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American Limbo

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AMERICAN LIMBO

By

Cassidy Lachmann Hart

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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Cassidy Lachmann Hart July 22, 1987

ABSTRACT

AMERICAN LIMBO

By

Cassidy Lachmann Hart

“American Limbo” is about the neglected and the lost stories of the Midwest. It is about a collection of people in Ironton, a fictional town that rests on the Michigan-Wisconsin border in the Upper Peninsula’s Menominee County. Ironton represents the quintessential Midwestern small town. It is sparse and filled with dead aspirations. Nearly all of Ironton’s residents are stalled in some way or another; their dreams have been either put on hold or extinguished. They are left struggling between the comfortable and the unknown in a liminal space of habit and fear. They have become the souls that walk through life ignoring their desires, and choosing instead to focus on the mundane of the everyday; if they don’t think about it, they won’t see what they have missed. These are the people that populate the Midwest, and “American Limbo” is about these people and the realizations of the lost.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Ironton has been described in the local Miner's Gazette as being "...a snow globe of the Midwest...a town where the people are kind and big of heart." That was in 1920 when the iron ore was still flowing through the veins of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, my wall tells me so. Back then you could fill your car with gas for two dollars and a Baby Ruth bar cost a nickel. Those were the times that my grand father spoke of like a distant dream, and by the time I was talking to him, that was all it ever would be. I can see him now with a seven and seven in his steel workers union mug. He's sitting in his brown Lay-z-boy—more of a mouse nest than a chair—talking away with my father about the family and the land. "This land will be yours." He takes a second to make me feel included. Earlier he taught me how to set a mousetrap with peanut butter, a wooden dowel, and a bucket half full of water. His white hair looks like a dollop of Colgate toothpaste on top of his head. His eyes are blue gray like pipe smoke, and the sourness of his face reminds me of the Popeye cartoons I watch early on Saturday mornings. The chair creaks on its rusting hinges and as he moves back and forth with the conversation, his chair squeaking more as my father mentions the economy. I imagine mice getting caught up in the steel lattice under workings of the chair. To me each squeak is another mouse decapitated.

I don't cry when he dies, neither does my father. We are woodsmen by heart and steelworkers by trade; our tears ducts are sealed by the furnace. He is in the Lay-z-boy when I find him. His eyes are open, staring at a pile of bills, the remote in his motionless hand. The television is off, so I take it from his cold hand and press in the power button. *Tom and Jerry* are on. Grandpa laughs every time Tom smashes a finger or gets his face flattened, but not today. Jerry ducks into his mouse hole when my father comes into the living room with a cup of coffee.

It steams up his face as he rolls his eyes. “Cartoons again? When you gonna let this kid grow up, pa?” Grandpa’s silent and I see my father’s body freeze as he touches grandpa’s shoulder. “Go to your room.” He says it in a voice that ends with a spanking if I object. I’m upstairs reading the wallpaper when the ambulance arrives. Grandpa has plastered my room with old newspapers for wallpaper. I read the stories when I wake, when I can’t sleep, or when I’m grounded. I know almost all of them by heart. “Ironton is a snow globe of the Midwest. It is where good people live and work, and where a family can live in peace. It is a town full of promise, a town where the people are kind and big of heart. One day your children will thank you. Plots start at \$5 an acre.” I imagine the mice fat and bloated in the water bucket when I read snow globe. At his funeral, I place the newspaper clipping in grandfather’s coffin. There is a blank spot on my wall, but I don’t think grandpa would mind.

Pull the Plug—Bury Me in the Backyard

--I--

Chester had signed the papers by accident, too drunk to ask questions. When the representative for Horizon Telecommunications knocked on his tar-papered shack, the man spouted words as soon as Chester came to the door and held out a clipboard filled with leaves of papers. Chester had been in a signing mood since the night before. He looked at the Horizon rep's red tie and his heavy eyelids and thought about having a son. The Horizon man smiled, pushed his shoulders back, and returned to the minivan idling in Chester's driveway. Chester closed the door to his cabin, picked up his bottle of Old Crow, and went back to reading the morning paper.

Flies buzzed around the one-room shack, weaving between piles of old hunting magazines, boxes of 12-gauge shotgun shells, and empty bottles of bottom-shelf bourbon, until either Chester swatted them or they got caught in the vines of fly tape that hung from the ceiling. Chester had long since lost his smell for the cabin, but every once in a while, after a long night at the bar or out on his trap lines, he'd catch a whiff—month-old dead mice, stale liquor, and the mold of body odor—but it was always fleeting. For a second, as he skimmed the obituaries, Chester got a quick slap of his own smell.

He took a shot.

The more Chester read, the less he could focus. *What was that Horizon man talking about?* He remembered something about signals and relay towers, but he couldn't figure out what that all had to do with him. Maybe it was a petition? Maybe he'd just entered a

sweepstakes? Maybe they were beaming signals over his land and he had to sign saying he wouldn't sue if he grew a third nipple? Goddammit! Why hadn't he listened?

Chester put a pot of coffee on the stove and changed his flannel. In the bathroom, Chester caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, quickly looked away, and splashed some water on his face. He'd forgotten how old he looked. At fifty-two, he looked seventy plus, his face pocked, wrinkled, and leathery, like a rubber Halloween mask that had been stretched too many times. He startled every time he looked in the mirror.

After he'd finished his coffee, Chester climbed into his Ford Pinto and drove to the Runway Bar. The Runway was the closet Chester got to town since his father had died. Because of long dead local liquor and zoning regulations, it sat six feet outside of the township line. It was once a mess hall for a logging camp but now smelled of tobacco and unwashed liquor. A giant carving of a deer's rear end with a plywood pinwheel for a tail hung above the doorway. The walls were solid oak logs that had darkened with age, and the floors were covered with sawdust. Antlers and deer mounts hung next to curled black and white photos of logging camps and tattered maps. Smoke hung in thick gray blue clouds above the bar and open rafters, softening the tin hooded incandescent light bulbs. A picture of his mother, his father, and him was pinned high on the south wall.

"Chet." Ted called from behind the bar. "You're a little earlier than usual."

Chester took a seat. The bar was empty except for a few local Native Americans who sipped Pabst Blue Ribbon under a mounted skull of a deer with glued on antlers totaling at thirty points. They smoked Senecas. Chester thought of his mother and rubbed at a cluster of scars beneath his shirt. Ted put a tumbler of bourbon in front of him.

“You wouldn’t know ‘bout these Horizon men runnin’ round, would you?” Chester took a snort.

“What about em?” Ted scratched at his tobacco stained moustache. The television over the bar buzzed between commercials.

“I dunno. What’re they rootin’ round about?”

“Oh, somethin or other ‘bout cell towers.”

“Cell towers?” *Prison guard towers? Castle turrets?*

“Yeah, helps out with phone reception.”

Chester finished his drink. *Property entitlement. Use of land contract. Compensation.*
A newscaster came on the television talking about feeding tubes and Florida.

“What’s your interest?”

Chester grunted, stood up, and shambled out the door.

Chester had never left Menominee County. His mother and father were both born and raised in Ironton, just as he was, and he’d lived on the same forty-acre plot of land his entire life. He knew the woods better than his own body. He could find his way home from any part of the county at any time of day in any kind of weather conditions. His mother had taught him. She’d drive him out to Cedar River, Swanson, McAllister, Marinette, or even out to Hermansville, sit him on the side of the road, and tell him to wait for her there. She’d drive off and, after an hour or two, Chester would wander back home. He got scared the first few times. He’d see dark shapes moving in the night. *Wolves. Black Bears.* Sweat would perk up around his ears and dribble down his spine. Eventually the fear wore off, and it became a game, and then a chore. There was comfort in being lost, and he managed to find a new way home every time. After his mother burnt down their house, he knew too much about the county to ever leave.

Chester sat behind the wheel of his Pinto, head swimming. He turned the key in the ignition and focused on keeping the hood of the car in between the centerline and the brown grass of the ditch. As he approached, he saw red Horizon minivan was parked in his driveway. He watched two men wearing black and red coveralls and baseball caps with the Horizon logo—a red sun dawning over black hills—emblazoned above the brim pull surveying equipment from inside the van. The man with the red tie stepped from around the van and walked towards Chester's car. Chester slammed the door as he stumbled out.

“Good to see—”

“Get off my land.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me.”

“But you—”

“Git!”

