

## The Ground She Walks

There is the boy in the back seat. The boy has made love to eight women. He met each one separately, but now it doesn't quite seem so. The boy wonders what has happened to the old days. The understandable days. He is holding out his fingers, numbering his lovers. Awareness of the position of the body without seeing it is the sixth sense, he knows this. It is not intuition of the future. There is no intuition of the future. The dusk has long gone and his hands are heavy and grey. They are older hands and need not be his. Yes, it could be like this. Darkness adds as well as takes. The boy can't tell if he is holding out eight fingers. He thinks he might not have a sixth sense. He is being reasonable. But there must be eight fingers. They are not enough.

The girlfriend, the eighth, the present, has had twice as many lovers and much earlier. She has lain next to him in her favorite red and black checkered shirt and counted them off. Tent-Boy. The Redhead. Hunter. The Older Navy Friend. Dog. There are others. She grazed his lips with her fingertips while telling him each one's story. She touched and whispered. The boy had never known these men before and now he does. If needed, he could recognize them. Such a talent, he thinks, is useless. The boy thinks of himself as a whole, ungrowing, and it's something like this that takes a piece of him and makes it useless. This is the boy for you. He had been frightened when the girlfriend told him about her lovers—until later when he understood none of these men had done anything to her. They had not changed her. They may as well have not been. He breathed deeper and more slowly and opened a beer. He offered her one. She said "No," and put her hand under his shirt and tore out a long stray hair growing on the top of his shoulder. The boy blinked several times. She said, "You are such a misplaced boy. I will put you in order."

Unlike the girlfriend, the boy's lovers layers his history into geological eras, stratifications in rock: formations of violence, volcanos, comet falls. He bites his lip when he think of the fourth woman; he has his hair cut to lay over his ears because of the first. The seventh still has him brushing his tongue. There is in his memory of the fifth woman a gap. He has a Double-Mint gum wrapper with her name and phone number written on it; there are the words of her roommate, a friend of the boy's from high school, who has said the woman only sleeps with a man to say to him the next morning he is awful in bed. "A father thing," the roommate said, eyeing him accusingly. The boy keeps the artifacts of each relation. The gum wrapper is curled in his wallet against his Social Security card. The writing there is in the fifth women's handwriting. He doesn't know, though. Someone else, another woman, with other women's limbs and thoughts could have written it. He doesn't remember receiving it. The 4's look like 9's. It is a dangerous number to call. Will he have the correct

home? Information does not have her on file; the name Heather Vanhorn has nothing linked to it, not a number, a face. Lately the boy can never convince himself he was in there with her, deep in that gap, involved. When he thinks about it, it is like waking up later; the television has lurched suddenly on to another show. So many memories, dead things, float to surfaces, only to sink. There has been a time when cannons, bolted to the decks of boats, were shot over rivers to dislodge the drowned.

The boy is lying down across seat belts, wearing headphones, thumbing the black plastic wheel on the radio he has set on his belly. Warm, tousled, a little sweaty. He is home for the summer from college, his eyes squinted. He has lost his place. The girlfriend has written him a letter. He holds the letter close to his eyes. The boy is being moved toward a Memorial Day weekend with his grandmother. His father drives the station wagon, two fingers at the base of the wheel, the tongue in his mouth twisting between his dentures. He spits bits of this morning's popcorn in a Kleenex. In her front seat the mother sleeps. Her head is erect, attentive, a pile of *Good Housekeeping* magazines on her lap. Between her feet is a small coffee can of cream-colored peonies lined in green, their heads spraying toward and away from the green instrumentation lights. A tiny grey feather rides her cheek with the words she mouths.

The boy lifts his head closer to a page of the girlfriend's letter. In his head he listens to her voice; it is horribly dislocated. He reads by the headlights of passing cars. They come, go; they shine through the paper, shifting the words at odd angles. But the highway has abruptly emptied. Behind the window beyond the boy's feet is a contradicting darkness that is substantial and caged, the hot air around a moth trapped between two hands. The boy closes his eyes. The girlfriend continues to speak but it is the background whisper she has laid within him, brushed over, patted down flat. He feels the paper fill with other meanings, a cacophony of false meaning that well over the black ink with its own blackness. Anything can be there now. Hideous things may be written inches from his face. He doesn't know.

