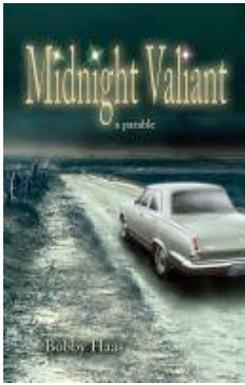


Midnight Valiant

a parable



Bobby Haas



Midnight Valiant begins as a humorous coming-of-age adventure, and ultimately transforms into a profoundly sad saga of human longing for the Divine when Catholic patriarchy crashes into a Goddess culture on the Great Plains of Western Kansas. A college road trip in a 1965 Plymouth Valiant brings four friends home to a heartland wheat farm. Searching for fathers and redemption bequeaths the sins of one generation onto the next. Penance is harsh, tragedy inevitable.

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The midnight adventure in the 1965 Plymouth Valiant started normally enough. The four of us were in Dante's Bar, marking the end of Spring Semester. I had no way of knowing it would be the last normal day of my life...

...when the smell of Jack Daniel's woke me it took me awhile to be amazed that the three of them were still at it, drinking like demons and driving the Valiant in the darkness...

Nattie wasn't sleeping but she was quiet, listening to Adams and Daniel O'Neill going back and forth, talking mostly nonsense in that way they had of assigning a great deal of importance to frivolous or silly discourse.

I tried hard not to listen, not to think, not to wonder. A deformed piece of time and space had just spilled out across the prairie, escaping from a dark little midnight crevice. It swallowed us up and nothing was the same. Something skewed; something else twisted. A macabre tilt in the darkness out in the middle of our midnight nowhere.

I float in the Valiant like a madman

Midnight Valiant

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MidnightValiant.com

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Thanks to Dz, Coly, and O'Rourke
for generous
assistance with gestation, and

Thanks to Harry for seeing it, and seeing it through, and

Thanks to the Professor, who rapped
commas with a red pen like
knuckles with a ruler, and

Thanks to vV, who cried
when first she read it, and

Profound thanks to my daughters,
who both understood it
with shockingly keen insight

This Book is Dedicated to

Sarah Bug
and
Ali Kat

the Sweetness of my Heart

Midnight Valiant

Book One

Life's but a sweeping moment, a stone stairway
That reaches up and out toward the stars
And then explodes in fire: it is a tale
Told by a madman, full of dust and chaos,
Signifying God.

From *The Plagiarist*
- by John Gophe

Introitus (Requiem Aeternam)

My Passion is the sound of prairie cicadas. My Crown of Thorns is the memory of Becky Dreiling's farm. My resurrection is my penance – sweeping sacred dust into careful piles of daily devotion. But no more.

It is finished.

I celebrate Calvary and sing Gethsemane. I work the beads to no avail: all redemptive swirls of Confessional incense now stain instead of cleanse my soul.

Nevertheless, I refuse to renounce the Sacraments.

Likewise, Christ did not escape. But what if he had? What if he had lived on in Lazarus? What if he had transformed his body, and transferred his soul, and lived long on the soil that was forbidden to him? What then?

Cicadas buzz incessantly, loud and long in the hot Kansas summer. They buzz high up in the few trees providing little shade against blistering sun and ceaseless wind. Cicadas are crunchy bugs the size of your thumb and they buzz and they buzz and they buzz. When the prairie afternoons turn hot and still, it begins: they buzz and they buzz. In the small towns of north-central Kansas, towns on the High Plains where farmers harvest sunflowers and winter wheat, cicadas buzz and the children of immigrants do not call them by their correct name. No one calls them cicadas. Everyone calls them by their true name: "Goddam Locusts."

They buzz and they buzz, ceaseless like the hot wind, and their name is always the same. It doesn't matter what you call them, it doesn't matter how their name is said, they just buzz and they buzz and they buzz. Goddam Locusts.

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And so it is with me. My stomach buzzes and buzzes because no one will correctly say my name. I sit a silent vigil, waiting with reverence for the end of my stomach buzz: no more subdued or stammered murmurs of correction; no more repeated mumble: “Rhymes with Off, not with Oaf.”

It doesn’t matter what my name rhymes with. It doesn’t matter anymore how it is said, or by whom. Rhymes with cauldron. Rhymes with stove. Rhymes with Eucharist or Sinclair. Doesn’t matter. Until I grasp this, I will continue tumbling down into the choking chaos. It is the precise moment when the buzzing Kansas locusts bless me with Extreme Unction that I notice the tiniest crumbling of dust.

That’s how it was at Becky Dreiling’s farm, when the stones and mortar of the *stairway to the stars* came crashing down and filled the barn with choking dust: that first Catacomb crumble was small and subtle. A slight shift, a speck, a tiny tremor and then settled and still and, if you weren’t paying attention, you might have thought that was all. Like an aftershock when it’s all over, a herald of the end.

Would that it had been so.

In any event, clearly, that early crumble of dust was when it began.

It’s this curiosity about the chronology which adds to the difficulty of knowing the story. The story itself is confused about time. My story is confused about time and so my name, in a strange sort of way, is confused, is lost about time. As if only through immigration and migration and movement are we connected to the fabric of time.

Your grandfather’s name when he arrived on these shores doesn’t always stay your name. Your grandfather’s name is no longer your name because somewhere along the line it wasn’t protected. A careless immigration clerk. An overworked second

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grade teacher. Somebody takes it because you neglected to protect it. You didn't defend it.

I remember my Grandfather saying our name, long ago when I was little. The way he said it sounded like a British person saying laugh. "Lough." But then they would just say "Loaf" so that doesn't matter too.

It's just a name, after all. Just my name. It's okay, whatever they want to call me.

It's not as if it's a name like Dreiling; a name filled with the hope of the Trinity and the terror of the Triple Goddess. Mother and Maiden, Holy Ghost, Father, Son and Crone. Two great movements and forces hurtling toward each other, crashing into conflict.

