beautiful to see: the glimmering ice spread over the fish, the heavy sagging salmon, a whole school of slippery trout, a bloated heavy fish, speckled with pink scales the size of pennies, golden flat eyes and a puckered mouth. Tio buries them all so that they swim and twist back and forth by each other, swimming both north and south. He packs the ice so tight down and around them that the fish are suspended, dark beneath the ice, caught in their own frozen strip of water, distorted in blue light.

Slowly, he lowers the lid over the packed and leveled ice, sealing the coffin back up. The roses and larkspur are replaced and rearranged, blooming light and lovely, as they were before. Then very quietly, Tio gets down on his hands and knees and mops up his tracks, in careful, deep circles, backing the whole way down the long aisle, right on out of the church, wiping up any traces that he was ever there at all.

The ride home floats by, slow and easy, the back weighing down the wheels, keeping them on the road. Tio's mind is tired, spinning again over the simplest thoughts: how he will cut the lights, then coast down his drive, all the way down to the shed beyond the house where they sometimes put up guests, unloading the delivery truck, quickly, quietly. He will stand in the shower long enough to rub off the day, then slide into bed next to Helen, warm, placing just his feet over hers, gently so as not to wake her. He can see her now as if she were beside him, standing there, tomorrow at the church in front of the yawning open hole, watching the casket slide down on greased ropes. He will let Helen lean into him, her perfumed shoulders and powder floating up gently at him, her hair pillowed and soft to the touch. Maybe he will hold her elbow while she stoops to pick up a small handful

of holy dirt to toss down into the hole. He will take a much larger handful, a handful of pebbles and dirt. When he tosses them, they'll roll down like loose teeth or clattering hail. He'll wait a minute, then do it again.

Ahead of him there is nothing but some startled trees, then the break out into the field beyond, the moon washing out the bowl like a giant crater empty and wide. Tio slows down to clear the curve, the one where the roan died. He cuts the lights there and slows till he finds his drive. Starting up his hill he keeps the engine in low gear, crawling home. Moonlight seeps into the fields around him, making them look pocked and pitted, the road full of gulches, but Tio knows it is just a trick of the light. He shifts his weight, presses his foot down harder on the gas. The heater blasts so hot on his boots he smells leather heating, shoe polish melting, but Tio keeps his toes there, his mind loose and wandering. He thinks about the ruts in the road, the packed boxes, the melting ice, the roan stretched out and waiting next to the grave, a small disturbance down by the trees.



Diza Sauers has published in various magazines and is a recipient of an Arizona Commission for the Arts Fellowship.