One of the men began to set up a yellow tripod. Chester pushed past the man with the tie, ducked into his cabin to grab his Remington pump-action shotgun, and waved the gun about. The two men in coveralls jumped behind the van, but the man with the tie stood his ground yelling. Chester leveled the shotgun. The man with the tie clenched and unclenched his hands. Chester's finger slipped inside of the trigger guard. He went deaf for a second as the barrel threw flames and buckshot into the sliding door of the minivan. The man with the tie dove into the van, and the van's tires sprayed gravel as it reversed down Chester's driveway. Chester's ears rang as he racked the spent shell from the chamber.

--II--

Chester thought about blackberries while he sat in the Menominee County jail. A blackberry patch grew among the charred skeleton foundation of the old house. The serrated stems pushed between black support beams and mossy stones. They grew in too thick to pick, and the stones from the foundation prevented Chester from rooting up the entire plot. Chester's father had once told him that blackberries needed a cold winter before they could grow. Chester's mother told him that his father was a drunk, and to *never put stock in what he said*. Chester remembered winter after the house had burnt down was particularly harsh, and every fall since, the blackberries grew in fat and fell like big, wet tears with the first winds of September.

"Chet." Gill, the Sheriff, unlocked the cell door. "You're good to go."

"Thanks much."

"For Christ's sake, stop pulling that gun on people."

"If they're on—"

"I couldn't care less where they're standin'. Give it a rest."

Chester grunted and walked out, weaving his way back towards the Runway Bar.

Chester built his cabin with the tools and lumber he salvaged from the fire after his father died. Not all of the rooms had burnt, but the Fire Chief had deemed the structure *unsuitable for life*, so Chester pulled down the old boards, bought some cement, and went about making his own cabin. He dug into the black soil for the support beams, cemented them in, smoothed the foundation with the left over cement, stuffed old rugs and towels and newspapers between the walls as insulation, and covered the roof with corrugated steel and the outside walls with tar paper. It wasn't much, but it was what remained.

Chester followed the power lines to the Runway Bar. They hummed above him. He wondered if this was how people get cancer. *Cancer wasn't around before electricity was it?*

The tail to the deer above the door spun in the breeze. Chester pulled up the collar of his flannel and opened the door.

“If it isn’t the Veggie-killer himself?” Mike was sitting at the bar next to his overweight son. Mike had a Stormy Kromer snug above his dark eyes that was frayed and flaked with sawdust. Mike’s son had buzzed brown hair and looked like an owl that had sucked in too much air.

Chester took a seat next to Mike and Ted placed the same tumbler from before in front of Chester. *Veggie-killer?*

“What?” Mike threw his hands up. “Don’t remember? Livin’ will?”

Chester shrugged.

“Ted. Turn it up.” Mike motioned towards the television. The newscaster’s voice became audible, his forced accent echoed through the room. Chester’s ears rang softly; they made the newscaster sound like he had an electrolarynx. *...and the debate is still going strong here in Florida. Ever since the feeding tube was reinserted under state law in 2003, the case of Terri Schiavo has been a hot one...*

“Turn it off.” Chester waved at Ted. “I’m tired of this shit.”

“Exactly.” Mike and his son sniggered. “Ya made a hullabaloo ‘bout it last night. Made us all sit here and witness.” Mike laughed. “Only livin’ will ever wrote in a bar.”

Chester finished his drink, looking at Mike with his heavy eyelids.

“Here, I’ll show ya.” Mike walked over to the south wall, plucked the coaster from beneath Chester’s family picture, and placed it in front of Chester. In black scribbles the coaster read: *I, Chester, of sond mind and body give consint to pull the plug and bury me in the*

backyard. Mike's son began shaking with laughter. Mike patted Chester on the shoulder between gasps of air. "You goofy old fart."

Chester felt like his face was melting into his glass. He imagined Mike's son pulling the feeding tube on Mike, and wondered who would pull the plug on him.

--III--

The Horizon men erected the tower in no time. After they surveyed Chester's property, they decided on a clear spot on the edge of his land, a ways away from Chester's cabin. Chester watched the vans and trucks file through his drive, day in and day out. He could see the bones of the tower growing together from his window; each joint was carefully fitted into the next, until the steel lattice work reached into the sky like the corpse of a giraffe.

The tower was fixed with all sorts of satellites and antennas. Chester would pace about his cabin, drink, and return to his window. Whenever he left his cabin and approached the Horizon men, the man with the red tie would hold out a check for Chester, his legs twitching a little. "Here," the man with the red tie would say, searching Chester with his burgundy eyes. Chester would take the check, stumble back to his cabin, and set it on a stack of newspapers with the rest of them.

It had already been a hard year for trapping; the winter had been harsh, and the constant hum of truck and van motors paired with the buzz of power tools had left Chester's trap lines empty. Chester's father had taught him how to set the lines. His father had once taken him to the cinema in Kingsford; they saw *Jeremiah Johnson*, and Chester had been incapable of separating his father and Robert Redford ever since, even when his father was pale with cancer and coughing blood. *It's all about location. Ain't no bait or bullet worth knowin where a critter*

moves. His father always had a thick beard and smelled of pipe tobacco. Chester wanted to teach someone how to trap.

Chester went out and gathered up his trap lines. He threw the blood-rusted steel traps over his shoulder one by one until he'd collected them all. They clanged together, echoing through the thick cedar swamp as he carried them back to his cabin. He oiled the hinges on every last one and tested their springs. At dusk, after he watched every van and truck pull out from behind a brown cluster of sumac, Chester slung the traps over his shoulder, a sheet of cloth between each layer, and snuck out to the base of the tower.

Chester woke with a start. Gill was pounding on the tar paper of his shack. "Chet, get out here."

Chester opened the door slowly. Gill was holding one of Chester's steel traps with a strip of bloody cloth caught between its teeth.

"This yours?"

Chester laughed.

"Goddammit, Chet! I ought to haul you in. Coon traps? At a construction site?"

"Well, it's the only place the coons'll go."

Gill sighed. "Chet, I know it's your land, but for Christ's sake, you signed the damned paperwork. Cut these guys a break." Gill dropped the trap. "Pay the man's hospital bill, or I'm lockin' you up."

Chester grabbed the stack of checks and held them out towards Gill. Gill turned sharply and walked to his police car, his black shoes squelching in the mud.

--IV--

Chester was beginning to have strange dreams about the man with the red tie. There was always fire and his mother and a hospital bed: the man with the red tie wearing a doctor's scrubs and carrying a scalpel, his mother breathing fire, and he was in the hospital bed. Sometimes his father was in the bed next to him, chest open, lungs black, staring at Chester with glazed eyes. "Pull the plug!" The man with the red tie would pull an oversized plug from an oversized wall outlet, and Chester would jump awake.

The red, pulsing light on top of the tower illuminated his room, a spotlight that flickered, beaming into Chester's eyes, stunning him. The tower hummed and buzzed; it had killed all the flies in his cabin, their corpses black and crisp on the window sills. He hadn't caught a raccoon or porcupine or coyote or woodchuck or beaver all spring. Spring was usually a slow season, but a critter or two usually wandered into one of his traps.

His mother had forbidden Chester's father from buying a television. When Chester asked why, she said television gave her migraines and turned her insides into mush. She said she could feel the commercials twisting up her insides and dissolving her stomach. Chester and his father would sneak down to the Runway for Packer games. When they came home, his mother wouldn't touch them; she would send Chester straight up to his room and tuck a chair under his doorknob. In the morning, his father would jimmy the door open.

Chester couldn't sleep. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes, pulled on a pair of jeans, and wandered outside. Dawn was creeping gray into the thick woods. Chester paced around the blackberry patch. The stems were brown and wilted. They drooped over the bones of the old foundation. He could taste his mother's blackberry jam. He could feel the cell phone waves baking the land. The tower boiled the mud around his feet and heated the hairs on his arms. He went inside and began covering his windows with tin foil.

After the sun had risen, Chester drank a pot of coffee, looked at a half bottle of Old Crow, ignored the bottle and the mirror, and wandered down to the Runway.

“I’m comin, I’m comin’.” Ted opened the door, and Chester quit knocking. “Chet.” Ted stepped back. “Early.”

“Can’t sleep.”

“Now, Chet, I can’t serve before seven.”

“I know.” Chester shifted his weight. “Can’t sleep.”

Ted looked Chester up and down and stepped aside. “Aw hell, come in.”