When the boy would lose his face in the girlfriend's hair he would be aware in pieces, of his ribs bending outward, the placement of his hands. She'd been beaten up, left on curbsides to walk home, mauled in the Chips 'N Soda section of a Hy-Vee. Her skin was always moist. After pulling off his shirt he would put his dry hands against her hips. When he lifted them off, her eyes would waver from his and she would trace their outlines' warmth in her head; he would curl the moisture on his hands into soft fists.

There was a smell on her, a rare hot animal female scent smelled otherwise only by unwary hunters alone in wilderness. The boy sees it, the rifle batted away far into the tall grasses, the claws striping while the heavy head, jaws working, pants into a man's chest.

Since the last overpass the boy has heard only a sound like escaping air.

He roves the dial from end to end. It is everywhere.

In junior high the girlfriend sniffed amyl nitrate ampules and climbed the back stairs to the roof of the Memorial Union building on the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis campus, a wind-torn angel above her gripping her shoulders, pulling her higher and higher. She sat on the roof with her chin on the wet, iron handrail, looking through the miles of drizzle at the city lights. There are patterns in some landscapes that can only be discerned from above. They are there to be seen by gods and many times are astronomical calendars. She counted the thorny trees with purple blossoms and fell asleep. She said doing the ampules was, really, like falling in love; the face would flush, breath would thicken, sometimes a friend would come over and worry about her and the girlfriend would drop into her arms.

The boy's batteries to his radio are almost dead. He knows because on the car radio is an all-strings rendition of "Penny Lane," and his father, driving the station wagon, nods silently. Last month with a friend the boy chewed cushiony, pale-grey mushrooms and smoked marijuana from a pipe made from an elbow of brass plumbing. At Park Avenue Pub that evening he sensed that the men there languished where fields of gravity overlapped, the sun, the moon interred beneath the earth. A pitcher of beer slipped from the boy's hand as he took it from the bartender; it had felt like it had been chained to a winch in Hell. His friend slapped at the beer stain on his pant leg, shouting "Bastard, bastard..." in the beat of the jukebox. The boy looked around the bar and saw that the men moving around the pool table had posed themselves in stances of dread. At the tables near the jukebox they smoked and drank severely. The boy watched them rub their glasses, play with their napkins. Their secrets were finding them. Everyone in the pub was dismayed at the loss of their forgetfulness. The boy pulled on his friend's shoulder as he said something the girlfriend had told him the week before. "We are wet bones inside, thrashing against engines that move us and draw us down, engines that coagulate and ossify."

The boy thinks he's learned all life is sensation. He thinks the girlfriend learned this years ago and has had time to refine, distill that life. He fears he will never catch her. The summer she turned sixteen the girlfriend stopped snapping the ampules under her nose because a murmur was starting in her heart.

The father is stretching his jaw. He covers his mouth with his fist; he taps a front tooth against a fat wedding band. It takes six hours to drive from Des Moines to Eureka, Illinois. Every Memorial Day weekend that time is constant and misinterpreted, like Scripture. The mother has slept since the father asked her for the sack of sourballs from her purse, just past the city limits. The boy makes a small, restless "Ohhh." The father does not notice. It is a love sound, utterly inappropriate to what he feels, to what is going on. He lightly

punches himself in the stomach. The girlfriend has moved into an apartment in her hometown in Minnesota on a permanent basis. Her funds have run out, her loans have thinned; she cannot stay within Iowa and pay the tuition of an out-of-state Minnesotan. She cannot persevere on rice cakes and peanut butter! This was the first part of her letter, but all this was known. The boy imagines he has been wounded by something vastly large, something sliding alone into his life, slowly tumbling his most precious of possessions against the rocks it scooped, its weight buckling the surface on his heart. In reality, glaciers once ground the land outside. They rode it for centuries. They do not now. His hand is on his heart from under the bottom of his shirt, pressing hard against the ribs and the small, male nipple.