I don't care all that much for conflict, if you really want to know. I'd rather just get along, whenever that's possible.

Instead of making a scene and taking a stand, I'd clasp and shake the hand of any man. I'd shake the hand of Adolph Hitler if he offered it.

That's a shameful plagiarism, and one bastardized to boot.

But of course I've never been above stealing and molding and creating into my own. Throw whatever's handy into the pot, give it a good name and bask in the glow of my newest stew. A pathetic lack of original substance and a pitiful clinging to meaningless form.

I was that way before I went to Becky Dreiling's farm. I am that way still, so clearly it's difficult to remember where I am and if I really ever left the farm at all.

Perhaps I never did. The voice of the farm is with me always, chattering like the incessant winds blowing ceaselessly across the Great Plains prairie. A voice filling my ears constantly, whispering sometimes, screaming always "no escape, no escape."

The wind from the prairie can comfort even as it terrorizes; it can excite even as it blows, constant and mundane and always. The prairie wind has the same voice every day and every year and

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forever – hot and sticky in summer, frigid and piercing in winter. But always the same voice; the voice of the prairie, expansive and forever. I've left that voice because I've left the prairie. But the voice of the farm is different. The wind from Becky Dreiling's farm fills my ears and snares my soul and haunts me always.

It never leaves me.

I might have thought once that wind is wind and nothing in the one is different than the other. I now know the difference is as real as that between sandpaper and soft skin, or true friends and empty nights. Or between the sound of your car and the sound of any old car. If you pay attention the differences are breathtaking.

Like you can hear the difference in the engine of some old dusty and distant four-door sedan. You know the many sounds the engine makes, so you know when its sounds are different. The sound of a comfortable engine doggedly driving you forever across the prairie, taking you far away and turning you into a speck on the horizon; the sound it makes when you get there and the sound it makes when you turn it off.

Pick any old car, and if you've grown up with it, or it's grown old with you, you can hear the difference. Differences of laughter in the back seat, or sounds of cussing and drinking, rollicking back from the front seat. The sounds that make the engine unique so you know the car when you hear it coming, or when it's taking you away.

Doesn't matter what kind of car, as long as it's old, and reliable, and holds some part of your life. A baby-blue Rambler parked down the street when you were a kid; a drab olive green Dodge Dart your uncle drove.

Even a faded tan 1965 Plymouth Valiant.

The wind from the farm was like that, blowing always, sometimes filling your ears with only one voice, and other times you could hear distinctly the several voices blending into the one. Sometimes just the farm voice, sometimes the voices of those left behind, calling me always. Clawing and grabbing at me to stay

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behind still. I cover my ears and try to block them out. Clumsy, I tip the crystal tumbler and spill most of the ice. And the wind is relentless, and it blows in my head always.

The wind voices of Becky Dreiling and Nattie Sinclair, so soft and pretty and smiling, both of them. Women I loved who never loved me; women I would have touched with thousands of caresses but never did; women into where you fell deep and never got out; women mysterious and dangerous and fine.

Lance O'Neill not calling but in the wind all the same and at the farm even still. Not a father not an uncle not a husband not a friend. Lance O'Neill not calling but cussing and winking and watching me always.

The voices of Nattie Sinclair and Adams raging also in the wind. Their single voice beautiful and clean before the farm, when they were first falling in love; their terrifying voice afterwards.

Daniel O'Neill's voice perhaps the loudest – I can feel his soul clutching its way out of the wind. I can see him as I cover my ears and scream over the wind. I see his eyes. I see his face; I admire its strength and love its softness. I can see that scruff, neither whiskers nor beard. The jeans and work boots. Jet-black long hair. A face Celtic, chiseled, and clean.

I drink now because I can't stop the farm wind. I drink now in a desperate hope of hearing again the prairie wind, if only for a moment of reprieve, a moment of release, a moment to take me away. I drink now because I didn't drink then.

"Dag!"

The little whiskey left in the bottom of the glass has eaten the last of the ice. The cool dilution tastes like a tease.

And so forget you, Daniel O'Neill, forget you all and forget the fresh ice. I pour the glass full brown gold and empty it.

I know that was one of the better than fine rules and I just broke it.

"Lots of ice, a little Jack, and pour it often."

Platitudes now plagiarized.

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I haven't yet drunk enough Jack Daniel's to bring whiskey tears. Jack Daniel's was Daniel O'Neill's whiskey. He brought it to us in college; he brought it with him from Kansas. He drank it in defiance of the Frat Boys' gin and the Jocks' scotch. He drank Jack Daniel's whiskey because it was his. He drank it because no one else did. I couldn't drink it with him when I knew him, but I drink it without him now.

Daniel O'Neill's life was one long tack strip of talismans: Jack Daniel's whiskey and 1965 Plymouth Valiants, midnight drives and burning alone.

I know that when morning brings a clear head and shines its light through the monsters of this bottle, I know I'll remember Becky Dreiling's farm is dead. I know that, while holding my hangover and sucking sodas for dry mouth, I might spend tomorrow's Sunday in the Valiant of my mind, slamming the doors and driving toward its tomb, plowed up and buried six feet beneath the hot dusty nowhere.

Driving with all four windows rolled down, hot dry air thundering around the car battering steadily through the infinite grassland Prairie. Driving long and distant with the sound of laughter in the engine, the sound of silly in the adventure. Driving all afternoon through burning white sun away from middle of nowhere exploding orange sunsets. And then nightfall. Darkness. Driving and celebrating the exhilaration and the terror as he turns off the headlights in the new-moon darkness. Everything else in the universe disappears except for the screaming wind and the utter blackness. Desperate, mindless. Driving the Valiant in the midnight darkness.

But tonight, a ridiculous dribble of Jack Daniel's staining my shirt, I remember a kitchen sink stained with old coffee and a kitchen floor stained with caked yellow mud from a farm long ago. Tonight I cannot stop the wind. I cannot silence the cry.