The Runway was cleaner in the dark. It looked deserted and occupied at the same time, like a mausoleum. Deer heads loomed like gargoyles, and the oak walls felt as cold as stone. The black and white photos that dotted the walls hung like lichens. A sink behind the bar dripped, the drops ringing against the metal sink.

“What can I do you for?” Ted flipped on the lights. The gray haze burnt off the walls, the photos came into focus, and the dusty deer heads grew fur. The sink still rang.

“Damned tower’s givin’ me cancer.” Chester sat down. “Had to cover my windows to keep out the transmissions.”

Ted raised his eyebrows. “That so?”

“Can hear it.” Chester scratched at the bar. “Ringin’ and buzzin’. Just like my ma used to tell. An’ you know bout pa.”

Ted put his hand on Chester’s shoulder. “Chet, you know what? Maybe it’s about time you thought ‘bout takin’ a trip up to Marquette. Get some fresh air.” Ted shrugged. “Might do you some good.”

Ted turned on the television. A stiff, blonde news reporter droned about Florida, living wills, and the Supreme Court. Ted put a tumbler of bourbon in front of Chester. Chester pushed it away.

--V--

Chester pulled the trigger by accident. The fawn had startled him and now made a tight circle before it fell over. Chester looked at the tower; he followed the lattice work straight up to the red blinking tip and then back down to where the fawn lay—legs twitching—at the base. He pulled himself from the brush, brown cedar straw and thin dead branches sticking to the outside of his flannel. He couldn't remember how long he'd been sitting in the brush. The tower droned in his ears, his eyes felt dry and red.

Chester watched the fawn's eyes glaze. He put his hand on its warm stomach. Mud flecked the coarse fur. *Made it through the winter. Shot out of season.* Its eyes were as big as his mother's. He could always see his reflection in her eyes as she put out cigarettes on him. When he identified her body in the morgue, he expected her to be crisp with black cracked skin, like an overcooked hotdog. She was serene. Her skin was white. He imagined her being warm. Would anyone look for him? He looked up at the tower, pulled out his knife, and dressed the fawn.

He split from the groin up to the rib cage, branching the cut into a "Y" at the rib cage—following the bones. He reached inside, warm blood slicking onto his hands and forearms, and pulled out the innards. The intestines were green and dissolved into a pasty mush between his fingers. Chester pulled back the skin. All of the fawn's insides were green or black and reeked

of decay. Even the blood was darker than usual. Chester stumbled away from the carcass and vomited into a bush. His head pounded and his ears were hot.

Chester dragged the fawn onto the old foundation and doused it with gasoline he had siphoned from his Pinto. He wasn't going to let anything else in the woods get what this deer had; he didn't want this disease passing on. His tongue felt fat and numb with the taste of the gas. The fawn's eyes were white. As he struck the match, he remembered how skinny his father had looked before they cremated him. He thought of his parents paired, even though they separated by years in death, in coffins: his mother sleeping, his father thin as sticks. The fawn's coat blackened as the dry stems of the blackberry patch crackled with fire. Smoke filled Chester's lungs. He coughed and backed away from the fire.

--VI--

Chester tapped a red Sharpie against the bar. The Runway hummed with voices. A cluster of Native Americans sat in the corner mumbling in Anishinabe. Ted scratched at his cheek as he watched the television. The reporter with the forced Midwestern accent smiled.

“Will ya look at that?” Mike patted his hand on the bar. “They're gonna pull the tube for good.” His obese son sat next to him sipping from a mug of PBR. “Hear that, Veggie-killer? They sided with you.”

Chester looked up, waved his hand dismissively at Mike, and uncapped the Sharpie. He scrawled his number on a FOR SALE sign.

A Native American boy with a face like a coyote and big eyes climbed up next to Chester at the bar. He placed an empty growler on the bar and pushed it towards Ted. “Budweezer. For

Pa.” The boy’s voice warbled over the words. Ted grabbed the handle of the growler, angled it under the tap, and began to fill it.

The boy was thin with arms and legs like matchsticks, his face angled and his hair thick and black about his face. A constellation of dime sized burns peeked out from under his shirt sleeve. Chester touched the boy on the shoulder; he felt warm. “Hey, your pa a trapper?”

The boy shook his head.

Chester smiled and took a snort of bourbon. “Well, ain’t nothin you need know ‘bout trappin’ but location.” As he explained his father’s method of trapping, he watched the boy’s eyes—big and black. They reminded him of the fawn’s. He wondered what the boy’s insides looked like, and realized that he wasn’t ever going to have a son.

With or Without You

Chloe tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel of her Ford Ranger as she waited for the guard to unlock the heavy, wrought-iron gate. The guard walked slowly, and something in the way he moved seemed familiar. The gate was at least twenty feet high and connected to a thick brick wall topped with coils of razor wire. She watched as the guard labored with the weight of the gate, his face reddening and his shirt tight with the shape of his gut. The guard panted as he waved her on through. In the last second of her passing, as the guard smiled, Chloe saw in the guard a fatter, paler Chad. She wished he was Chad. She checked the mirrors, but the guard had turned his back, struggling to close the gate.

She looked both ways, thought about how the day hadn't gone as she'd hoped, and turned on to U.S. Highway 41. How many visits would it be until Chad was out of prison?

It was late March and the first thaw was freezing again as Chloe drove home towards Ironton. Flurries accumulated beneath the windshield wipers. The long, pale grass on the side of the road was flecked with white, and under the thick gray of the clouds, she knew the world would be white again in a few hours. The trees, the road, everything would be covered in snow. Chloe wondered if the snow would ever leave. She tried to think of the song her grandmother used to sing, but it wouldn't come to her.

Grandmother's voice was like cracked leather when she talked. Years of Pall Mall cigarettes had dried out her vocal cords, but when she sang, she became a different person: her voice changed. It would move through her ancestor's songs like water. She could warble as

good as any songbird and could yip better than most coyotes. Chloe remembered listening to her grandmother sing the songs that the other tribesmen wouldn't bother to teach her or Chad. She had a song for everything: every season, every sickness; nothing went without a beat from her deerskin drum. She had taught Chloe most of the songs, but over the years, they had been forgotten. Was there a song for today? Was there a song for Chad?

The snow thickened, and the slush began to freeze. The wind pushed on the windows of the truck. In a few hours the world would be inescapably white again.

A news report came on in between songs. The Georgia Pacific paper mill in Ironton had caught fire. An explosion had gone off early in the morning, killing two. The fire wasn't contained and the nearby buildings had been evacuated. Two dead, just like that. Chloe imagined two crisp skeletons and fell back to 2000.

She was balanced on the back of the couch taking down a silver "Welcome to the New Millennium" banner when Chad burst in through the door. His nose was broken flat and a trail of blood flowed from each nostril down across his mouth and off of his chin. His eyes were red worn and puffy, his knuckles raw. He stumbled through the room, straight into the basement, where he slid down the steps and collided with the basement wall.

Chloe came down from the back of the couch and went to the bathroom where she pulled a roll of bandages and Neosporin from the medicine cabinet. In the kitchen she removed an icepack from the freezer wrapped in one of Grandma's old hand towels and then descended into the basement.

"What happened?" Chloe knelt next to where Chad was lying face first on the basement floor. Blood was pooling on the gray of the cement.

Chad groaned.

“Dean get at you again?” Chloe lifted Chad’s head off of the floor and began wiping the blood from his nose. “You know what Grandma would’ve said.”

“W-w-wendigo.” Chad’s teeth were stained red.

Chloe could hear her grandmother’s voice in her head; Wendigo was the only name she couldn’t sing. “Let’s get you patched up.”

Wendigo. Wendigo. Chloe remembered taunting Chad by that name when they were children. Grandma called him that when he chewed on things. No, it was from biting Grandma. When she was cooking or baking she’d scoop a little on to her finger and hold out her hand. “Try. Try, little ones.” Chloe would peck at it like a little bird, but Chad would try to take her whole hand. “Ouch! Damn you, little Wendigo.” Grandma would swat him on the nose and return to her dish.

Chloe wondered how things could’ve been different. What if their mother hadn’t left for Las Vegas? What if she would’ve stayed? “Get your head from the clouds.” Grandma would smack Chloe on the back of the head. “Don’t go thinking that. You have no mother. You are here; think of here.” Then Grandma would sing Chloe songs of the earth and of the tortoise and tap on the thickness of her thigh with her, tan wrinkled hand. Still, Chloe wondered if she looked like her mother.

