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Trash

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Claire Davis

Trash

John Root Pratt scraped his breakfast dish clean into the garbage pail tucked under the kitchen sink. He could hear his wife, Tillie, singing down in the root cellar. She was slightly off-pitch. He found it comforting.

"Tillie," he called down to her and waited.

She came to the bottom of the stairs, jars tucked under her arms and carrots suspended in a sling of newspaper between her hands. "Just coming up," she called, looking small and gray on the stairs.

He took the carrots, their tips withered black. "Want me to take these to the compost?" he asked.

Tillie shook her head. "You go on," and she lifted her face to him as she had every morning of their forty-three years together.

John brushed her with a kiss. "We're getting too old for this," he said and put on his John Deere cap and wool coat.

"We were too old yesterday," she said laughing as she opened the door for him. "Soup for lunch."

John walked his fields following the treeline bordering the south-most pasture from the highway, treading on fallen leaves that sweetened the air with decay. He was careful to keep his eyes averted from the subdivision rising like a blister on the far side of the road, focusing instead on his fields, the crop, the leaves underfoot. He loved autumn—it was the green of summer well used and spent, a time to let the year's labor account for itself. He squinted into the thin sunlight and opened the top button of his jacket.

Raccoons had raided his cornfield, but still it would be a good crop. His father had liked to say, "The good years diminish the poor." John looked over the tall corn and although he was not a steady church-going man, he liked to believe he knew God's presence when he met it.

He routinely walked the field's edge along the highway. Up ahead, in the ditch, a pair of dogs worried an industrial-sized black plastic trash bag. The plastic stretched between their fighting.

"God damn," he said, rolling his hands into fists. "Can't keep their garbage home." He searched out a large stick and approached.

"Go on, get!" He raised the stick, figured them to be vacation dogs, shagged out of the back seat of a car at the end of summer. The smaller of the two, with sides shrunken and back arched, slunk off with its tail ratty between its legs. The other, a larger long-haired breed, stayed, trying to pull something free of the bag.

John picked up a rock and hit the big dog square in the side. The rock hit with a hollow sound. The dog scuttled into the leaves and ran off yelping while the gaunt dog remained sitting at a distance. The bag's white plastic tie, still looped, had slipped off and lay in the dirt. He glanced at what had slid partially out of the bag.

It looked like the leg of a brown Swiss calf. Why in God's name would someone waste good meat? He stepped closer and the leg angled oddly, and then he realized it was no cow's leg, but a man's, severed with its fuzz of soft blond hair still curling tightly against the white skin. He looked down at his own squat legs in surprise for a moment.

A fly crawled up onto the leg, opened its wings to the sun. John lifted the plastic, looked into a jumble of body parts, seeing what might be the crook of an elbow, a nipple. He shifted the bag so that the half-exposed leg slid back into the dark. The fly buzzed inside the bag.

John straightened, staring down the highway, his arms slack at his side. At his back, the corn clattered in the breeze, a blue jay screamed. The air smelled of meat gone bad. A car drove by and then another and then none. He reached down to the bag at his feet and twisted the plastic opening closed in a knot.

He paced off a short distance, returned to stand over the bag. Something must explain this, he thought. Maybe it would come clear if he gave it time. The sun pierced a patch of clouds while a rooster pheasant strolled down a row of corn. The skinny dog was panting as it lay in the dirt, tongue spread over one foot, still watching. He should call the police. The dog's ears lifted and it raised to its feet.

It was clear he couldn't leave the bag. He looked down the length of highway and then carefully hefted the bag. It hung at his side in odd bumps and sags—then he turned toward the house.

With each step the bag swung, throwing his gait off. The dog trailed at a distance. "Go on, get!" he yelled and took a threatening step. It backed up, trotted off to a safer distance. John put the bag down, looked around the fields as if for an answer, then hunching his shoulder swung the bag around and over. He flinched as it thudded against his back, but it rode easier, high on his shoulder. It had the weight of a good-sized bale of hay, or better yet, a young calf. He used to carry his boy this way.