I have attempted, over the years, to plug that plea with everything imaginable, anything possible. I sand wood and sweep sawdust. I eat and drink.

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I watch the outside through my window. I never laugh and seldom speak.

I sleep (perchance to dream.

That does not count as a plagiarism, as I do not take it for my own. I have no use for that dithering little whine and murderous self-indulgence. Do it or don't do it, decide and move on).

*“A man who doesn’t pee in his own backyard
Has no idea where in the hell he lives.”*

- Lance O’Neill

Chapter 1

The honky tonk outside of Dodge City erupted in hoots and hollers as the local band hit the first notes of Hank Williams’ *Jambalaya*. A few real cowboys and a lot of gussied-up Saturday-nighters grabbed their gals unprodded and headed to the oak parquet dance floor.

“Goodbye Joe,” Lance O’Neill mouthed along. He sat alone at a small table off in a dark corner, slouched against the busted terminal of a video poker machine. “Me gotta go.”

Christ almighty, his leg hurt. Like a son of a bitch. Both he and this dive reeked of cigarettes and beer, and his goddamn leg hurt. He closed his eyes and used the technique to fight off images of the jungle and so to calm the pain. He inhaled slowly through the fire and exploding terror and he exhaled slowly to silence the screams. Slowly in, slowly out. Blue in, red out. Flowers in, fire out. Think Van Morrison: You breathe in you breathe out, you breathe in you breathe out. Becky in, Danny out.

“Shit,” he said aloud, and he began again with the technique. Danny was the reason for the technique. He couldn’t be part of the technique.

Danny’s face, framed in fire, glowed like the face of a scream.

And his goddamn leg throbbed. Focus. Again. Breathe. Budweiser in, dysentery out. Long, aimless driving the pickup in, long, aimless slogging through jungle out. Musk perfume in, blood and gunpowder out. Laughter in, terror...

“Another beer, Hon?” Her hand touched his and then both wrapped around the top of the glass longneck. Lance opened his

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eyes and followed her arm up to her smile. He held onto the bottle for just a moment, just long enough to get the rush. The rush of the waitress smile. You could feel like shit, or feel invisible, or feel nothing at all except the throb and scream of your goddamn missing leg but the rare, right kind of waitress smile gave you that last gasp of maybe just one more day. Not the common “need a beer hope you tip well” smile, but the “you look like shit and I’m just a waitress” smile. The smile that softened the edge, lit the blackness and cooled the rage.

“Thanks, Doll,” Lance O’Neill said. “Dig me up a cold one.”

She winked like a sister and patted his hand, took the bottle and then turned and moved across the edge of the dance floor toward the bar. Lance watched her go and he imagined her life – a couple of kids, junior high age, probably, whom her mom watches when she works a couple of shifts slinging drinks for vacation money; a string of infrequent and mostly lousy boyfriends, one guy she fell for hard and still thinks about; a class every now and then at the community college; a Chiefs or Royals T-shirt she sleeps in because she usually sleeps alone. Those rare nights she slips on her champagne pink silk sheer are the nights when she gives much more than she gets with men who don’t understand her and don’t care enough to try. She knows she deserves more and one day she’ll make it happen. One day her real life will begin.

She returned to his table with only one beer on her tray and a warmer smile and fresh gloss on her lips.

“That’s one-seventy-five, Hon,” she said. “Sorry, but it’s after nine; price goes up when the band comes on.”

“That’s all right.”

“Lots of people get mad. Guys, mostly. Tips go down first hour or so after the band comes on.”

“You got to make a living, same as the band.”

“Years ago, I dated the bass player. We went to high school. He used to be nicer. A lot nicer. Sweeter, even. Now he thinks he should be in Nashville.”

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“Guess nearly everybody thinks they should be somewhere else.” Lance nudged the stack of bills across the small round table toward the waitress.

She smiled again, nervous. Her finger drew a slow circle in the water sweating off his bottle of beer. Finally she asked, “Do you ever braid your hair? It’s beautiful. I bet Charlene, the bartender, that you’re Indian, or at least part. Half at least.”

“What did Charlene think?”

“Nothing, just not Indian.”

“How much the bet?”

“Not very much. In fun, mostly.”

“Good. I’m not.”

“Indian?”

“Not even half. Not even a little. Irish, all the way through.”

“No. Really? With your dark hair? Irish have red hair.”

“Not the black Irish. Not me.”

“Wow. I thought sure Indian. On account of your hair, and the jewelry. The earrings and, uh, well, I guess it’s not called a necklace for a man, but you know. Most men around here don’t have earrings, or much jewelry at all except belt buckles and goddamn wedding rings.”

“Well,” Lance said, reaching for the bottle of beer, “mostly I’m from somewhere else.”

“Sometimes I wish I was. Some day I will be.”

Not tonight, though, Lance thought, and then he thought a moment about her champagne pink silk nightgown. “Not tonight,” he said aloud.

“Yeah, not tonight. I gotta go.”

“Thanks for the beer. Don’t forget me sitting back here.”

“I won’t,” the woman smiled again.

Lance figured not.

And then, even though it violated every part of the technique, Lance O’Neill reached into the inside breast pocket of his beat-up khaki army jacket and pulled out a stuffed, crumpled envelope. He wiped the table in front of him clean with his sleeve and then he polished it with a napkin. He set the envelope down. He reached

into the outer pocket on the same breast side and pulled out a soft leather pouch holding his fixings. He peeled off a rolling paper and sprinkled an even layer of long-cut tobacco into the crease. He massaged the tobacco inside the paper until both edges of paper were clean against each other and then he quickly turned the front edge over and into the back. He licked the gummed edge and ran his finger over the seam and then pinched off both ends of loose tobacco with his fingernails. He tamped the cigarette several times against his thumbnail. He looked at his brother's Zippo for a long time before popping the lid and striking the wheel. He touched the blue flame to the end of the cigarette and felt the calm of the nicotine, and then he listened to and let echo the metallic sound of the lighter – its lid snapping closed with clarity and finality.