The songs died before Grandmother did. They were buried with the neighbor’s cat. Chloe remembered the thick long white fur of the cat. She couldn’t remember its name, but it was grossly overweight. She would come across it eating out of the trash bins, flat gold eyes staring as it licked out the insides of tuna cans and McDonalds’ containers. Whenever it was outside it would tip over the plastic garbage bins, sending cascades of soup cans, pizza boxes,

and empty liquor bottles onto the sidewalks. That cat must've been going on sixteen by the time she graduated high school. It was an immortal, fat nuisance.

Until Chad shot it.

Chloe heard the shot. She was packing a box of her things for college in Marquette into the back of Grandma's Ranger when the shock of the gunshot caused her to jump, spilling the box out onto the curb. A few minutes later, Chad came around the side of the house, Grandma's double-barreled break-open shotgun over his shoulder.

"What was that?"

Chad paused on the steps, hand on the screen door. "Nothing."

"Didn't sound like nothing."

Chad shrugged and went inside the house.

Chloe had almost finished packing the truck when Dean, the neighbor, stormed up the front steps holding an old shoebox. "Look what that fucking devil did!" He opened the box, revealing the front half of the cat: white fur stained black and red, intestines coiling out beneath its blasted spinal column, and its filmed-over gold eyes.

"Wendigo!" Grandma called into the house. "That child's the death of me."

Dean's house had since been leveled in a controlled burn. Chloe remembered the orange glow of the fire in the night, and couldn't separate Dean's memory from his burning, abandoned house.

The ground and slush had fully frozen by the time Chloe reached Kingsford. At times, the road would completely white out with a gust of snow. The day was fading into purple twilight. She switched on her fog lights and slowed the truck as she drove into town.

The buildings downtown hadn't changed. She passed the Five and Dime that was now a Ben Franklin and remembered the candies Grandma used to buy for them by the handful before they went to watch a film at the theatre. The pale outline of where the Five and Dime sign had been sandblasted away jutted out from behind the fresher paint coat of the Ben Franklin sign. Chloe liked the anise and sarsaparilla hard candies because a handful would last an entire movie. Grandma had taught Chloe how to keep the candy on the center of her tongue, to let it dissolve slowly until it was nothing but a black, crystalline sliver. Chad would suck on his candy quickly and crunch away at it before it had a chance to dissolve. Grandma, and later Chloe after she got her drivers license, would swat at Chad's ear if he crunched too loudly during a quiet scene of dialogue.

As she passed the theatre with its gold rimmed billboard, she remembered leaving Chad in the truck when she would go to movies with her boyfriends. Grandma gave her only enough money for her and Chad's ticket, so Chad got left in the truck while Chloe made out with her boyfriends in the theatre. How many times had that happened? Not more than seven, possibly eight. She'd come back to the truck after the film to Chad sitting quietly in his seat. She was always suspicious. He was too innocent. There was no way he had sat still for two hours.

New CDs tucked away in handmade paper folders began to show up around the house. Whenever Grandma asked where Chad got the money he would shrug and walk away. She would curse after him, but her throat was getting dryer and her legs stiffer. She could no longer run after him.

When liquor began evaporating from the cabinet, Chloe stopped picking up her boyfriends and brought Chad into the theatre.

Chloe was amazed at how much the buildings brought back. It was 2003 and they still held all of the years. Sure, half of them were now empty, but they had been there with her. They saw the economy, felt the push for elsewhere, but stayed and had bore the weights of the unrelenting winters. Chloe wondered why she hadn't moved. Who would be here for this place otherwise? She was comfortable with these buildings, with these memories. She increased the frequency of her windshield wipers and turned out towards Ironton.

Grandma had been dead for only nine months when Chad went to prison. The stolen CDs and booze should've been a sign. The cat should've been a sign. Why didn't she see it?

Chloe had pulled Chad onto the couch where he began to breathe steadily. The blood in his nose gurgled, making his breathing wet. In the basement, when he was conscious, he'd grabbed for the gun case beneath the staircase, so Chloe had brought him to the upstairs living room with the hope that he would calm down. She propped him onto his side, put a pillow behind his head, and moved the wastebasket next to the couch.

Chloe felt guilty for not putting a stop to his drinking. It had gotten worse when Grandma got sick. She had refused medical care. Instead she lay in her bed getting thinner by the day. Chloe didn't move to Marquette, didn't go to school; she stayed in Ironton to look after Grandma, feeding her beef and chicken broth as Grandma had done for her when she was sick. Then Grandma died, taking her last breath unceremoniously as Chloe held out a spoon.

Chad's drinking worsened. His bouts got more violent. He would break bottles, light fires, and yell at the moon. Most of all he fought. The bar locals never missed an opportunity to put money on a fight between a miner and an Indian, and Dean never missed an opportunity to take a swing at Chad. Sometimes Chloe could hear the two getting at it in the street. He would

come home bleeding, but it was just a phase. It had to be. He would get over Grandma, stop drinking, and everything would be fine again. He had to.

Then he shot Dean. He leveled grandma's shotgun and fired both tubes as Dean was leaning over to check his mailbox. Just like that: no rhyme, no reason. Took his head clean off. Still, Chloe felt guilt—not as if she had pulled the triggers, but as if she had always known and should've stopped it.

As Chloe approached her house, she saw an unfamiliar black sedan parked on the street. She eased into her driveway, and as she exited from her truck, she saw a short man in a black suit and a thick moustache in the driver's seat. He was watching her. She looked towards the house, grabbed her purse, and began to walk quickly towards the house. The door to the sedan opened and the short man hopped out. Chloe placed her house key between knuckles. She had made a point not to trust men in suits since Chad's trial.

“Miss.” The man was moving up the driveway, his arm stretched forward.

Chloe stopped on the step and turned.

“Wait up a second?” As the man got closer, Chloe could see that his hair was peppered with gray and balding on top. “I called earlier. Left a message.”

“I was in Marquette all day.” Chloe felt the key warming in between her knuckles.

“Ah, bad day for drivin.” He moved his hands deliberately as though he was acting from cue cards. “I'm William Lampi, but I go by Bill.” He put his hand out, but retracted it after a few seconds. “I'll take it you're Chloe? You'll have to excuse me, I'm new.”

Chloe nodded.

“I’m with Cliffs.” Bill smoothed his moustache with his hand. “We’re hopin to purchase your property.”

“What? Why?” Chloe stepped back.

“We got a new mine comin in.”

“Right here? In town.”

Bill laughed. His mouth was large like a bullfrog. “No, not right here. It’ll be out of the town towards Stephenson.”

“So what do you need my house for then?” Chloe crossed her arms.

“Carpool lot.” Bill moved his hands in front of him like he was smoothing out the earth. “Gas is expensive and economy’s rough, so people are carpoolin. We’re bringin a lot of jobs to Ironton, so we’re puttin a carpool lot here.”

Chloe imagined her house bulldozed, flattened under the treads of a yellow Caterpillar dozer. She pictured herself in the house as the dozer plowed through the front wall causing the rest of the house to collapse on her. The engine thundered as the treads creaked on to destroy the foundation of the house. “No.”

“Beg pardon.”

“Absolutely not.” Chloe shook her head, whipping her hair violently.

“We pay market value.” Bill turned his hands upward.

“No way.”

“We already own the acreage around your property. This lot will happen with or without you.”

“Excuse me.”

“I mean you’ll have empty cars for neighbors.” Bill shoved his hand into his pocket. He pulled out a small rectangular business card printed in black ink. “In case you change your mind.” Bill smiled.

Chloe slapped the card from his hand, and went inside the house. She threw her purse down, went to the kitchen where she poured herself a glass of water, and listened for the black sedan to start. She took a long drink from the glass and noticed a Polaroid of Grandma taped to the refrigerator. Grandma is looking out her bedroom window from her bed. Her wrinkled face is expressionless a patchwork quilt lies across her legs. Chloe plucked it from the fridge slowly like she would a flower. She remembered taking the picture before breakfast. Her handwriting was on the back. She wondered what Grandma would’ve thought. Grandma had a song for this, a song about the Menominee River, about how the water keeps flowing and you can never drink the same water.

Chloe waited for a few moments, until the sedan turned towards downtown, and then stepped out onto the porch, searching for the business card.

Chloe went through the security checkpoints with the mindless ease that attaches itself to any routine. She had been waiting a few minutes at her booth before the guards brought out Chad. She picked up the receiver as he sat down. His face had become leaner and his arms thicker. The black ink of a tattoo curved from underneath his orange collar onto his neck. His eyes hadn’t changed; Chloe could still see the same childish sparkle that ringed his irises. With a slow, precise movement, Chad removed the receiver and put it to his ear.