The boy is thinking of how the girlfriend thought he would die after she left, that his city would shiver, drop into ashes and nothingness without her to see it and think about it, and he begins to bounce off the back seat furiously, the top of his head hitting hard the cushioned armrest, the curved, chromed door handle. He opens his eyes. From under the back of the driver's seat a dusty map of Illinois flips on its side, exposing a grey boot print, and jumps in the air. The boy's insides are collapsing, slipping off one another, crashing in huge shards. The boy sits up and grips the jittery back of the front seat. The highway under the station wagon has turned wild, a fitful thing thudding murderously its undercarriage. A blue-green field stretches far in the flickering headlights, seeming to spread further with each lunge of the station wagon above the weeds it flattens. Beside the boy the father yells, "Jesus Crimany!"

The station wagon accelerates. It fishtails, tilts, surges like a skimming heron up the bank of earth that beside it emerges. The boy is pulled back into his seat. He doesn't know where he is. Shadows are sunk around everything in the back seat, deep as eye holes. Everything is in derangement. He rolls to the floor of the car, his hair soaking in peony water. There is a hissing in his ears; his headphones are still on, the sound a distant, white place of solitude. This is my family, he thinks. This can't be happening to them.

The station wagon drops heavily over the shoulder, onto the interstate.

"What happened?" The mother, who has been there, quiet and sunk down, is found by the two others by her voice. She looks back at the boy.

"I fell asleep," the father says. He snaps the radio off which had begun to sound like the theme from *South Pacific* and pats the cuff of his shirt to his face. The boy pulls off his headphones and rubs his hair. The father rolls down his window. A car is passing outside; in its dark interior is an orange tip of a cigarette. The mother looks from the boy to the father, back to the boy. "What are you doing?" she says. She sets her mouth tight, she is disgusted with him, the father.

In the other car the boy sees the two people in the front seat looking into the station wagon, but he doesn't know how. There are no shapes in there.

Only the cigarette. The car pulls ahead and its sound falls under the wind. The father's head is tilted at the wind, unmoving. The station wagon drifts forward smoothly and easily. Nothing sound wrong. The father grunts and seals the window closed. The silence in the sounds of the road looses a long piece of air from the boy. The father turns the radio on and twists the dial until he finds the squeals of electric guitars, a singer in precise, electronic harmony with himself. The mother closes her eyes and shakes her head. The father turns the volume up until the rock singer's voice is an additional person in the car and they feel themselves fade a little.

In what the boy has read, the girlfriend dances around her apartment. Usually by the kitchen where the floor doesn't squeak so much. Sometimes beside the couch. The floor noises seem to shift.

At the Little Amana Holiday Inn the boy, the mother, the father circle the station wagon clockwise. Some grass has caught along the backs of the tire wells; a corner of the rear license plate is bent. At the front the father kneels down and looks at the underside. The boy looks with him. There is grass and mud clinging to the end of the axle hub. Nothing seems damaged. They stand up and see the mother wiping her passenger door with a Kleenex from her coat pocket.

The father says, "Well I'll say one thing. This car is one sturdy car."

The boy giggles. He slaps his hand to his mouth tightly.

The mother has reached into the car for more Kleenex. She shakes a clump of them at the boy saying, "There was some grease on the door. I didn't get it all." The boy takes them and rubs the black smear she points at, her finger raising and lowering to the streaks left. As he wipes, the cold grease makes a noise on the metal. He drops the Kleenexes to the asphalt. The father and mother lock their doors and walk across the parking lot toward the restaurant in the Holiday Inn. The boy sits putting his shoes on over his dew-dampened sockfeet. He reads a little more of the letter. The girlfriend is still getting mail for the former occupant of her apartment. A *Business Week* magazine and another called *Mirror* from Singapore. The boy picks up the wad of kleenexes and throws it on the floor of the back seat. It is possible to reconstruct a convoluted sequence of events with the slightest tangible article. The identity of a man is in a single hair. The boy walks toward the lights of the Inn. His parents are ahead of him, almost to the door, walking quickly in step, slowly falling out of step.

They are seated by the kitchen, ordering from a dark-haired, brown-eyed waitress dressed like a Dutch peasant, who the mother follows with her eyes into the kitchen.