Lance smoked for awhile and then put the cigarette down in the amber glass ashtray and picked up and opened the envelope. He removed the bundle of worn papers – torn scraps and folded notebook leaves, a bar napkin or two all crumpled and faded, some stained, and he began to look at them, one at a time. And then he breathed in and breathed out and breathed in and breathed out, and he let the memories and the laughter come back.

Danny, Becky, Lance. Danny, Becky, Lance. Every paper, every scrap, Danny, Becky, Lance underlined across the top. Danny, Becky, Lance always with the circled bid first, and then the meld, and then the points in the tricks, and then the totals. Three running columns, a yin-yang next to the score when Danny won, a pentagram for Becky's victories and a peace symbol scrawled next to each number if Lance won. A smiley face but with a frown instead when you went set. Danny always keeping score, Becky always dealing the three-handed way like her dad and uncles did, and Lance breathing it all in and breathing it all out.

Lance picked up and re-lit his cigarette. "Goddamn," he said and then, in one long swallow, he drained the beer from the bottle. He removed the broken-down deck of pinochle cards from the envelope and slipped them methodically from hand to hand feeling the edges on his fingertips and listening to the laughter fluttering through them.

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“Goddamn,” he said again.

The waitress returned, this time balancing a tray filled with drinks, mostly cocktails but some beer also, and she set a bottle on the table in front of him.

“This one’s on me.”

Lance regarded her a moment. “Ever wonder why one-legged men don’t play three-handed pinochle?” He knew he was getting intoxicated. He kept his gaze fixed on her. The waitress glanced nervously down to the legs of his bar stool.

“Does it hurt?” she finally asked.

“Which part?”

“I gotta deliver these,” she said. She looked down again, and then she left.

“Leg hurts sometimes,” Lance said after her. “Pinochle hurts always.”

Lance carefully repacked the envelope and worked on the fresh bottle of beer. He sat through the night and drank several more, and then he said “goddamn” and got up and clumped heavily across the edge of the dance floor and limped out the front door of the bar.

Lance usually parked the pickup facing east so the morning sun would hit and wake him early. It did. Somehow his leg got wrapped around the gearshift lever sticking up from the floorboard, and the wooden peg got wedged awkwardly and painfully between the seat back and the rear window. Lance mumbled “shit” and rubbed his jaw, feeling the stubble as if checking a calendar. Suddenly he clutched in agony as a muscle spasm gripped the back of his leg, in the thigh above the wood. He rubbed the hardened muscle and worked to visualize it as smooth and flowing and fine rather than as the quivering mass of grotesque that caused his fingers to flinch. He worked slowly, trying to relax the muscle, trying to stretch it, trying to visualize its release, imagining it attached to ligament and bone instead of ending in a gnarled stump of nothing and carved wood.

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He slowly untangled himself and then he fumbled for the door handle and spilled outside to pee in the early morning cold. Sure as hell he was parked out in the middle of Kansas nowhere. First he remembered the waitress and the honky tonk, and then he remembered he didn't go home with her. Somehow he found his way out of Dodge City and had driven himself back out into the country. Back to the middle of nowhere, back to the land of yellow stone fence posts encircling yellow stone churches with steeples made of the yellow limestone rising from endless expanses of yellow dirt. He thought of home. The only things in Monterey yellow like this yellow were the yellow oxalis that bloomed in spring along the beach rocks amid the succulent cacti.

He thought of waking up along the wharfs of the bay on similar autumn mornings, lounging among the rocks and concrete pylons beneath the deserted canneries. Or perhaps up top on the last rough timber wharf. Once the sun hit the gulls their chatter drowned out the water swelling and sloshing against the rocks; sea lions barking and hollering out by the buoys; the flap of pigeon wings. Mornings as noisy and alive and full of promise as this morning was still and faceless and lost.

Just as the endless empty expanse of Kansas dust prairie was once a magnificent inland sea, transformed over eons into desolation, the deserted canneries were transforming back into hustles of commerce aimed now at tourists instead of sardines. He left just as the renovation began. He left hoping the over-harvesting of retirees would lead also to their disappearance, just like the sardines. Years before, when he and Danny left for Berkeley, he dreamed of coming home triumphant and watching the giant purse seines once more unload tons of slippery silver sardines. As if the return of the Brothers O'Neill could refill the oceans with fish like so many screaming fans on a football Friday night. The Brothers O'Neill – State Finals. The Brothers O'Neill – Fishers of Men. The two of them, together, winking and laughing, striding tall through it all like true Princes of Ireland.

Lance had waited a year after high school, working at the wharves and at a fisherman's bar, until his brother's graduation.

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Sure he could get a year under his belt and scope the place out, but what the hell. Why break up the brothers in their prime?

"You can look after each other that way." Both believed their mother was touched by the angels.

Their father saw it differently. "He needs to get his goddamn ass out of the house and into college. Danny'll be fine for a year without him. No damn reason to hang around here, bumming at the wharfs, begging those S.S. Nazis to come pick him up."

"Selective Service aren't Nazis, Pop."

"Anyone who sends boys to die in the jungle for politics is a Nazi."

"Geo politics, Pop. It's about stopping the Chinese there, now, rather than at the Bay Bridge tomorrow."

"Bullshit. It's about somebody else's war. We've got no business there. No business sending 200,000 of our boys off to die in a goddamn jungle."

"Some things are worth fighting for, Pop. Patriotism, for one thing."

"Screaming in the jungle when your face is blown off is not patriotism. Is that worth dying for?"

"Freedom's worth dying for," Lance said. "You ought to love this country more, Pop. It's been pretty good to us."