“I am allowed to make phone calls.”

“It’s not the same.” Chloe pulled a Polaroid photograph of her, Grandma, and Chad in front of Grandma’s house from her purse. She pressed it against the glass. The flash had washed the photo with whites bringing out the yellows and browns of the background. Everyone was smiling and the back read “*family 1996*” in Grandma’s flowing handwriting. “Plus it’s Grandma’s birthday.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t know if you kept track of dates.”

Chad snorted. “Dates are all I’ve got.” He leaned back in his chair, releasing a heavy breath. “Why are you doing this?”

“Grandma would’ve wanted to see you.” Chloe returned the picture to her purse. “She would’ve wanted us together.”

“No.” Chad shook his head and then ran his hand over his mouth. “Never mind.”

A woman yelled a few booths down. A guard came over and she quieted down.

“She’s eighty today.” Chloe wrapped the cord to the receiver around her finger.

“This is what I mean.” Chad sat forward, the soles of his white shoes slapping against the tile floor. “You keep coming here, bringing up the past. It’s two-thousand three and she’s god-damned dead.”

Chad’s voice hissed in Chloe’s ear. She stared at the lumpy bridge of his nose, and could feel face warming as tears wetted her eyelashes, blurring her vision. “I’m sorry. I just miss it. I miss her.”

“I know.” Chad got closer; his breathing fogged the glass. “I do too.”

Chloe wanted wrap her arms around Chad; she wanted to feel close, to feel his heart beating. “Was it her?” Chloe lowered her head. “Or me?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Did we—”

“Fuck no!” Chad slapped the flat of his palm against the table. Chloe could feel the vibrations through the glass. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. You’re stuck; you’re living in the past.” Chad’s eyes widened. “You haven’t even sold the house yet. I’ll bet you’re still driving her truck.”

Chloe shrugged. “But.”

“Goddamit, Chloe.” Chad sat up in his seat, pulling away from the glass. “Aren’t you ever going to get out there and live? Jesus.”

“But I just want us to be a family again.”

“That’s not going to happen for a long while. Get your head out of your ass—go back to school. You know that’s what Grandma really would’ve wanted.”

They sat in silence for a minute. A guard came over and told them their time was up. Chloe wanted to talk longer. She wanted to ask Chad everything. Chad hung up his receiver and turned as his hands were fastened into handcuffs. He didn’t look back as he was escorted away.

Chloe hoped to see the fat guard who reminded her of Chad as she exited the prison and drove down its driveway. A leaner, taller guard with short-cropped black hair came out from the guardhouse and began to move the wrought-iron gate. The news came on over the radio. Chloe only became aware of it when the stern voice of the newscaster reported that the fire at the Georgia Pacific mill had been contained and put out. The guard had finished opening the gate and made a curt nod in Chloe’s direction. She moved through and noticed in the mirror that he was quite attractive.

She looked both ways and turned onto U.S. Highway 41. The snow had melted, revealing cigarette butts and the yellow green shoots of grass. Chloe rolled down her window and watched as a semi hauling a bulldozer sped by. She thought of Grandma's house. It had been leveled since Grandma died; no one, not even Chloe, had truly been living in it the years since. She stuck her hand into her purse, searching for Bill's business card.

Horizons

Clyde slapped the snooze button on his alarm clock and got up. He'd been watching the clock for longer than he could remember. Clyde could feel the cold of the night in the floorboards as they creaked against the bare soles of his feet. His first thought was of Justine and the black hair on her arms.

The shower wasn't warming up. It always took a while in the winter. Clyde peeled a long strand of black hair from his soap's wet skin. The bathroom walls shuddered as the hot water heater came on. Clyde rubbed the strand of hair from his hand, rolling his fingers till the hair came loose. The shower drain was clogged with a matted ball of hair. He ignored the water filling the shower, pooling up past his ankles; it had to drain eventually.

Clyde stirred cane sugar into his Maxwell House and pulled from his cigarette as he read an old newspaper. It was from earlier in the week, the day after Justine slammed the door, yelling "You're a *nobody!*" The spoon rang against the inside of his mug as the coffee lightened in color. Smoke curled in front of his eyes. He hadn't realized he was reading the obituaries. Besides a local teen dying in a car accident, every death was at least sixty years in the making, and everyone had been born and raised in Ironton. Clyde folded the paper shut and drank his coffee, staring out his apartment window at the predawn darkness of the iced over Menominee River.

When Clyde first moved to Ironton, he hadn't been ready for the winters of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He had grown up in Rockford just outside of Chicago, and really couldn't

remember why he had moved to the U.P. back in 1989. But that didn't matter anymore. He was where he was.

Horizon Communications had been a last resort, and for the past ten years, as the electric doors jerked open, Clyde had been telling himself it was only temporary. He traced his footsteps to the backroom, punched his numbers into the ancient IBM, hung his coat, and then paced out onto the sales floor. He imagined he was following a stream he had weathered himself.

A tone followed by Damion's even voice came over the P.A.: "We're open in five. Could you get on the display units?" Clyde looked at the two-way mirror behind the counter, looked past the darkness of his hair and features, and focused on Damion's outline. He could almost make out his thick-rimmed glasses and his white name tag, "manager" written in jagged script. Clyde paced over to the far wall and turned on the display units, one by one.

"Sir." An elderly lady with a Roman nose, a sagging face, and surprisingly dark hair tapped her foot against the worn carpet next to Clyde. "Sir, I was wondering if you could tell me about this unit." She pointed towards the wall of display phones.

Clyde stood up slowly from cleaning the base deck of the accessories aisle, duster firm in hand, and paced towards the display wall. "Yeah."

The lady scrunched up her nose almost causing the flaps of wrinkled skin on her face to cave in and rolled her eyes. "Well, what's your return policy?"

"It's—"

"I don't want to get home and have this phone not work."

"We're always expanding horizons."

“Don’t quote that commercial stuff to me. I live all the way over in Iron River and nobody gets service out there.” The lady wiped the corner of her mouth. “I don’t want to be driving about all afternoon if it’s not going to work.” She scratched at her hairline. “Which is the most durable and has the longest battery life?”

Clyde opened his mouth.

“And I need to know, are these Y2K ready? I don’t want to be talking to my sister while I’m watching the ball drop only to have my phone explode in my ear. Then I’d have to drive to the hospital—on New Years of all times—with my brain hanging out. No way to bring in the new millennium.” She crossed her arms and raised her penciled eyebrows, revealing a thick layer of icy blue eye shadow. “Well?”

Clyde was strangling her with his mind, his hands tight against the soft rolls of her neck. “It’s impossible to cover the entire U.P. The iron ranges and limestone deposits interfere with the signal.” Clyde pointed to a Nokia phone on the wall. “This one gets the best service around here. If you return it and the box has been opened, it’s a twenty percent restocking fee.”

“What?” The lady stepped back. “But I have to open it to see if it works. What kind of policy is that?”

“It’s the store’s policy.” Clyde’s voice was flat like the drone of a ceiling fan.

“*Your* policy, you mean.”

“No, I’m not the store.” Clyde smiled. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t charge you a penny.”

The lady scoffed and shook her head. “You’re an employee. That makes you the store; you *are* Horizon.”

Clyde pointed his duster at the lady. “Look, I just work here; I don’t make the policies. Do you want a phone or not?”

The lady raised her chin. “Yes, I’ll take it.” She motioned towards thick, black Motorola. “But if I can’t get reception, I’m not paying the twenty percent.”

“Well, if it doesn’t work out, you can take it up with a manager.”

She signed the paperwork and Clyde returned to dusting. He brushed the duster against the black shelving, causing the dust to rise up in motes around him. He requisitioned the higher end dusters, the ones advertized as “dirt magnets,” but it didn’t matter; in two days Clyde would have to re-dust the entire store. *You are Horizon*. The words weighed against Clyde’s thoughts. This job was only temporary; something to pay the bills until he got on to his feet again. There was no way he was Horizon. He looked at the dust floating around him and realized that the lady reminded him of Justine.

Was it love? A week before Justine slammed the door, Clyde asked Bill, his father, when he knew he was in love. They were at Rusty’s, the local bar, and Bill laughed, his face creased by the labor of age. “In love? With your mother?” He finished his pint of Pabst Blue Ribbon, smacking his wet lips and wiping the beer from his thick, graying moustache. Clyde had hoped for a better answer but he knew that this was all he was going to get. He wondered what his mother would say, but he hadn’t talked to her since he’d moved from Illinois.