"She's cute. We should take her home for Joey." She nods at the boy.

The boy is twisting the dessert card that is fastened to the salt and pepper shaker holder. Cheese cake with strawberry topping is today's special. On the back is the breakfast menu. Eggs are optional with everything. "How much is she?" the boy says.

Everyone smiles and the father starts talking about the last time he's had a tuna salad sandwich. "It's been so long. It was at someone's retirement party and a stack of them in little buns were on a silver tray. It could have been a wedding, though."

When the sandwiches come the mother is talking about Dori's party, a woman she works with. "I still like Jim Pauley, even though he got a hickey. Everyone at Dori's party got a hickey."

"Mmmm," the boy says.

"Dori knows everything about giving hickeys."

"What's to know?" the father says.

"And French kissing."

"Yech," the boy says sympathetically. He unrolls his napkin. The mother talks this way only near him. Only recently has she begun to say the things she is ashamed adults do. She offers them and watches him for his smile. He has been told to be careful by the girlfriend. Truth is sometimes in the dilation of pupils, in perspiration. He picks up his fork, then looks at it closely. It has three long, curved tines.

"This is a strange fork," he says.

Everyone looks at their forks.

The boy watches a bus glimmer outside, leaning forward, slowly pushing by as the family crosses over the Mississippi River on the Burlington Bridge into Illinois. A man in the bus sleeps with his cheek flat on the green tinted window; the woman beside him has her hand in his inside coat pocket. A child peering out drops down and reemerges with another child. On their heads are golden paper crowns. The station wagon is drawing in the bus' exhaust through its vents. The air over the boy smells of loss and spared pain. He throws his arm across his eyes and stares into his elbow. The bus slips away.

The boy has run into an entire parade of self-destructive people. Most cut their wrists. They are all women. He doesn't know about men. He may know some personally, but he hasn't gotten that close to them. He does know that the girlfriend's brother—a painter by whom the boy has seen one painting of a very tall, thin man with a narrowed face, extending his pale, bare arms, holding open his immense, impossible hands—has tried it and she did herself, years ago.

She has no scar, though.

The grandmother is asleep when they arrive. She is slumped in the

corner of an arm chair with an afghan patterned with white cats pulled over her legs. The father wakes her by lowering his face to hers and saying, "Ma?" She jumps and apologizes. "Gosh, I must have dozed off."

"Mom, it's eleven-thirty," the father says.

"My!" she says.

Later, they have brought too many groceries. The grandmother complains as she looks into each bag. "The extras are for you," the mother says.

"I know. But do I have room?"

"This is a very big house, Grandma," the boy says. He is lifting the container of lemonade crystals in a grocery bag to see what is underneath, but the lighting is bad, the floor is upheaved near the pantry, the wallpaper is yellowed, patterned with faded cornucopias.

"But I can't possibly ever eat all this," the grandmother says. She has an ice tray in one hand, a frozen chicken in the other. "It'd kill me to try."

"Well, at least let us give you some money," the mother says.

"No!"

There is a second letter with the boy. It is from the parents of his second lover. She is in a hospital in St. Louis. A hereditary disorder has turned her immune system against certain tissues in her body as if they were the tissues of another driven into her. Her liver is damaged, her kidneys have shut down, poison has thickened her dirty blood. The mistake is in her chromosomes. They are misinformed. They do not know good from bad. She has been a tired woman for years, easing herself wearily into chairs. Now she knows why. Her parents sit beside her next to the clicking machines there for life support. The machines have dozens of dials and toggle switches. Some have interesting, though repetitive, displays. There is a rhythm and pattern to life and these machines lay her open and reinforce a preset design. Sometimes near the end of a long afternoon the parents look bored and just watch the readouts, looking like they could turn a switch to break the monotony. Her sisters and brothers are flying in and extra chairs are being brought from the lounge down the hall. The second oldest brother arrived first. He leaves every so often to smoke a cigarette in the lounge; it is against hospital rules and otherwise dangerous to smoke in the room with so much oxygen going on. He comes back, leans on the wall, peers in the plastic tent with the rest. She looks back across her body hot with the war inside. The second lover's parents say they would like to write something nice, but the last year has been hell.