It rolled almost comfortably back there. Looking out over the fences he knew personally, he hoped he might see Ben or his boy

in the neighboring field. They could stop. Talk. He could show them a thing or two, he thought matter-of-factly. He turned to look for the dog, but it had disappeared into the rows of corn.

Back in his yard, John walked to the burn barrel, a rusted oil drum next to the garage. He swung the bag off his shoulder. It bumped against the metal, ringing softly. John eased the bag down into the barrel, settling it in the soot of old newspapers, cardboard and wax milk cartons. Ash drifted up.

In the kitchen, the radio played and Tillie was swaying in place at the cutting board. John took his jacket off, hung it on the peg behind the door. He walked to the sink.

"Remember Carmen Miranda?" Tillie asked. She held an onion behind her ear.

He scraped bar soap up under his nails. Tillie walked up behind him. "You're back early."

The water steamed out of the faucet and stung his knuckles. An old song he could almost remember played and out the window, across the yard, he could see the burn barrel.

"A penny for your thoughts," Tillie said softly into his ear.

He wiped his hands and turned to her. Her eyes were the same blue as when he'd left that morning. "It don't matter," he said.

"John?"

"I found something. I got to call the police."

"What?" Tillie's voice raised. "What's happened?"

"Found a bag full of a man's body parts. It's in the burn barrel." He hesitated. "You want to see?" And even as he asked, he wondered if it was right to show a woman a thing like that. Was it right to show her? And yet it seemed the years spent at her side gave him the right to ask it of her. "It's just out there." It became

important that she see it too.

Tillie backed away. "No," she said then crossed to the stove and turned on the gas under the coffee pot.

John followed Tillie, put his hand on her elbow. "It's just out there," he repeated. He waited until moisture hissed from the coffee pot, then walked into the living room and called the police.

John sat across the kitchen table from their son, Karl. Dishes rattled in the sink as Tillie washed the coffee cups the police had used earlier. Under that, he could hear Karl's pregnant wife snoring on the living room couch.

"This county's always been a dumping ground for Chicago trash," Karl said, grinding out a cigarette.

A cup banged on the sideboard. The overhead light was yellow on Karl's face. He looked fleshy in the starched, white shirt. Like a banker. John looked down at his hands in embarrassment.

Karl's voice dropped. "Mobsters. Probably drug-related."

Tillie turned from the sink, wringing soap from her hands. "That's enough," she scolded.

"Dad should be on the eleven o'clock news." Karl walked into the living room.

The TV clicked on. John stood up from the table. "You going to come see?" he asked.

"I got to finish these dishes," Tillie said. And that was like her, John thought. He had always taken pride in her composure, her tidiness—a woman who knew what belonged to each part of the day, and these dishes just another part of another day, as though the stack that mounted on the sideboard had not been the result of detectives breaking for coffee at the house. She moved with a

purpose, cups clattering onto the drying rack. "I'll be right in," she added but remained standing with her back to him at the sink. In the living room, Karl sat on the floor in front of his wife, his head resting against her belly that slumped off the side of the couch. She smiled, the cushion damp beneath her mouth. John sat in the easy chair. They were the first item of news for the evening.

It all looked so neat as he watched the footage of his south field, then a quick shot of the barn—empty this past three years when it had gotten too much for him to manage the herd without Karl—and a close-up of the burn barrel. The reporter faced into the breeze.

"You're going to miss it, Ma," Karl called. "Hey, look at you, Dad."

John watched himself on camera. He looked thick. The weather-scrubbed barn behind him, which he'd always admired for being burnished down to the heart of the wood, looked shabby on the small screen. The sheriff came on briefly, while behind him two men hefted the black plastic bag onto a stretcher. John remembered that he'd meant to tell the men they wouldn't need it, that the weight sat easy enough on your shoulder if you leaned forward a bit. But he hadn't said that. There he was on TV, looking startled, saying what he'd supposed they wanted to hear. "Yes. Quite a surprise."