“Women don’t love.” Bill’s drunk was beginning to show. “They’re just lookin out for themselves, for their future.” He waved his hands dismissively. He was beginning to bald and Clyde wondered what that meant for him. “Even after all of that bra burnin shit, they just want a caveman with a paycheck.”

Clyde got a pitcher from the bar and refilled both his and Bill's drinks, tilting the glasses to reduce the foam. Around them, filling the bar's walls, were the relics of the Upper Peninsula: miner's picks, steel hard hats, pictures of ore freighters or Lakers, and stuffed deer heads, all covered in a layer of dust. A black and white picture of a camp of loggers dated 1899 reminded Clyde. "How's the search coming?"

"Search for what?" Bill pulled out a cigarette and patted at his jeans.

"Jobs." Clyde held out his lighter. "Any other mills about?"

Bill flicked his cigarette alight. The lighter illuminated the calluses and cracks in Bill's fingers. "You fuckin kiddin me? There's nothin in this entire goddamned region, not even in Wisconsin. Twenty five years for nothin."

Clyde remembered a few locals—husky men with stained Carhartts—terminating their service contracts for their phones. He wondered if they were laid off as well. Clyde and Bill sipped at their beers silently. Two locals conversing at the bar laughed loudly as the smiling bartender poured them a shot. A news report speculated about the new millennium: what will change? Will everything be destroyed? Clyde imagined the ball drop ending in a massive nuclear explosion. So much for the future. He was almost relieved by the thought.

"You serious about this chick?" Bill's head was heavy on his shoulders. He swayed loosely as he spoke. "Justine or whatever?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Clyde looked at the empty pitcher and then at Bill's rosy cheeks.

"If you don't know, you don't know." Bill pointed his finger in Clyde's direction. "Don't fuckin rush about this. Women want one thing, and they don't know what that is."

"I'm going to cash—"

“Hey, you listen. They don’t realize everyone here’s dead. The entire region—*everyone*—sittin around, decayin.” Bill’s head hit the table. The bartender made eye contact with Clyde, and Clyde dialed for a taxi.

Clyde took his lunch earlier than usual. He snuck into the backroom and poured himself a cup of coffee. The break room was empty. He went to his locker, poured rum from his flask into his mug, and lit a cigarette. The rum lifted the haze of the morning and the cigarette put him at ease. His shoulders relaxed as the weathered leather of the break room couch creaked beneath Clyde’s weight.

The break room was more of a closet than anything. There was a sink, a microwave, a vending machine, a fold out card table with four plastic stacking chairs, and the couch against the back wall. Clyde opted for the couch every time he took a lunch. He would look at the other employees, conversing about local sports or fishing holes, and sip his coffee and puff his cigarettes, the smoke and steam blurring the other workers until they were indecipherable from one another. Clyde watched. Whenever another worker asked Clyde a question, he’d reply monosyllabically. To him, they were as much as a fixture as the dust.

Damion walked in and filled his “I’d rather be fishing” mug from the pot. He paced into the room sipping from his mug, steam fogging up his glasses. He started when he saw Clyde, spitting his coffee back into his mug. “Jesus.” He dabbed at his red tie where a few droplets of coffee had splashed. “You scared the shit outta me.”

Clyde shrugged and took drag from his cigarette.

“Little early today?”

“Customers getting to me.”

“Yeah, I heard you and that lady earlier.” Damion adjusted his glasses and nodded his head. “You might be goin through some rough stuff, but you’re part of the team. We need you sellin. We got margins to keep up.”

“Yeah.” Clyde stubbed out his cigarette into the gray of the ashtray.

“Remember, you’re always a part of the team.” Damion smiled, made the O.K. sign by touching his index finger and thumb, and walked from the room, the heels of his dress shoes muffled by the carpet.

Clyde finished his coffee quickly and returned to his locker for a shot of rum. It burned all the way into his stomach. *You are Horizon.* The rum tingled in his fingers. He put Justine out of his head and returned to the sales floor, the break room door slamming behind him.

Justine was Italian in the way that all Midwesterners cling to the individuality of a foreign nationality. She would tell Clyde about how her grandmother used to grow tomatoes and make all of her sauces and noodles from scratch. In the supermarket aisles, she’d complain about how the store never carried fresh gnocchi or ravioli or ziti, but would buy boxes of Creamette pasta without blinking. Clyde listened to her list the fresh spices her grandmother used grow and cook with as he watched her place Lawry’s Italian seasoning into his cart. *Sauces from scratch.* She’d say this over and over as they passed by the fresh produce and canned tomatoes only to stop and fill their cart with Ragu. Clyde often wondered just how Italian Justine’s grandmother had been; he liked to imagine her hiding empty jars of Bertolli.

“I don’t get you.” Justine brushed her thick, midnight black hair in front of the bathroom mirror. “Don’t you care? How can you know who you are if you don’t know where you’re from?”

Clyde poked his head into the bathroom. “I was born in Chicago. My parents divorced when I was eight. Now I’m here. What else is there to know?”

Justine turned to meet Clyde’s gaze, her blue eyes as cold as cobalt. “Everything.” She raised her chin, which always pronounced her Roman nose, and went back to brushing her hair. “With your dark hair and complexion, you could be Italian too you know. My family has a castle in Southern Italy.” She placed the brush down and began applying eye shadow. “We can trace our lineage back to the Romans.”

Clyde laughed. “Maybe we’ll go someday.”

“You just don’t understand.” Justine’s cheeks reddened. “Get out of here.” She shut the bathroom door in Clyde’s face.

When Clyde returned from work, the sun was setting, resting low and dark-hot orange against the horizon, and Justine’s belongings were in cardboard boxes on the snow of the stoop. Justine in her coat sat at the dining table, her key to the apartment on the table in front of her. “You keep saying this is temporary, but you’re a liar.” Her olive complexion reddened. “You’re going nowhere and don’t know it.” Clyde couldn’t remember exactly what he said. He stared at the black hair on her arms and wondered why he’d never noticed it before. She yelled. “You’re a *nobody!*” She slammed the door. The entire wall shook. Clyde sat at the table and stared at the key in front of him. The room darkened as the sun set until Clyde could no longer make out where the key began and the table ended.

The electric doors whined opened, releasing a cold blast of air into the store. Small eddies of dust swirled at the edges of the metal doorframe. Clyde looked up to see a Native American with a long ponytail in a well-worn military field-jacket. His face was red from the wind. He

swayed towards the counter in a lumbering, serpentine motion, his knees and ankles loose. What parts of his eyes that weren't pupil were frosted red. A dry, earthy smell entered Clyde's nostrils.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes." The Native American's voice cracked. "This needs to stop." He placed a large gray Nokia cell phone on the counter. "I can't do it."

Clyde licked his teeth. "Do what?"

"I can't be part of this." The Native pointed at his phone. "These are taking over everything. I want to listen and see and talk, not just talk."

Clyde reached for the termination of contract information packet and a pen.

"I can feel it." The Native moved his hands slowly in front of him like he was pushing at an imaginary door. "This new century is going to be different."

"I'll bite." Clyde looked to the two-way mirror but couldn't make out Damion.

"Can't you feel it? We're no longer people. All of these waves: cell phone towers, T.V., the Internet. We're becoming signals. Can you see signals? I can't."

"Alright, man." Clyde crossed his arms.

"If I can't see you, you become nothing. Don't you see?"

"Okay, Cheech. Take it down a notch."

"No, you don't understand what you're doing." The Native had yet to blink. He got closer to the counter. "All of this, man." He gestured towards the wall with a sweeping motion.

"It's all turning us into signals, signals that go out but stay nowhere."

"Look—"

"We're all becoming nobody."

Clyde stopped—mouth half open—and looked the Native up and down. Was he fully convinced that he was nothing? The room became colder. Clyde could hear himself shiver.

“Everythin alright?” Damion poked his head out from his office. He looked smaller than normal.

“Yeah.” Clyde shook his head. “Just finishing some paperwork.” Damion disappeared into his office. Clyde relaxed his shoulders, they seemed lighter than usual. “Alright,” Clyde lowered his voice. “I’ll make this disappear.” He motioned to the phone. “No charge.”