"I love this country just fine." His father's eyes blazed, then softened as they shifted toward Danny. "It took us in, gave us an American-born son. America isn't the government," he told Lance. "You should have paid better attention in school. America is us."

"Well, it doesn't matter, Pop. We're not talking America, here." He laughed and nodded toward his brother. "We're talking the American Boy."

Lance enjoyed knowing he could steer his father's attention by driving his father's favorite subject.

"We're talking your ass in college where it belongs and your grades up so's to keep your goddamn deferment. That's what we're talking about."

Danny gave Lance the look even before Lance formed the thought. Don't say it, Danny's eyes insisted, almost demanded,

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almost mean. Don't say a thing. Lance smiled at his brother, pretending to reassure.

"Sure to say, Danny Boy will no doubt be fine; boy's a marvel, boy's a wonder." Lance winked at his brother. Danny shook his head – what's the point?

"Thing is, Pop, you might need help around here, stashing all the boy's football trophies, record books and cheerleader panties. Promises to be a senior year for the ages."

"Won't happen without you throwing' it up," Danny chimed in. "You've got the cannon and you've got the touch, Big Brother. Kilpatrick's got shit for an arm, and he's easy to blitz, because he's got rocks for feet. We'll be a running team, Smitty will be the hero with the huge numbers, and I'll spend the season throwing downfield blocks. My numbers will fall, you wait and see. Kilpatrick's not anywhere near the quarterback Lance is. Nobody is, Pop."

"Kilpatrick's fine. He's only a junior, for chrissakes. Give him a year, he'll be fine."

"Boy here doesn't have a year, Pop. Boy needs his numbers now. This is his shot."

"Goddamn," their father said.

"I won't ever get the stats without Number 9 here putting it up," Danny said. "Nobody throws like the Brother O'Neill. Sure as hell not Kilpatrick. You know that, Pop. Shoulda heard what Richter said about Lance, end of season meeting."

"Coach Richter's a damn fine man. A damn fine coach."

"Lance O'Neill is a damn fine quarterback," Danny said, feeling fine about pushing his father.

"Lance was a good ballplayer, no question. Showed up for every game."

"Gee, thanks Pop," Lance said. "Means a ton."

"Goddamn interception in the championship."

"That's bullshit, Dad." Danny's eyes blazed. "Lance holds half the records for the whole goddamn high school. Yards in a season. Yards in a game. Touchdowns in a game. Yards rushing in a single

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game, for chrissakes. Three hundred eighty-three yards for a quarterback? Jesus, Pop.”

“Who caught all of those touchdowns? You caught four of the five.” The old man’s eyes softened a little, just for a moment. “The Brothers O’Neill,” he said, smiling at them both. “They’ll talk about that game for years.”

“In most houses, Pop,” Lance said. “In most houses they probably will.”

“They’ll talk about Lance O’Neill in any house that knows anything at all about football,” Danny said.

“They’ll talk about the Brothers O’Neill,” their father said. “And don’t forget,” he said, nodding to his younger son, “you’ve still got an entire year coming up.”

“Kilpatrick’s got shit for an arm, Pop,” Danny said.

“Jesus H,” Lance said. “I’m going out for some air.”

So without welcome or why, Lance stayed the extra year, watching the numbers and waiting for Danny. Sometimes at the house but mostly not, Lance waited for his brother to set the records, warm the old man’s heart and get the hell out.

They drove to Berkeley in April for the demonstrations, but since they still lived at home Danny said leaving San Francisco and driving back to Monterey made him feel like a dilettante, like a poser. Lance had to twist some serious arm to get his brother to leave the campus and go back home.

“Graduating high school is bullshit, it’s manipulative, it’s about nothing more than making us all good little rule-following citizens, making sure we all conform, making sure we all get our foreheads stamped and become obedient little cogs in the military fucking industrial complex. It won’t change until we stand up to it,” Danny’s eyes sang with the lilt of his passion. Lance listened with some mix of pride and incredulity. “I’m going to stand up to it,” Danny said. “I’m going to make a stand, right here, right now. I’m not going home, and I’m not going to graduate.”

Lance laughed, feeling for just a moment like a father watching a child slip and fall in the waves. “You sure as hell are not staying here, and you sure as hell are going to graduate,” he told his

brother. "You've got six weeks left; we're going to Berkeley as soon after that as we can get packed, and I'm here to tell you they won't want some knucklehead who dropped out of school at the end of his senior year.

"We're going home," Lance said, and they did.

Within weeks of Danny's graduation, they were back on the road, arguing about their father and heading to Berkeley for good.

"He just gets excited, goes overboard sometimes," Danny told his brother. "He doesn't know how to show it."

"Seems to show it pretty clearly when it comes to receivers and second-borns."

"It's not that way," Danny said. "Really it's not."

"I'll tell you what it's not," Lance said, winking at his brother. "It's not anything about you and me, so don't worry about it. Our deal is not his deal. No doubt he'll cry at my funeral, so I've got that going for me."

"Yeah," Danny said, smiling back with mischief. "But sure as hell he won't let 'em play *Danny Boy*."

They both laughed, and relaxed in the ride.

"Far out," Danny said after a while. "Berkeley, you know?"

"Berkeley," Lance said. "Far fucking out."

"It ain't seen nothing 'til it's seen the Brothers O'Neill."

"You got that right, Danny Boy," Lance said, winking and laughing from down deep. "You sure as hell got that one right."

The brothers O'Neill didn't exactly burn the place down, but Danny especially was determined not to miss out on any more of what he called the tilting shift of the planet.

From the moment they arrived at Berkeley, Danny jumped into the summer of love and nearly drowned, choking on serious, sputtering self-righteousness. They laughed, partied, loved and protested through a semester and a half at the U Cal Berkeley Center of the Enlightenment, and then they met Becky Dreiling, a gorgeous and brilliant co-ed from Kansas.