The boy is full of thoughts and this is one of them: each of us houses a death. It is coiled within us at a fundamental, molecular level. Sometimes it climbs out of us and rides us and we try to shake it off, try to pound it into another. We mistakenly call this the love act.

There are things to be done every time someone visits the grandmother. Saturday morning, the father has the paint rollers out of their wrappers by the time the boy is dressed for work. The boy has brought only good clothes in his suitcase and had to borrow an old shirt and pants of his grandfather's whom he never remembers meeting. He was only a baby being lifted to a face. He has been told the grandfather had a lemon drop for any child that came up to him and shook his hand.

The father has the sprayer; he stands on the top rung of a step ladder and waves it under the underside of the garage's overhanging roof. This is half the reason for coming out for Memorial Day weekend. The boy is brushing the walls with a frayed O-Cedar broom near the ground where rainwater has splattered mud upward into a low, brown ribbon around the garage. The mother and grandmother sit in lawn chairs watching and talking, a pitcher of iced tea between them on the grass. A beige pantsuit sways behind them by the kitchen window on the iron clothesline from the garage to the house. The boy cannot hear the mother over his brushing, but every few minutes the grandmother claps her hands and says, "Crazy!"

The father pours a paint can into a blue plastic tray and lays a paint roller in it. It's a slate-white syrup. "Ever use one of these?" he says. He rolls the roller against the tray, squeezing out the excess. The boy nods, but the father is busy with the brush. Something drifts across the yard. Someone is burning leaves. "Here," the father says holding out the wooden handle of the roller. "Do what you can in the back."

The ground is soft and moss-covered under the trees behind the garage. The step ladder lurches unpredictably in its footing; the boy rises no further than the third rung at a time. The plastic tray is on the ground with flies twitching on the surface of the paint. The boy rolls his roller, squeezing out the excess. He is a third done when the wind changes and smoke pours across the back alley. Weightless flecks of soot rain on the boy's back and pepper the tacky paint of the garage. The boy steps down to the second rung and wipes an irritated eye with a sleeve of his grandfather's shirt. He pulls his arm away in alarm, true pain in his eye. In the haze he sees his sleeve where paint has dripped off the roller and been smeared. The ladder is unsteady; the boy cannot move. In front of his face a white-painted spider drops down on an immaterial, gauzy fiber. It shudders, lowering itself and slowing. The girlfriend is a sensitive girl, one who finds morbidity in the smallest things, in children undressing dolls, in a dog wanting bones. The spider hardens, begins to rock in the wind. The grandmother comes from behind the corner of the garage and waves her hand in her face. "What the hell is going on?" she says. In her other hand is a full glass of iced tea with the word "Virgo" printed around it. She yells across the alley, walking into the smoke, the ice in the glass rattling, "Clara! Stop it! What are you trying to do?" The boy pulls a handkerchief with threads unraveling out of

the front pocket of the grandfather's pants and wipes his eye. He sits on the top of the step ladder covering nose and mouth, inhaling deeply an ancient sweetness.

The boy has the ballerina room. He is under grainy sheets, his head on a lumpy feather pillow, looking at the pink-skinned dancer repeated in different poses throughout the room on the wallpaper. This was a small girl's bedroom; it is not now. The frilled lamps on the marble top dresser have cords going to the socket that hangs from the ceiling; they are switched on by pulling on a brown shoestring that ends with a lead sinker. In the corner of the open closet is a ceremonial sword with cross-shaped pommel and a blade with no edge.

Five days ago the boy gave the keys to his college apartment to his landlady so it could be sublet for the summer. She asked him in and gave him a wine cooler. They watched the people carrying couches out of the building from her kitchen window and talked about her boyfriend Steve. Steve never says her name; he calls her "hon" and "babe." He looks at her but seems to talk to someone not in the room. "Even when I am with him intimately I am all alone," she had said, nervously. She took the boy's hand and held it to her cheek and to one breast. "I want you," she had said, glaring at the hand.

"Yeah, right," the boy had said.