The Native nodded and turned for the doors. As they closed behind him, Clyde wondered if he’d see the Native again. Later, as he deleted all of the Native’s information from the computer database, he wondered if the entire ordeal was real. He looked at the delete key on the keyboard, and then back at the screen where the Native’s information once was. Clyde blinked and turned the computer off.

Clyde didn’t sleep. He lay in his bed and watched as the digital rectangles of his alarm clock formed number after number, circling the night. The Native’s voice took on the words of Justine, or was it her voice that took on the Native’s words? Clyde couldn’t separate the two in his head. Their long black hair braided into a single, dusty voice: *You are, we are nobody.* Clyde closed his eyes and tried to separate the voices, focusing on the hair of Justine’s arms, but her arms became his. He sat up, opened his eyes, but couldn’t make out his arm or his body from the black of the night. He groped about for the light switch, slapping the wall until he found it.

The five a.m. news came on the television. A reporter droned about the construction of the downtown ball drop. He detailed the construction and announced that a local with bone

cancer would be initiating the ball drop. He ended the report by stating that there was nothing to worry about—the world was Y2K proof—and that the new millennium will be just as safe as the last one, as long as there were no drunk drivers on the road. The number for a taxi service flashed at the bottom of the screen as Clyde switched off the television. So it was all going to stay the same.

The bathroom walls shuddered as the hot water came on. The water hissed as it sprayed Clyde's body. He looked down through the steam at the soapy pool forming over his feet. He could barely make out the black plug of hair. Crouching down, he pulled the matted ball from the drain, and looked at it, running his fingers through its thick wetness. He couldn't tell which hairs were his and which were Justine's. For a second, he wondered if the Native's weren't in there as well. He pulled back the curtain and rubbed the hairs through his fingers until they fell clean from his hand into the toilet.

Clyde finished his shower wondering if the sunrise would be orange or gray.

Limbo on Fire

Buck sat at the bar. His thin hands rested against the dark lacquered oak. Cigarette smoke curled from his mouth and hovered above him a cloud. Even though it was less than seventy degrees in the bar, he could feel a swamp of sweat between his cotton shirt and his underarms. He took a long drink from a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon. The beer mixed with the gasoline smell of his shirt, making his head light and his eyes burn. Rusty, the bartender, was leaning against the shelving that encased the liquor. The rumble of sleep gathered in Rusty's throat as he breathed.

The bar, Rusty's Tavern, was dark in the way dreams are dark. Peanut shells, cigarette butts, and sawdust covered the floor. The overhanging lights were yellowed, their glass smudged and filmy. The walls were filled with all sorts of knickknacks—an old toboggan, steel miners' helmets from the 1930s, a fireman's axe, a pair of skates. There was a ratty deer head missing one of its antlers above the bar, a casting of a marlin missing the tip of its foil-thin nose near the men's room, and all sorts of paintings and black and white pictures of Michigan's Upper Peninsula or of Northern Wisconsin on every wall, frames splintered and dates faded. Every decoration was covered in a thin blanket of dust that glowed luminescent under the yellow lights.

An old Magnavox tube television set sat in the corner on mute. The local news was covering a fire at Ironton's Georgia Pacific paper mill. A headline banner at the bottom of the screen read: day two, two dead. Buck tried not to look at the television. His eyes were drawn to it, but every time he saw the billowing black smoke, his face got hot. Larry's lazy eye and Brian's fat face flashed into his head. A bead of sweat rolled down his hairless arms.

The front door opened, startling Rusty. A wave of cold spring air came over Buck's back. He took a slug from his beer.

"Buck Murray, that you?"

At first Buck didn't recognize Damion. He squinted and cocked his head, but a smile came to his face when he recognized the rim of Damion's eyebrows and the thinness of his lips that hadn't been touched by the years. "Holy wah. Damion." Buck stuck out his hand. "What the hell you doin here?"

Damion shook Buck's hand firmly. "Out for a celebrate. Just got promoted."

"That so? One for my friend here." Buck looked at Rusty, pointing in Damion's direction. "Jesus, how long's it been?"

Rusty popped the top off of a Pabst and placed it in front of Damion.

"It's gotta be least fifteen." Damion took a quick sip from his beer. "Didn't know you was still in town."

"Just biding time in Limbo. What brings you back?"

"Found me a missus at Northern, and came back to pay the bills." Damion smiled. "Rent's cheaper."

Buck's bills were piling up on his dining room table next to his pink slip from Georgia Pacific. His stomach did a flip and he looked at Damion. "A regular college boy now, hey?" Buck picked up his beer. "Well, to your future." He raised it up and knocked bottle-necks with Damion.

By the time the regulars began to take seats behind their bottles and shot glasses, Rusty had to start a new sheet for Buck's tab. Buck's shoulders slacked back as he finished another bottle.

The beer cooled his insides as it traveled into his stomach, relaxing his diaphragm, but the smell of gasoline wouldn't leave his nose. He's been holding breath between drinks.

Damion smacked Buck on his back as he wobbled on the cracked leather of his barstool. "You ever find yourself a lady?"

"Nah, you were always the pretty one." Buck took a drag from his cigarette. "I remember you gettin blowjobs beneath the bleachers." Buck laughed. "What was her name again? Caitlin? Kathy?"

"Katie." Damion's cheeks began to flush. He adjusted his thick, square glasses. "Katie Maki."

"Wah, the tits on that one." Buck curved his open palms to grope at an imaginary set of breasts. "She was a wild one; quite the tramp." Buck patted his hands on the bar. "Heard she was back in town."

"Yah." Damion held up his left hand to show a gold band on his ring finger. "She came back with me."

"No shit!" Buck snorted to stop himself from laughing. Beer fizzed in his nostrils. "The missus is Katie?"

Damion nodded. A man at one of the corner tables slammed his beer down and shouted "Jewish lightning! It's gotta be." Buck recognized the man from the paper mill—somewhere in shipping and receiving. Buck made a point of looking Damion in the eye. The back of his neck was hot. Rusty yelled at the man to quiet down.

Buck lowered his head. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Nah, you're fine; she's a wild one." Damion smiled. Rusty popped open two more beers. "The past's the past. What's done is done."

Buck rolled his cigarette in his fingers. He looked down the bar towards the Magnavox. Hockey players skated across the ice. One player checked another one hard, bouncing him off of the glass and onto the ice. He was amazed how fast the player recovered and went back after the puck.

Rusty dimmed the lights. The jukebox got louder. More locals had come into the bar; almost every table was full. The buzz of conversation gathered in Buck's ears—words like: evacuation, blaze, crisp, inferno, and Hell. He struggled to follow Damion's voice through the chaos.

"Limbo's not real you know." Damion's eyes were focused and intense behind his glasses. "Catholics did away with it. No more." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

"What?" Buck flared his nostrils, raising his upper lips to reveal a thin line of teeth, and scrunched up his eyebrows. "What you talkin about?"

"You know, where the dead babies go." Damion was leaning heavily on the bar; he looked like he might tip over onto Rusty.

"Sounds like a helluva place." Buck lit another cigarette, holding the flame a little longer than usual. "Wouldn't wanna go near it."

"Yoose talkin about Limbo?" Rusty moved his head forward and placed a hand on the bar. A cross on a gold chain dangled out from under his open shirt collar. "Or Purgatory?"

"Same difference."

"Big difference." Rusty's eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Two different things."

Damion shrugged, uninterested. Buck pulled his stool closer and took a long swing of beer.

“You see, Limbo’s a place alright. Fact some think it’s a layer of Hell. But it’s where you wait for redemption from yer sins.” Rusty licked his lips. “It’s the waitin room before better things if you done some bad stuff but been good in yer life. But Purgatory, that’s a whole different can-o-worms. Purgatory’s about gettin to heaven once you stuck in Limbo. It’s like a car wash for gettin to heaven.” Rusty leaned back with a smirk on his face like he just cleaned the plate of a good steak dinner. “An that’s still all part of the church. Somebody must’ve been tellin you wrong.”

Buck scratched at the stubble on his chin. He thought about fire—both the one down the street and the ones in Hell. He wondered if Limbo was hot. Fire jumps; it finds a way. In the blink of an eye, everything will be hot with curtains of red and orange. What if a few flames escaped, and Limbo caught fire? What of the almost dammed then? Were they consumed? Is Jesus a firefighter? He wondered if Larry and Brian were there. He worried about where he might be. His head was spinning with questions. That and beer. Buck blinked and looked from the empty bottle in front of him to Rusty. “I didn’t know you was Catholic.”