And from there things moved very quickly and bad. As he shivered in the early morning of the Great Plains prairie, Lance O'Neill realized again that he never saw any of this coming.

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When he left with his brother for Berkeley he dreamed of many things, so many things but he never caught even a glimpse of this. Never an inkling of how things turned out. Not Danny, nor his leg, nor being in country. Not Becky Dreiling, nor her boy, and sure as hell not middle of nowhere Kansas. Never in a million years, never in twenty guesses, never in a crystal ball.

He sure as hell never saw this coming.

Suddenly he remembered driving last night. He remembered a shift and then he remembered promising himself it was time for a change. A real change. Christ. He even remembered swearing on his brother. "For God's sake," he said out loud.

And yet. The truth is he didn't go home with the waitress and even in the sobriety of morning he remembered her as being somewhat pretty and very sweet. But he didn't let her take him home, and he knew finally that part was over. He shivered as he zipped himself up and he looked directly into the cold April dawn. And then he knew it was time to go home, and he knew that going home didn't mean California but meant going back for good to Becky Dreiling's farm. He got back into the truck, and as the engine sparked to life, he swallowed against the pressure at the back of his throat and behind his eyes.

It was later that same day while heading mostly back to the farm but taking the long way on country roads through nothing little towns that Lance O'Neill found the wood-burning cook stove. It sat desolate and out of the weather, abandoned behind the post office connected to a little antique store next to the filling station where he stopped to get seven dollars worth.

"Belonged to my Henry, before he passed," she told him. The heavy-set shopkeeper pushed her glasses gently up her nose and tamed some gray strands sticking wayward from her head. "Had several offers to sell it, over the years, but never did, somehow."

"How much will you take today?" Lance asked.

“Don’t rightly know,” the woman said. “It always worked good, but its two back legs are broke off. Its been sitting out there awhile. I guess you can tell that by the way it looks.”

“It looks fine,” Lance told her. “Or better, we could trade. What have you got needs fixing? I’ve got my own tools.”

“Well,” she began. “I can tell you, as I’m on the council and also the post-mistress, I can tell you the railing, porch and stairs of the post office are in bad shape, and since there’s some insist we wait on federal money, we’ll wait forever until someone falls through and breaks their neck. Clete over to the lumber yard’s already said he’d put up for the boards, but I don’t know the stove’s worth all that.”

“Stoves worth every bit of it to me,” Lance said. “I’d need a place to stay a day or so.” The woman eyed him carefully. “Don’t even know for sure that stove works anymore. Been settin’ there, like I say, for quite awhile.”

“I’ll have a look first. No moving parts though, so I’m guessing it’s fine. At least nothing wrong I couldn’t fix.”

“It’s got those two broke legs, like I told you.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

The woman picked up a letter opener from atop a glass display case and ran the dull edge back and forth across her index finger. She rubbed the cast aluminum eagle on the handle.

“Ray Hermann’s got a big old Victorian a few blocks over on Elm. He used to rent out rooms until the Interstate went through up north. Now next to nobody comes through so he don’t anymore.”

“I can’t pay for a room,” Lance said. “I can sleep in my truck, just need a place to park it. And a bathroom. Shower would be nice but not necessary.”

The woman glanced quickly down at his one work boot. “How would you ever load it onto your truck?”

“Got a hand winch and bar extensions for the ladder rack. Have block and tackle as well. I’ve loaded heavier.”

She considered a while. “Maybe you ought to just take it. It’s sat there a long time. Henry loved it. Would give him pleasure knowing someone wanted it as bad as you seem to.”

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“I appreciate that,” Lance said. “I really do. And I’d gladly accept, but for concern about walking up those post office steps to get at it. I’d hate to be the one to fall through and break my neck.”

The woman said nothing for a time, and then finally “There’s a small storeroom in the back of my shop. It’s got a john and a slop sink, but no shower.”

“Maybe I could just pull around, take some measurements for the steps and railing.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll call Clete when you’re ready.”

As Lance followed the directions outside of town to the lumber yard, he began planning where he’d put the stove in the barn, and he thought of sitting in front of it, blazing hot while snow swirled outside, talking quietly with Becky Dreiling. Perhaps drinking red wine like normal people and perhaps talking quietly with Becky Dreiling about maybe starting over and maybe starting for real.

Three winters back Lance decided the hell with farming. Deep down he knew Becky had already settled on leasing the rest of the north quarter to Leiker’s boys. Leiker himself bought the entire herd right after her father died, and they worked out what Becky knew was a generous lease for 80 acres of pasture. She held on to the rest; Leiker said he’d happily send the boys around to check on things, so Becky Dreiling figured she’d farm a little milo and winter wheat. Leiker’s boys had been helping her dad the last few years anyway, so the place was already running fine. And then out of nowhere Lance shows up looking like hell and saying he needs a place to settle down and maybe he’d give farming a try. Becky had already moved the cattle money into business in town so she wasn’t dependent on cash from the crops. Becky was shocked enough to see him as well as increasingly concerned for his state of mind, so that she didn’t care what he did around the place. He realized early on she was great at letting him wander, but rather than feel fortunate or lucky, Lance filed her understanding and compassion with all the rest that life threw him which he didn’t deserve. He felt like a lucky son-of-a-bitch with the emphasis on son-of-a-bitch.

Haas

So throughout the years of dicking around, of driving off and then coming back, for Becky's sake Lance had always intended to put forth a decent effort to become a Kansas farmer. He knew that he could, if he set his mind to it. Most of his life had already been spent in endeavor not of his choosing anyway. What difference did it make? He had been a warrior. And then a wanderer. He was good at both; he could be good at farming. How the hell hard could it be? Lance figured the hardest part would be to keep the tractor running and cut a good deal with a combine crew in the fall. It would either rain or it wouldn't. Leiker had been cutting their small farm for years with his own crew, but Lance was sure he could get a better deal from one of the crews passing through on their way north. Leiker could keep his goddamned crews busy on his own land, which was enough sections for his own damn county. Leiker, a fourth generation Kansas farmer who bought a brand new Chevy pick-up every other year, had no respect for Lance, and Lance didn't give a shit.