He will not tell the girlfriend. Nothing happened with the landlady. She walked him to her door and said she was sorry. Something had come over her, she said. The boy takes the sword from the closet and begins to feint in his underwear with his shadow on the wallpaper. He feels that either his situation or himself has become irrelevant. Since he met the girlfriend he doesn't know how to act around other women. The power to be unfaithful has been taken away from him. He is not himself. The boy whirls and sweats, cutting swaths in the air with the pitted sword blade while the ballerinas under his shadow wriggle and grind a libidinous fertility dance.

Sunday brunch is at the Maverick House Buffet. In the booth behind the boy a woman is talking with another.

"I'm blind in one eye, you know," she says.

"No, I didn't."

The father sputters in his glass of milk and lays his hand on his breast bone. "I don't know what's in me." He coughs.

The woman behind says, "Yes. One morning I looked up at the calendar and had trouble seeing it. It was all blurry. I closed one of my eyes and couldn't see. 'Oh my god,' I thought, 'I've gone blind!' I went to see the doctor and he said I'd had a small stroke."

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"No. He said once it's happened, it's happened. It's irreversible."

"Oh, me. My husband's blind in one eye, too."

"The left one?"

The mother spills on herself. "I have to go to the bathroom," she says.

"I'll come with you," the grandmother says.

"I'll do the check and we'll wait for you at the car," says the father. He is swishing his tongue in his mouth. He stands up and lays a flap of tomato skin on his plate.

The boy says, "There are floods of grief that transfix some of the living, that overmaster them into believing they were once alive and now are not."

"Crazy," says the father.

On the drive to the cemetery in the afternoon the boy hears what he thinks is a wedding procession coming up behind him, car horns honking, clattering tin cans strung from a bumper. What passes the station wagon is an angry motorist in a chugging clunker car, its muffler dragging, laying down sparks on the country highway. He leans on his horn as he passes and throws his arm out the window, wagging furiously his middle finger.

"The nerve!" the mother says to the grandmother.

The boy looks at his father. "What have we done?"

There is a perplexed quiet in the station wagon. In the back seat the grandmother puts her hand on the mother's knee. She leans forward. The father pushes his lips out and shrugs.

"Oh, look at the flags," the grandmother says. The station wagon is passing through the black iron fence that surrounds the cemetery. Shifting flags line the lane at intervals; behind squat, red brick shed a row of evergreens windbreak the northern edge. From a distance it seemed a fertile, green oasis to the boy, a tiny village in a field. It is a very low hill, a small grassy rise in the middle of a vast expanse of dark earth.

As the mother steps out she says, "It looks like the Cornwells have been here. There's some flowers on Dad's grave."

The father is in the back of the station wagon pulling a small tray of flowering plants out, setting them on the road. "Which ones go where, Mom?"

"Do we have enough?" the grandmother says.

"I think plenty."

"There's a can of peonies in the front seat," says the mother.

The boy stands beside a marker stone as tall as he. He runs his fingers in the groove of his last name cut an inch deep in polished, pink granite. The Cornwells have left flowers in front of this stone, a small, white pot of something, though it marks no grave. They are relatives of the boy, though he doesn't know how. They have the plot fifteen feet down the lane.

“Goodness, look at the tree!” the mother says. Behind the marker stone a shaggy pine dwarfs the plot, its heavy branches drooping, brushing the ground. At its top is the highest point in the cemetery, the highest point for miles.

“We shouldn’t have planted it if it was going to do this,” says the grandmother. “We can hardly get in.”

“Joey, go in and get the babies,” the mother says. She walks up to the boy and gives him two little jars of water with a long peony propped in each.

On his knees the boy palms the two jars in one hand and lifts a thick branch. Needles break off and fall down the collar of his shirt. He ducks under, sap sticking his arm, and kneels in the depression near the trunk. It is dark, warm and silent. In the ground are two white stones like half-buried salt licks. Elenore Kesler, 1899 to 1901. Merideth Kesler, 1900 to 1901. The boy sets a jar and a peony on each. The headstones are made of white sandstone; the boy rubs his fingers across “Elenore” and catches a few fine grains. If he sits here long enough touching the stone there will be no more name. While lying next to the girlfriend she would draw her finger from the boy’s shoulder, down along his chest. “I like you here,” she would say. She would rub the pad of her finger up and down that muscle.