“Since day of birth.” Rusty smiled and pointed at the cross nestled on his gray chest hair. “What yoose talkin about Limbo for anyways?”

“Hey.” Buck tapped Damion on the shoulder, causing him to start.

“Jesus!” Damion shook his head and blinked three times. “What?”

“What was this talk of Limbo about?”

Damion looked up at the ceiling and scratched at his cheek, slowly making an “o” with his mouth. “Can’t say.”

Both Buck and Damion laughed. Rusty threw up his hands. “Well, now you know. Either of yoose want another?”

Damion looked at Buck and nodded. “Why the hell not?”

The guilt really began to set in when Buck stopped drinking beers and started ordering Crown Royale on the rocks. He knew he didn’t have enough money, but he ordered them anyway. He didn’t care. He could feel his mind sinking, and once it started, he wanted to go all the way under.

By this time Damion had begun ordering coffee. He drank it slowly, and whenever Buck offered him a drink, he would hold up his mug and say: “Gotta drive home to the missus.”

Buck was swaying now. His neck was completely loose.

“You sure you need another?” Rusty cocked his gray peppered eyebrow and leaned in close.”

“Dead s-sure.”

The eleven o’clock news came on the Magnavox. A group huddled around the television, maxing out the volume and quieting down when the mill fire came on. “The fire that killed two in the early morning on Wednesday at the Ironton Georgia Pacific paper mill has erupted into a full blown inferno and shows no signs of stopping. Authorities have evacuated the surrounding buildings in case the fire spreads.” Another man’s voice came on. “This is the biggest fire I’ve ever seen; there’s no telling where it might go.” The newscaster’s voice returned. “Police are still investigating the cause of the fire, but are not ruling out arson. Recent downsizing at the mill, resulting in thirty laid-off employees, leaves plenty of room for questions. Right now, firefighters are working around the clock to quell the blaze. For information involving memorial services for Larry Washburn and Brian Schultz, please call...” Somebody muted the volume and the crowd dispersed, chatting as they returned to their seats.

“Jesus Christ,” said someone.

Buck focused on Larry’s lazy eye rolling when he talked to him earlier. It was something about the weather, something about how he was cold and wished summer was here quicker.

“Summer—all two months of it.” He said that. And then he laughed.

“Damn shame,” said someone else.

Buck saw Brian’s chipmunk cheeks. He saw them puff as Brian laughed at Larry. He was leaning against mop and Buck wondered how the mop didn’t crack in half under Brian’s weight. It was magic like in Fantasia; Brian was a three hundred and twenty pound Mickey Mouse.

“Arson,” shouted a man sitting by himself. “Lookin for insurance cash.”

Buck saw Larry and Brian on fire. Their faces were twisted in agony. The fire engulfed them like a wave, swelling until it crested in red and orange and then bursts. Then they dissolved into flakes of ash. He shook his head. He stood up and started walking towards the table the man had shouted from. As he got closer, the man grew in size. He was thick with arms that filled the sleeves of his red flannel. From beneath the bristled hair on his face, Buck could see that his cheeks were rosy. His moustache and upper lip were wet. Buck pointed at the man. His hand was unsteady and he swayed. “Yo-you.”

“We got a problem?” The man stood up. He was taller than Buck and seemed to fill up the corner of the room.

“You sayin s-somebody set it?”

“Come on.” Damion pulled on Buck’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“No.” Buck shrugged off Damion’s hand. “This mother-fucker’s accusin w-with no.”
Buck swallowed hard. “No evidence.”

The man crossed his arms, flexing his biceps. “Listen to your friend.”

“Rusty, tell him to stop.”

“I ain’t gettin into this.” Rusty had his hands under the bar. The low light made him look like an animal ready to pounce. “Yoose two gotta a problem: take it out back.”

“Let off it, Buck.”

“Go fuckin home.” Buck pushed away Damion. “Go to-to your whore.” He regretted the words as they left his lips. Damion stepped back. His eyes were heavy. He sighed as he set down his empty mug. He picked up his coat and left. The night air slipped in cold around Buck’s feet.

“Well, you got something to say?” The man tapped the rubber sole of his heavy boots on the wooden floor, sending a plume of sawdust upwards.

“Plenty for a backwoods pig-fucker like you,” Buck said. Even through the haze in his mind, Buck could tell this wasn’t going to go his way, but he didn’t care. He needed to lose and it needed to be bad.

“Outside.”

A group gathered as they stumbled out into the night. Someone said, “Twenty on the big one.” Right before the Buck took a right cross to the eye, he looked up into the black of the night sky filled with dark gray smoke and thought: *penance, Purgatory, Limbo—whatever.*

Buck could see the fire in the sky though the eye that hadn’t bruised shut. He was lying with his back to the pavement. The horizon was tinted orange from the blaze. He tasted blood. His ribs were stinging and he could feel a couple of loose teeth as he ran his tongue over them. Smoke curled into the night obscuring the stars and the moon; it hung thick over the city. Buck stuck his

arm out, grinding his palm into the pavement; his head spun. The cold cut at the warmth of his drunk. He could feel the dried sweat all over his body. His hairless arms felt frozen. He stumbled to his feet, using the side of Rusty's for balance. He couldn't tell how long he had lasted—the fight was a flash of images: fists and boots—but he felt bad enough now. A siren whined in the distance; Rusty had probably called the cops. Buck slipped down an alleyway, heading away from the fire.

He slipped in and out of conscious as he walked. One minute he would be walking on the street and the next he'd be two blocks down or back at the mill or home. He had talked to both Larry and Brian on his way out the mill that morning. They were janitors—working for goddamned peanuts—and they apologized about the layoff, throwing up their hands empathetically. They cared. They at least put up face; they knew what it was like to be unemployed. He could've gone back or warned them, but it was too late. He had heard the whine of the pressure valve on the propane cylinder and knew it would catch the flame from the gasoline he had lit over it. Now they were dead. Snap your fingers—like that—gone. Buck imagined their black, crispy bodies, burned of skin, fat, and hair, and threw up.

The fire would be out in a few days. The investigators would find the flashpoint in the charred-out wreck of the propane cylinders on the back of the forklift. They would crouch in low next to the twisted metal, rank with the fumes of death. They had noses like dogs. "Looks like here's your accelerant, boss," one would say as he sealed a sample swab in a plastic vial. They'd take more samples and plenty of pictures. He had motive and they'd see him leaving on the surveillance tapes. It was over; Buck's life was over.

"At least I know where I'm going," he thought and passed out in his own vomit.

Buck's head pounded when he awoke. Vomit covered his right cheek and stained the collar of his shirt. He reeked of alcohol; he imagined fumes escaping his pores like heat mirages, and gagged at the phantom taste of Crown Royale still lingering in his throat. The sun pierced through his eyes, causing sharp barbs of pain at the base of his skull. He struggled to his feet, wiped the vomit from his face and nose, and looked around for his bearings.

Behind the Laundromat. Two blocks from the industrial park. Buck turned his head towards the sky, almost losing his balance. It was overcast, but the smoke from the night before was missing. The sun burned white hot through the sheet of gray. He moved down the alley, squinting to keep his headache from exploding, in the direction of Georgia Pacific.

The smoke was still there, but there was less of it. Buck couldn't see any flames, only thin trails of black moving from the main complex into the sky. He rested against the chain link fence, putting his fingers through the spaces between the mesh of the links, and watched firefighters move between fire trucks, pulling the trunks of hoses or switching out oxygen tanks. He had imagined the fire fighters to be more rushed; on the television they were always running or yelling, but here they were calm. It was like watching not a battle but a chess game.

"Returning to the scene of the crime?" Larry tugged at his charred coveralls. His name tag was fully blackened. His rolling eyes were glazed over; they looked like smoke caught in a jar. "Jesus, Buck. You look like Hell."

Buck laughed, loud and genuine. "Not lookin too bad yourself." He ran his hand through his hair, feeling the grease that came off onto his fingers. "How is it?"

"A little cold. These March blizzards always get me." Larry pressed his hands to his chest. "Can't wait till summer—all two months of it."

“Now what?” Buck released the fence, and looked around. Larry wasn’t there. Of course he wasn’t there. Buck rubbed his eyes as he laughed. A tear came out between his fingers. He pushed passed the fence, through the DO NOT CROSS! CRIME SCENE tape, and walked towards the nearest fire engine. His arms were out in front of him, palms up, and he realized for the first time that all of the hair was burnt from his forearms and fingers.