But this godforsaken prairie had conspired against him at every turn. The first year Lance changed out milo for feed corn and then he watched the whole damn crop get all beat to hell and ruin by a mid-summer hailstorm. The next year he decided to seed both fields in winter wheat. After one of the wettest falls, which brought the wheat up well, the county had one of the driest years on record, and the wheat crop was forty-three percent of average.

By Halloween of Lance's second year on the farm, Becky had made the deal with Leiker. Lance was furious that Leiker swept in with his money, arrogance, and condescension. Lance didn't need his help, he didn't need his advice, and what with Leiker's insisting on paying over market on the lease, Lance sure as hell didn't need his pity. That was the first and only time Becky had shown any anger toward Lance since he arrived.

"He was good friends with my dad," she told him in measured tones. Her eyes blazed. "With this lease, Mr. Leiker chooses to honor my father. If you can't see the goodness in that then you're far enough gone you'll never make it back. Either accept it, or move on. It's none of your damn business, anyway."

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By Thanksgiving Lance had emptied the barn of every last piece of anything remotely resembling a farm implement – old rusting discs, fence wire, bailing equipment and the like that he hauled up to the corner of the north forty and dumped all in a pile on the ground. Leiker's boys could pick it up or it could sit and rust and rot. Lance didn't give a shit one way or the other. The decent hand tools he hung in the mudroom at the back of the house for Becky's kitchen garden.

Only the many woodworking tools remained.

They were the old man's hobby and passion; relaxation from the fields. Lance kept them initially as a perverse stake in the old man's claim. They would ultimately become his connection to staying put and staying in touch.

Once everything was out, Lance started in, retooling the barn as his own. He finished off the hayloft and put in a cracked walnut bed frame and mattress, a couple overstuffed couches he found in town, and a mahogany frame rocking chair from the attic. He didn't ask Becky about the history of the chair or who used it before.

He dug a three-foot trench from inside the barn 50 feet away to the septic tank near the side of the house and laid together sections of clay drainpipe that had been stacked for years near the stock pump. He sweated a copper water line and built a bathroom.

He outfitted the barn as haphazardly as he lived his life. Lance O'Neill was a scavenger. His frequent trips away from the farm, especially in the early years, were no more mysterious nor meaningful than that. Rambling along in his old beat up pick-up truck from dinky town to dinky town, for days on end, looking to pick up the discarded pieces of other people's lives. An oak framed storage cabinet came from behind a hardware store; once he replaced the broken glass and missing hinges, it would be perfect. He found a set of metal shelves leaning against a schoolhouse somewhere. The bed frame came from an alley in a turn-of-the-century neighborhood off the main street in another unremarkable small town. Similar hours spent over unremarkable days picking up the pieces and repairing other people's cast-off pasts.

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Before he decided to create the woodshop, he scavenged without reason or purpose, collecting whatever to use whenever for who knows why. Years ago, Lance had spent an entire fall and winter driving his truck throughout northern Oklahoma. Just driving, scavenging, repairing, and discarding along the way. He'd find something here, fix it up along the way to there, and sell enough of it somewhere else to keep his gas tank full, a bar stool warm and a few cans of food stowed in a wooden box in the bed of the truck.

He slept in the cab of the truck when he wasn't taking the waitress home. Sometimes they were ragged or ugly and sometimes they weren't, but they all had a shower and usually a bed for the night.

It was months of driving through cold and windy and raw.

The engine clattering its lifters along for miles and miles of desolate nowhere. White dust snow swirling furiously across the pastures and prairies and highway. The truck's heater had two settings – bitter cold or blowing hot air that filtered musty and pungent through torn seat upholstery. Most often, Lance said the hell with it, unfolded the rim of his navy wool Longshoreman's cap, pulling the thing well over his ears, flipped up the collar of his army jacket, and rolled the window down.

Deep within himself, Lance hoped the isolation and the penance would somehow be cleansing or invigorating, but it wasn't. It was just irritating, and then numbing, and then flat. And one day Lance realized, finally, that he couldn't give a shit. Not didn't give a shit, couldn't. Wasn't capable. He drove the rest of that day, letting it sink in, even crying for a full hour, and that night he turned his truck and found his way back to the farm. That wasn't his last trip away from the farm but it was the last one where he didn't know if he'd come back. He'd still take off once a month or every six weeks but he always found his way back to the farm.

He and Becky never spoke of where he'd been or when he would return. Certainly not why he went. Some bizarre unspoken agreement that their lives wouldn't be normal, couldn't be complete. As if the bill finally came due for the indiscretions of their past. All

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the wonderful free love be damned; build a mud castle leading to now. Who gives a shit? Whatever it was, they had both, over the years, settled into a resigned acceptance of the strangeness of their lives together.

When Lance found the wood-burning cook stove, he knew just like that it was time for a change.

Becky watched from the dining room window the day he pulled up with the huge wood-burning stove lashed in the back of his pick-up. Lance wasn't sure what would happen with Becky, or with their relationship, but he smiled to himself as he realized that, at least now, he had a wood-burning cook stove. His own hearth. A circle of home. He figured maybe he'd try a ritual, too. Clean the stove once a month when Becky oiled her mother's cast iron cauldron. They could do it together, and meet in the middle. Maybe that would help.

Becky came out into the yard carrying two bottles of beer, as Lance struggled to rig slider beams off the tailgate to unload the stove.

"Nice looking stove," she said, opening one of the bottles and setting it out of the way on the ground near the rear tire. "Need any help?"

"Nah, but thanks. Son of a bitch is so big, I just need to figure out how to let gravity do the work. How's everything been?"