John stood up, knowing now a person could not always believe what he saw. Tillie waited in the doorway, studying him. He walked past her, out the back door and into the yard.

He stood in the cold and shoved his hands into his pant pockets. Moonlight congealed on the elderberry bushes and the remains of Karl's old play fort canted into the shadows. He started

walking away, and when he heard the storm door bang shut behind him, he looked back to see Tillie come out onto the porch, pull a sweater over her shoulders and step down into the yard after him.

They went out through the orchard, his steps turning on fallen apples that had bruised and slumped into the ground. They passed the storage shed and empty cowbarn, through the rows of field corn with the leaves flagging in the breeze, until he came out on the far northern field and stood on a hill, his breath churning the chill air. Tillie stepped close and pressed a sweater over his shoulder.

He looked south. "You see," he said, "from over there." His finger followed a pinpoint headlight moving down the highway. "Can you imagine? All the way here to put such a thing on my land."

Tillie leaned into him, but he felt separate, as if the act of walking out into his fields this morning had left her too far behind. He looked into the night.

She ducked her head and whispered, "Don't think about it," and snugged the sweater tight around him again.

John turned to her. "How do I walk my own fields again?"

Tillie hugged her arms around her.

He asked, "Why? What did I do?"

The next morning a hard frost scabbed the few remaining squash in the garden, but by ten o'clock the clouds had broken, the frost melted and John found himself walking to the south field, not first, as he normally did, but last, as a thing worked up to.

He had started finding his way there since breakfast where he

sat longer than usual, drinking *two* cups of coffee and reading the newspaper slowly. He was on the front page. Inside were pictures of the police with shovels and teams of dogs searching his fields. He sat spread over the paper, breathing through his nose.

"Karl might have been right," he said. "Police think it had something to do with drugs and organized crime."

"Why do they think that?" Tillie asked, buttering a slice of toast.

John cleared his throat, then spoke each word as though he were counting change. "His head and hands are missing."

Tillie settled the butter knife onto her plate, glanced out the window. "Does that make sense?"

"I didn't notice them missing," he said quietly.

Tillie sat back. "You looked?"

John glanced up.

"I supposed," she offered, "it would be the natural thing to do—"

"At first I thought it was just meat, something off the rendering truck, maybe, I don't know, but I saw it was human then. And I looked."

Tillie stared down at her hands. John sensed her backing away as she had yesterday. He waited for her to ask what he had seen. What he had felt when he looked into the bag. He waited for her to ask how he could sleep after seeing that. He was afraid she would ask and he would have to admit he had slept well—after a while. Tillie remained silent. "I should go now," he said, spreading both hands on the table as he pushed his chair clear.

Tillie shook her head. "I saw my father with his arm in the thresher. I've seen body parts before." She paused. "wasn't much

help yesterday.”

John rubbed a hand over his eyes. “You going to be all right?” he asked.

“You want me to come along?” she answered.

As Tillie lifted her face to him, he turned away, left the house and walked to the north field as it had been his job to do each day of his adult life. The fields were his, given into his care. He had never taken that obligation lightly. As he walked, he told himself it was garbage—trash he’d found, like the styrofoam cartons from fast-food joints. Or a careless litter of kittens. He wondered what his father would have thought of it all. John walked down the crest of a small hill, looking over the fields to the rows of blank-faced houses in the near distance—subdivisions, curbs, gutters, driveways and roads. Waste. But then his father had not known about such things. That was before the highway and the trash it spawned.

John walked carefully over the plowed field. Maybe next year he’d rent the field out. Ben could use the extra hay. I *am* getting too old for this, he thought. He ran his fingers through his thin hair and looked across to the highway where he’d found the bag. A car was parked on the side of the road. He could see a young man standing on the gravel shoulder.