When the boy crawls from under the tree the grandmother is talking. “This area used to be the world’s center for growing pumpkins. Everywhere, vines on the ground, for miles and miles. My brothers worked in the fields out here in the Twenties. That was until the cannery moved,” she says.

“What is all this now?” says the mother. In the fields are rows of green stubs not an inch high.

“Beans. Corn. I don’t know.”

“Joey,” says the father. “It’s time we got going.” His arms are on the roof of the station wagon.

The boy ambles to the car. This weekend seems to be going on and on. The mother comes to him and says, “Dump this out, would you?” She is pointing at the empty tray of plants with bits of soil in the bottom. “We don’t want to have bugs in the car.”

The boy walks to the bottom of the hill to the evergreen windbreak and slaps the tray on the side of a trunk. Beyond the trees are spindly towers with slack power lines running to other towers every few hundred yards. The land is so flat. The boy could lay his head on the ground, look out straight across to the end of the world. The power lines cross the corner of the cemetery and extend suspended to the horizons, north to Chicago, south to Springfield. The girlfriend has said that on last New Year’s Eve she had been at a wide, expansive lake near Duluth, Minnesota with some friends when a small girl ran up yelling. “There’s a snowmobile on the lake that’s crashed on the ice!” she told them. Her mouth was a wet hole for steam to come out of. One of the friends ran inside the house to call the police. The rest followed the girl out in the snow onto the lake, the

lights from the house lost on the drifts behind. They had flashlights like lengths of pipe. The girl had small dog faces on the earmuffs she wore. Beads of snow rustled across the ice; everywhere under the hard, black sky was the sound of seething. They reached the man after an incredible distance. The small girl sat down a few feet away, facing away, and pressed her mittened hands on her cheeks. The man had seemingly isolated himself to die alone. He was quite nearly decapitated. The girlfriend looks back, kneels down, touches the snowmobiler's forehead every time she tells the story, says the phrase, "He was quite nearly decapitated." Someone went to examine the snowmobile curled in a drift of snow like a sleeping child. High and silent behind the snowmobiler was a stiff crystal limb of ice. One of them stood for a while patting it with his glove. Lake water expands as it freezes. Sometimes a lake can be seen noticeably bowing upwards. The pressure had snapped there and thrown a slab in the cold air. Standing, watching the broken man freeze, she could feel beneath her the pressure of the lake. She sat down in front of the girl. "How did you find this? Were you a part of this?" The girl looked down, scratching her fingers through her mittens in the crust of snow. The girlfriend slid her arms around the girl and rested her chin on her shoulder. Through the girl's hair she could see the starless sky laid over them. "We're insects," she said to the girl. "No, flat—blots of blood between slides of enormous glass."

The boy leans behind the trees on the iron fence, on the bar, his hands between the sharp black spires. In her letter the girlfriend wanted to continue, no matter what the distance. What does this woman want in him? Should it be given? The boy is unsure. It is not a matter of practicality; he is able to drive to see her; he can, with preparation, move from Iowa to Minnesota and be with her. This can be handled. There are other things.

The horn of the station wagon blares twice briefly. "We're leaving now, Joey," the father calls.

He would have to fill himself with the absence in her, the shape hanging empty in her that moves through his life like something swallowed. Balled, furred, dropping deeper inside him. A slow steady wind blows from the north across the flat earth. The girlfriend is a little west of north. Miles of air pile up blue to a cool, paradisiacal place at the horizon. He shifts his feet and points them accordingly. Here, like the girlfriend's lake, there is a force bowing the landscape. Caskets displace the soil, strain it upward. The boy feels the dead pressing against his back.

"Joey!" the mother says.

The boy turns away from the fence, picks up the tray, and climbs the hill. He threads the square stones to the road where the father stands drumming his fingers on the fender of the station wagon and the mother is opening the door of the back seat for the grandmother. The boy takes the grandmother's arm and steadies her with a hand against her bony hip. She looks up from the ground,

into his face. She searches his face.  
“You’re not Joey,” she says.  
Everyone looks at the boy.

-Frank J. Nixon