

Seventeen Fences

I.

If you have an old map, you might still find Farland, North Dakota: the sod post office writhing with moles; the Wagon Wheel Inn, glass shot out of each pane, open front doorway choked by a knot of tumbleweeds. And if you care to stop and untangle the years, you'll find the last great boom when the price of wheat was up, cattle prices up, even water in the rain gauge up.

When farmers finally quit or die, no one's waiting to move in. Homesteads are half standing, faded and peeled, thrashed by rain, hail and decay. Six months a year snow blows through empty windows.

Come winter, one of the nine surviving families will lose to the bank or a corporate farm. The rest hang on, plugging holes in windows where wind leaks in; singing hymns in church on the Sundays their minister can make the trip from Dickinson, and numbing themselves at the Long X—the bar owner, like the farmers, losing more each year.

Sometime this winter an abandoned house in town will buckle, lurch to the side, and lean closer to the ground.

II.

The only child of homesteaders, I was born near the rim of the Badlands. In a cabin north of town, darkened by clouds of locusts mowing wheat fields to dirt, eating the straw from our broom. Soil dry as gunpowder, I still see cracks spider-webbing across the yard between our house and barn, where the snowy owl nested in the loft.

III.

The first notes at the end of the drought needled our faces with ice as we fled to the house. Snow that followed erased horizons, and a cloud

swallowed grain bins across the yard. For three days storm shutters knocked against windows, opaque with frost. Most of our cattle huddled in the barn. The dead—the ones not torn to scraps and dragged into coyote dens—lie scattered across the pasture early next spring.

In a sandstone coulee that summer, I found the last body, nearly stumbled over the steer's skeleton, a family of rattlers nesting in the ribcage.

IV.

I was twelve when my mother got sick. And I knelt by her bed. One night her eyes dulled as dusk pulled the light from that room. The sun sank, purpled the western sky, and sometime before dawn I dreamt a swarm of red-winged blackbirds rose from the fields. Eclipsed the stars and the moon.

V.

That battered truck was packed with a mattress in the back the day I left, sunlight knocking on the windshield. Each morning moving north the road stretched out and laughed, miles unraveling stitch by stitch, no place wide enough to turn around.

Then nightfall. Sleeping with old lovers who turned to blankets at sunrise.

VI.

I'd left because nothing's heavier than dirt and cattle. Except memory. The old man never forgave me.

VII.

Stranded on a mountain, hundreds of miles away, a dwindling supply of food in a storm that took orders from the devil and might blow forever.

One morning I woke and didn't hear sleet. One morning the sun was out, and I thought I'd gone mad. If I was among the Ancients, I know

what I'd build altars to. And I know if I had time between hunts and a hard chunk of coal what I'd draw on rocky cave walls.

VIII.

Three miles across the frozen lake, and I realize halfway I forgot the old-timer's warning: *At twenty below you still remember the good times, but at fifty even God has fled.* I feel it today—the shortening of step when joints freeze and blood thickens, how this cold seeps in, lulling me toward muffled dreams of endless birch stacks. All I want is to lie down and close my eyes when coming around the cove, through the fog of dimming sight, I spot my neighbors' cabin and, curling toward the sky like long, twisted fingers, the smoke of their fire.

IX.

Not many shots before your mind rides its whiskey through canyons and over mountains you'll never see again, flows back through miles and years to that Dakota bar where you met her. How many blacked-out nights did you drive those gravel roads home, wrestling the wheel and finding ditches more easily than the road? Same reason you sit here now, in the Yukon Bar.

A few more and maybe tonight you'll be able to sleep, enough whiskey to silence any echoes from deserted canyons.

X.

She used to waitress at the Chuckwagon. Coffee breaks she'd write me poetry on the back of used guest checks, her love for me under a smudge of ketchup, on the other side of someone's eggs-over-easy, side of bacon and toast.

XI.

Up here summer swings open on hinges and a bear steps out, dazed, rubbing winter eyes when a cloud of sparrows swims overhead, sucked up into the sun. Everywhere buds burst from branches and sprouts overtake

retreating snow. It's a continual day in which everything must happen before the swing back to darkness and moonlight, when the bear stumbles home drunk on blueberries and snow geese glide south.

The last thing summer will see through its faded window is the shadow of a moose beneath a ribbon of green light.

XII.

Years passed.

I was in town for the mail when I found the letter from my uncle. The funeral was in a week.

XIII.

Between Alaska and Dakota there are only seventeen fences, four hundred and sixty mountain peaks rising from tundra, dozens of salmon-choked streams. There are sixty-eight towns, three hundred frozen lakes, two hundred and twenty-one memories—a runaway mother, a father's fist. You pass a younger, stronger man heading north. Fields of snowdrift and rock, graveyards, churches, a broken windmill rattling in a rusted sunset.

Finally you come to a farm: halfway up, the driveway splits a windbreak whose dead trees and bare branches do anything but stop wind, and rises to the yard where the combine, arthritic, leans on flat tires, broken axle, joints and moving parts crawling with rust. The tractor, tied to the earth by a tangle of weeds, one cracked headlight staring wall-eyed to the east. And the barn—missing planks, rotted foundation—leans on wind without falling.

XIV.

Near the middle of the graveyard, a small metal marker with my father's name sticks in the sod. A teenager could pull it out barehanded on a bet. It's surrounded by granite headstones of bankers who foreclosed on him, oil-rich farmers who took half our land: Fleck, Skaar, Bredwick, Olson.

Their stones throw shadows on my feet.

XV.

The girl from the Chuckwagon is a woman now. Married and divorced before me, she tends our garden each morning, cans the best fruit for grandchildren.

As my tractor makes furrows, hawks circle overhead, waiting for me to scare out a field mouse or a jackrabbit.

XVI.

Rocks have a way of rising to the surface. All my life stones were hefted, lugged to piles and dropped. Field after field, Dad and I lifted stones. Each year, after working the earth, more appeared.

My father fell in the north field—hands dirty, heart tight. I'll move granite for the rest of my days and die, maybe the same way, a thousand stones beneath me, creeping toward the surface.

XVII.

The Farland Lutheran Church stands eight miles down a dirt path. It's been twelve years since the final sermon when the last family lost their land and the preacher moved west. One day a truckload of teenagers sped by in a cloud of red dust, the buckshot of their twelve gauges darkening the sockets of two front windows, which swallows found their way through.

As I walk in, light stabs holes in a roof that once kept hail and wind out, held hopes of rain and climbing cattle prices. A bible splayed in the corner and pews could be used again if someone cleared the rubble. I walk over to look at the pulpit, and when I tap it with my boot a half-dozen prayers startle up from behind and flap into the light.