John hurried, his feet sinking into the fresh-turned soil. There were others in the car. John slowed as he approached the ditch. The man had a sweater tied in a bright yellow knot around his waist. His hair was red and burnished bright in the sunlight. There was laughter from inside the car and a door opened for the young man. Another car passed slowly. John could see an arm pointing to him, to his fields.

He stepped into the ditch. "You got some business here?" he shouted.

"Just looking," the man squinted down at John.

John stooped to pick up a wad of paper and a pop can. He pressed the paper into his jacket pocket. "This is my land," he said.

"Hey, Mister, we're not bothering anything. Listen, it's a nice day."

"It was." He held out the pop can.

"This is public road."

"That's the road," John pointed to where a car drove slowly by, "and that's public road," he pointed to the sloping gravel shoulder, "but this is *mine*." He pointed to the ditch.

The young man backed into the opened car door and laughed. "You crazy, old man?"

John fingered the battered can in his hand. He threw it as the car pulled away, gravel popping from the tires and the shouts of the young people trailing like exhaust.

John watched until the car winked out into a curve. He turned, facing the road that wound through the rolling countryside and eventually leveled out in the suburbs of Chicago, to be swallowed into the city itself.

"Go ahead," he said, wiping his hands on his pants and confronting the faultless blue of the sky. "You bring Your garbage here."

Frankie Aldtenburg's "All Concertina Band" played every Friday night at the Elk's Club. Although Tillie had often asked John to go, this was the first time he had suggested it to her. The idea had

come to him as he'd pulled off his work boots, and then his white cotton socks—they were still clean after a full day. He looked down and saw his leg hairs curling dark and blue veins rooting beneath the pale skin. He pulled at the hair, watched the skin pimple up beneath it and snap back when released. It was at that moment, with his eyes tearing slightly and his breath squeezed in his throat, that he thought of dancing.

At the club, in the Bull Elk Room, Frankie Aldtenburg sat in a wooden folding chair, center stage, his metal walker standing companionably alongside. The drummer brushed a slow shuffle on the snare, while his foot kept the one beat on the bass, and the high-hat floated in the yellow stage light. The other concertina player sat to the right and slightly behind Frankie, squeezing rhythm in chords.

As John and Tillie walked by, fellow Elks and neighbors nodded their heads, said, "A little dancing, hey John?" and "How's by you?"

They sat at a table near the three-piece band. Frankie played polkas and waltzes and limping two-steps. Tillie ordered a Manhattan. John drank highballs.

Between songs, John leaned in toward his wife as though to speak, only to fall silent. He wanted to explain how he had found himself here, to draw a connection from his pale legs with their curling hairs to the bright dance floor and old man Adltenburg wheezing out melodies on the concertina. He knew it had something to do with finding your legs under you.

During the break their neighbor Ben stopped by the table, his head politely inclined to Tillie. He rested a hand briefly on John's shoulder, his voice funeral-soft. "How's it been, John?"

John eased back in his chair, looked up at Ben through the rim of his raised highball. It made his face look water-streaked and ruined. John knew what Ben was feeling, relief that it wasn't found on his property—that thing like an accusation from God Himself. "Fair to middlin'," John replied and smiled. "Corn's looking real good. Bumper crop with all that early rain. Hear you had some bad luck with that new soybean."

Ben leaned back on his heels, looked up at the ceiling a moment, then back at John. "Had better years." He nodded to Tillie then to John before he strode back across the dance floor.

At the end of two hours and five highballs, John let it all drift. He raised his face to the shine of stage lights, and as Frankie trailed out of a waltz and into a schottische, John asked Tillie to dance. On the floor they stood next to each other, John's hand riding her hip. Of all the dances, the schottisch was his favorite, with its practiced shuffling step and determined movement forward.

His mother had taught him it as a child, out on the dirt of the chicken-pecked back yard, humming the oom-pa-pa beat under her breath, the hens racketing out of their way. His father watched, shaking his head at such nonsense. His father would walk him through the fields instead, tell him, "You put yourself down and stay. Then you see what God provides." He would open his arms, gathering in all the crops and years in one gesture.