"Fine. No real news. Spent all of Monday and most of yesterday in town on the committee. Nothing much to speak of over the weekend. Been real quiet, stayed real still." She sipped her beer. "You?"

"Same. Lots of driving. Meant to get back Sunday, but, you know."

"Yeah," she said. "Not really."

How could she know, when he didn't? How could she explain it, if he couldn't? Two cottonwoods, long ago as saplings leaning together to protect each other from the wind, now grown and gracefully brushing their leaves during those quiet midnights when a soft breeze carried fragrance from one to the other.

Haas

Then they were young and he and Becky filled each other and completed one another. Their roots stretched down and suckled together beneath the crisp sweet river of fate. They were for and with each other. But they were too smart, so much smarter than their fate. Part of the chosen generation. Who better but they to decide when to alter, what to alter, with whom and why?

Ten years ago, in 1968, that was enlightenment.

And then, enlightenment began to cripple and atrophy and started reeking of decay and bitterness. Empty. Who really gives a shit anymore, Lance thought as he let go the rigging rope tied to the bumper of his pick-up and stooped for his beer?

"Thanks, tastes fine." He took another long swallow and nearly emptied the thing.

"Listen, Beck, I know you didn't ask, but I've done a lot of thinking this time. And I'm thinking this barn, this woodshop may be the ticket, you know? It's gonna be mine, so maybe for the first time in almost forever, something will really be mine."

He caught the hurt build in her eyes, and immediately regretted his words.

"I don't mean it like that. But we both know this grotesque can't go on. I know I haven't helped it; I'll take the blame. We're both carrying around too many goddamned skeletons. Always have."

"That's all right," she said. "You don't need to explain. It's not like I've come here clean, or made any of this easy. For you or for me."

"It's not your fault, Beck, and maybe part of it's not even mine. Just life. Our lives, with all our choices. Our fate, I guess.

"People've had worse. But I tell you what, once you hit 30, you realize your life's gonna finish out pretty much whatever it is right then and there. I'm thinking if we're smart about it, really start paying attention, we may yet be able to salvage something. It doesn't have to stay this way. I'm thinking of starting off by staying around. I'm getting awfully bored with all of this on the road crap, driving aimlessly, searching for nothing. All these overwhelming issues that were so important five years ago, ten years ago,

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suddenly seem like someone else's ancient history. You know? Almost like who gives a shit anymore?"

"Well," Becky said, smiling and slipping her hand inside his shirt and running her fingernails softly across his chest, "I've got two years to go, two years to believe my life's still going to turn out like a dime store romance, filled with youthful mistakes leading to cosmic possibilities. Although," she giggled, as he unsnapped the top of her blue jeans and slipped his hand down along the small of her back, "this is beginning to feel kind of cosmic right now."

Lance O'Neill placed his other hand behind her shoulders and gently eased Becky down onto the wooden plank angling down to the ground from the back of his pick-up.

"You're a beautiful woman, Becky Dreiling," Lance murmured as he unbuttoned her shirt. "Always have been, inside and out."

She still had the tight and graceful body of a co-ed. Her breasts and belly formed tiny goose bumps from the cool April breeze, and he smelled long and slow from her neck down to the top of her panties. She raised herself up and he slipped off her sandals and blue jeans. She reached for the back of his neck and softly pulled him toward her lips; her breath nuzzled in his ear.

Lance held on for a moment; he struggled to relax and struggled to hang on to the moment. And then, finally, he closed his eyes and let go for the ride. He listened to her breath nuzzling and coming in to him. He imagined its sweetness into flowers and laughter and Christmas. He thought of Astral Weeks when they would listen over and over – *Beside You* – watching the vinyl spin around and around and around. Breathing in and breathing out. Into a cleansing that moved into him and through him and down deep inside of him. Lance squinted his mind and watched the mean and the humiliation and the rage well together deep inside his belly, swelling there into a swirling mass of white hot gas. He took pieces of the inferno, and slowly breathed them out. Her meadows and Calico dolls buzzing slowly in, his mortar explosions and face-ripped bleeding brother out.

Shut his mind off, turn his body down, and follow the cycle of breath, in and out, cleansing and replenishing. You breathe in you

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breathe out. You breathe in you breathe out. Calm quiet Kansas wind. Prairie grass. You breathe in you breathe out. You breathe in you breathe out.

A calm exchange of fresh air for foul, living breath for decay. A breeze to soften the fire, rain to moisten the earth.

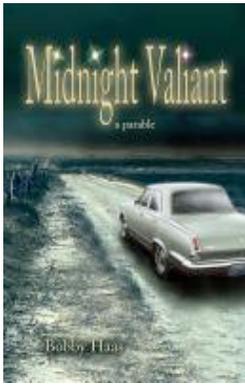
And then he saw it, the guilt, the anger. The dominating power, the return. Suddenly his breath no longer dissipated as he exhaled but now circled back and melded with hers, entering him again and re-contaminating him. No longer a cycle, now a circle. Her meadows turned into mountain lakes, and then into one particular glacier-formed Colorado tarn lake filled with gold, and so lonely.

Naked at the shore, his body shivers and then abruptly calms. Rage and his tears drip into the black water leaving expanding rings of rape and remorse.

And then he knows the circle is unbreakable. The future can't flow in on its own, it will always be pushed by his past.

He felt her body, then, against his, and gratefully accepted at least that. He quietly closed his lips and stopped the breath of his soul.

"Welcome home, Lance O'Neill," she whispered.



Midnight Valiant begins as a humorous coming-of-age adventure, and ultimately transforms into a profoundly sad saga of human longing for the Divine when Catholic patriarchy crashes into a Goddess culture on the Great Plains of Western Kansas. A college road trip in a 1965 Plymouth Valiant brings four friends home to a heartland wheat farm. Searching for fathers and redemption bequeaths the sins of one generation onto the next. Penance is harsh, tragedy inevitable.

Midnight Valiant a parable

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