John felt himself stumble. Tillie kept dancing. He threw his head back far on his neck and shouted, "My father named me John Root."

"Yes?" she asked.

He circled the dance floor with Tillie, planting each step reck-

lessly, his body bearing down as if to pack the earth beneath them.

For a week, each morning John lingered over breakfast, ate each item slowly, then walked out to the fields with the same deliberation. Things seemed normal again, as though the sin in that bag had never been committed or his discovery of the bag had been only a glancing blow after all. If he tended to fall asleep a little later, or startle awake in the dead of the night, he told himself it was no worse than when he'd worried about musk in the corn, or when Karl had sickened with chicken pox as an infant. He saw how Tillie watched him from the corner of her eye.

On the eighth morning he came back from the barber with the back of his neck clean-shaven and the tips of his ears revealed white where his field tan never reached. Tillie was packing squash into scalded jars, wringing the lids tight. She lifted each jar to the light before immersing it in the hot bath.

"They stop talking when they see me," he said.

"Why ever?"

"It's like I told them some secret they don't want to hear about."

"It could have been them," she said, turning down the heat under the canning kettle. "The highway runs along every one of these farms. They don't want to know it could have been them." She put her hand on his arm. "Listen to me. You got to listen. You're a good man. You've spent your life working to feed others—"

He shook his head, swaying lightly on his feet "I truck my grain to the elevator, sell it cheap as dirt. If my father grew wheat that year, he saw the bread, knew the bakers and the families who

ate it. Do I see the bread my grain makes? No, I take it on *faith*. I take it on faith, but I *know* some middle-man is stealing from that broker to sell to some company baker, who's stealing from the workers and the chain grocers are piling food in dumpsters because it's two days past shelf life in some *city* and people don't buy it because they're buying booze or drugs or lottery tickets. And then they come out here to take a crap on my land, like they knew who they were coming home to."

Tillie slapped her hand down on the table. Her body settled like dust into the chair. "It was trash, coming down the highway—it stopped at the dark bend in the road. There was no knowing behind it, John. Just chance." And he willed himself to believe that as he knelt and she rocked him in her arms.

Later that evening, on their way to Edgar and Anna's for their regular card game, John drove the road as he thought a stranger might. He counted the dark stretches of unlit fields. The fields became random, the dark accidental. He breathed deeply and when he smiled to himself he felt his skin stretch.

The six men ringed the dining room table, each one alternately sitting out a hand. They played five card stud, high and low, and aces and jokers wild, while Ernest always added a bump and a wiggle. They drank beer from amber bottles that Anna carried to the table, waved their cigarettes and spat small bits of tobacco from the tips of their tongues.

After a few hands, John took a long pull at his beer, looked into the bottle and asked, "What do you get when you mix beer cans and mobsters?"

The others fell silent.

"A Chicago landfill," he answered.

The men laughed uneasily at first, then loosened up with

Charlie's belly laugh.

"I don't know if we should be joking . . ." Anna said and faltered. Tillie looked over at John in surprise. He could feel her confusion just as he could feel the approval of the others. Their relief.

"They should all do each other in," Ben said, and the group looked to John.

"Garbage," John said looking away from Tillie. He leaned over Ben's hand. "More garbage," he said, his laughter erupting like a bark.

"I didn't deal it," Ben scowled at Hank.

John sat out the next hand. Perhaps it didn't matter after all. And even if it was an accounting as his father had promised, and if God had given him this, then John had looked deep and he had not found *himself* wanting, only the world.

Ben excused himself from the table.

Charlie raised his voice over the general laughter. "Speaking of that. I heard from Clifton that his department thinks it might have been sexual. He got a report some guy's been missing since a week ago Saturday."

"Sexual?" Hank asked.

Charlie nodded. "As in *homosexual*."

John set his cards down.

"Said he was canvassing in the suburbs for AIDS or something."

"You calling?" Edgar asked John.

John folded. Edgar split the pot with Charlie, and Ernest dealt the next hand. John listened to the cards hit the table with a soft sound like slapped flesh. Their voices hummed in his head and he sat with his cards flat on the table. He didn't understand what it was—how the word sexual had *changed* things, or why it had

done so. He felt his breathing grow shallow. But it had. He remembered lifting the bag, how it hit his back, that fleshy contact he could not allow himself to believe at the time.

John stared at the cards face-down in front of him.

Edgar spoke up. "Well it don't matter. Still garbage, ain't a John?"

John straightened his back, looked around the waiting circle of men to where Tillie sat with her eyes down on her hands. "arbage," he agreed.

Ben entered the dining room from the kitchen, a black plastic trash bag in his hands. He dropped it on the table in front of John.

"Must be for you," he said.

John's face whitened as if slapped. He sat looking at the bag as Ben turned away, laughing.

"John." Tillie left her chair next to Anna, moving to his side.

He looked up and the group fell silent. He glanced at Tillie, then down at the bag. Tillie moved her hand toward it, but John stopped her.

"No," he whispered, wanting to spare her what he wouldn't have a week ago.

Ben stepped forward. "It's nothing," he said. He laughed awkwardly. "Just a joke." He ripped into the bag; sandwiches scattered out. "It didn't mean nothing."

Later that evening, back home, John called Karl long distance. In the background he could hear Karl's wife questioning "Who is it? Who is it?"

"Sell the damn place," Karl said.

"It was supposed to be yours," John answered.

There was a long moment of breathing on the line, then "I don't want it, Dad. Look what it's gotten you."

John couldn't argue that. He sent his love and hung up. He tried to watch television, and later, in bed, he tried to rub himself alive, and failing that, to press himself limp into Tillie. She tried to help, her hands stroking him, but he remained limp, the moonlight illuminating a piece of himself, a piece of her and something of them—all their parts jumbled in the dark room.

He got up, dressed and left the house. In the yard, he found himself walking to his tractor, an old Allis he'd bought almost new in fifty-four. His hand ran along the dent on the right wheel cover, from back in sixty-seven. He swung himself onto the cast-iron seat that knew his spine better than he did. The engine stuttered as he choked it back to life. The night fled, closed down to two converging circles of light from the tractor's high beams. He backed over to where the disk rested, the rows of hard metal plates buried in wilted ragweed. He hitched it to the tractor, belly-down in the damp weeds, a stone for a mallet to hammer in the cotter pin, then looped two lengths of chain over the hook on the back of the tractor. He hiked the disk lever and the round plates lifted up to the trailer wheels. Standing in the dark, he admired the gleam of frosted metal—blades he still honed himself, just as his father had, in the off-season. The damp on his shirt was like a second skin, already stiffening in the cold. The porch light went on as he pulled onto the dirt road leading from the yards to his fields.

The moon was low on the horizon, a small sickle shape his grandfather had used as a portent for harvest in a time when soil was clean. He could have driven the road with the lights off, though the moonlight was feeble. But he kept them on to skitter over the road with each bump, leap up onto the trees like someone whose line of sight is jerked this way then that by the rush of

objects thrown at him. He shifted down for the rise leading into the south field, the engine warming him, the exhaust cap popping with small contained explosions, metal ringing each time it slapped back down. The wheels churned gravel and then he was over the hill and idling, the corn marching in straight rows out of the tractor's lights. He could see eyes lit red and sparking through the corn rows.

He slipped into gear, rolled forward and the corn rustled through the headlights, snapped like teeth clamping down beneath him. Over his shoulder he could see the ten-foot-wide swathe behind him, mowed flat against the wall of corn on his left. He steadied his hands on the wheel, feeling his heart banging in his chest like the pheasants that shotgunned out of the corn scattering into the dark. There was an excitement he had not anticipated, an intense joy rising up from his stomach and he shouted into the drone of engine and snapping corn, nearly rising from his seat to lean over the wheel, the night cut with lights, the dark revealed.

Halfway back across the field, he saw Tillie crossing the ruined path. Her hair was loose down her back and she hugged herself as she stumbled over the flattened corn. In the light, she looked startled. He shifted to neutral and pulled the brake.

"I can't see very well," she said as she neared the tractor. He offered a hand to her, and she climbed up onto the wheel fender next to him. "John, you could wait until morning . . ."

But he shook his head, engaged the gears. "I know this field," he shouted, thinking how well he knew it—better than his own body, maybe as well as he knew Tillie's. She nodded for him to go on then, her arm tight to his waist, her other hand gripping the

wheel cover she sat on.

They mowed the next row, and then the next, nearly a quarter of the field scraped flat, the remainder bristling at the edges of the light. Tillie was slumped against John. He could feel her weariness and the joy turned in him like winter storage, flat tasting, then soft and bad. He turned the tractor at row's end, driving on.

This was what it came to, he believed. The final leveling. His father's body leading a three-car cortege. John's son, Karl, an accountant. John's own life work just so much trash. His stomach cramped and he put in the clutch, shut off the engine. He stepped down from the tractor, crouched next to the fender, taking deep breaths through his mouth. Tillie was at his side, stroking his forehead and trying to shrug her sweater over his shoulders.

He turned to look over the broken field and stopped. A pair of eyes winked in the near distance at ground level. John started to laugh, pointed them out to Tillie. "Goddamn raccoons," he said. And then the eyes rose up a foot, burning, floating effortlessly higher and held at a height even with John's own. His back arched then sagged softly. And then he made out the shape of haunches and shoulders, a narrow head with a rack and flagging ears. The deer moved across the broken corn, feeding in the silence. The smell of corn was like a bruise in the air and he put his shaking hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry," Tillie said, "for what happened at Edgar and Anna's. It was . . . an ugly thing for Ben to do."

John sighed, his breath gelling in the cool air. The earth sounded hollow beneath his feet. He judged the depth of frost at six inches.

She tried again. "I didn't mean to hurt you—"

"No," he said, "you didn't." He turned off the tractor lights, hefted the disks back to trailer height. They walked clear of the tractor, crossed the standing rows of corn until they came to the creek skinned with ice. He could hear water rustling beneath.

"All these years," she said. "Shouldn't I know how to help you?"

He turned, following the creek away from the road. Tillie's fingers were tight on his arm. He said, "When I first saw it—when I first saw it I thought, for just a moment, that it was my own legs someone had cut out from under me and I just didn't know it yet." John stopped and peered down into Tillie's eyes. "Isn't that strange?"

Tillie's eyes were bright in the dark. "No," Tillie said. "We've been hurt."

John sighed and straightened up. He looked over his shoulder toward the highway. "Know what I did? Stood in that road and told God, Go ahead bring me Your garbage." He looked at Tillie. "Dared Him." John released a shaky laugh. "Back at Edgar's house—when Ben brought out the bag, I thought He'd answered, sent me the damned head and hands."

Tillie squeezed his arm.

He thought about what had come to him in the field just now, what he had thought of when he saw those eyes alive and rising, how he had again felt the soft hit and roll of the bag on his shoulder—"I called it—no, *him*—garbage, Tillie. As if I hadn't *seen*."

John Root leaned into Tillie and lay his head on her shoulder. He listened to her breath, cavernous in her body. He wrapped his arms around her, lending his own small weight to hers. The creek wandered in a lazy tangle, washing the soil, moving into neighboring fields past the homes of friends, beyond to where houses

squatted in packs and dogs barked and ran the length of their chains. He stared into the distance to see inside the houses, to where people shed soiled clothes, lifted tired legs into beds and drowned the noise of the dogs, the highway, and their own slow dying in the muffle of quilts and the soft slap of flesh.