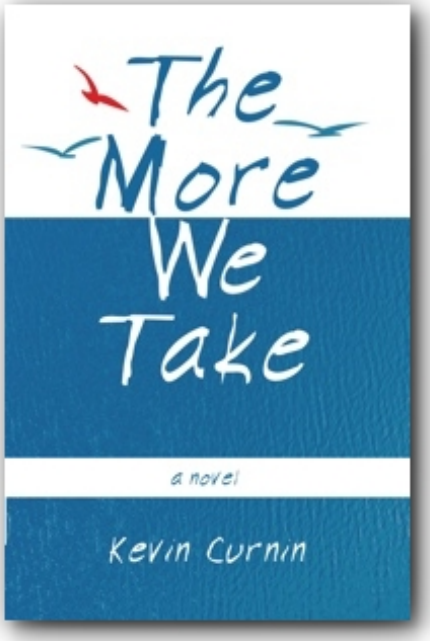

When the Ogallala Aquifer dies, life in the Midwest will perish. Can ordinary Nebraskans turn the tide? Only with help of legendary Lakota chiefs. Their race not yet run, together they may stop a second desecration of the Great Plains.

The More We Take

by Kevin Curnin

a novel

Kevin Curnin

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This is a work of fiction. With the Sky Council, my intention is to appreciate each member. They were invited by imagination, in service of fiction, and I am grateful for their appearance and the wisdom of the original stewards of North American lands and waters. All the other characters, organizations, and events portrayed are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Please welcome them all. We live in complicated times, past, present and future.

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I.

Your Land is My Land

II.

Well Yield Down

III.

Mr. Kool-Aid & The Lady Chiefs

IV.

The End of Ordinary Time

1.

As Clete Bauer pulls up to the Spangler Farm, everything looks two-dimensional in the early morning light. Everything flat. Cut-out yellow sun. Papery white slips of cloud. Feckless blue sky. Pale surfaces without depth, like he could punch right through. The red barn and the gray house behind it pasted in place. Flat on flat. No expression—man-made or divine—is spared.

There is nothing remarkable about this anymore. No panic in this picture. Only when it first happened, way out on Route 2 crossing the Sand Hills, did Clete feel something like panic. Like he would disappear into a far point of horizon that was only just past the Ram emblem on the hood of his truck. This was right after his father killed himself, which was only a year after his mother, having absorbed all that cancer and her unlovable husband dished out, finally succumbed. Yes, it felt a little like panic, mile after look-alike mile across Nebraska prairie, expecting to disappear at any moment. But that was years ago, right after college. Now forty-one, Clete has told himself so many times that he's over it that he believes it's true. So today is less like panic and more like habit, which might be worse.

Doesn't matter. Clete has work to do and isn't one to dwell. He doesn't know it, but a lot is about to change. The third dimension will reassert itself. And to keep it interesting, a fourth will push through.

For now, sitting in the cab of Ole Blue, his long-bed Dodge, Clete thinks about appearance and perspective. He imagines those flat surfaces have hidden drop-down menus. If only one could find them and click, each menu would descend and offer chapters in the full story of all the living and dying that led up to this moment on the farm.

Clete never tells anyone about his weird daydreams. Despite what Irene says about him being an artist inside a cowboy inside a surveyor, he's just a surveyor, just the one layer, full stop. He makes his living

mapping what is: real angles and distances, using real tools that measure real stuff in the usual three dimensions. In fact, mapping makes it more real. Except for Irene, nobody would get his daydreams anyway, leaving him even more deflated.

Arrow, a boxer-blue heeler mix sitting in the passenger seat, nudges him in the ribs. Clete pops open the driver's door and hops out. His boots stir miniature dust clouds from the dry ground. "With," Clete says in a low voice, and Arrow launches herself from the cab, patrols once around Ole Blue, then sits at his feet. Clete shuts the door, adjusts his *Red Cloud Rod & Reel* cap and rolls his shoulders to get the ache out. Once forward, once back. He remembers when he could launch out of the truck like Arrow, limber and ready to go.

As he walks toward the tall farmhouse, Clete grins at the memory of being pain free. The mid-March sun is already glaring just above the roofline. He's got to walk into it to get out of it.

Clete knows Curtis Spangler's place well. He went to school in Seward with his children, Gayla and Galen. Gayla, born a minute and half before her brother and plain-looking in a welcoming way, was the best athlete in the county. Set state records in track, anything under a mile, and won championships in basketball and softball. Beautiful to watch on the field; everything came easy, or so it seemed. Not fierce so much as lithe and lethal. By the time she was a sophomore, she was widely known in nearby counties; as an upperclassman, a star statewide. She had a following. She stirred Cornhusker pride but was oblivious to the attention and remained for the most part Gayla Spangler, happy kid, attentive daughter, reliable sister.

Galen was handsome and rough-cut. Quiet. Thick blond hair cut short. His manner was slow and easy, not through reticence so much as a reservoir of calm, a portable sense of security in his own body. He was bigger and stronger than classmates who spent hours lifting weights. His gym teacher said he looked like "Mickey Mantle in his

prime, only the Mick was an Okie." None of the boys in school ever tried to test him. A three-sport letterman, no one knew the limits of his gentleness, nor wanted to find out.

As he approaches the twins' childhood house, Clete remembers that Galen has the same blue eyes as his sister, only lightened by a brush of white like this morning's sky. Galen could take anything apart and rebuild it, working methodically for hours and making good money for himself. He fixed Clete's new ten-speed after Clete managed to derange the derailleur the first day he had it—his tenth birthday, 1987. Cost Clete five dollars—also birthday money, from a ten-dollar bill that his mother had slipped into his hand. Clete didn't tell his dad about the repair; that would not have been well received. He didn't tell his mom either; did not want her to have another worry to hide from her wire-taut husband. Clete always thought that the ten-speed when he turned ten was a kind of test that he failed.

One spring day twenty-six years ago, Galen took apart something he couldn't repair.

Gayla was usually the last one out of the locker room after home games. Her brother was her ride home. Patient as he was, Galen never thought to rush her. He knew it was those moments, after a close race or big game, that Gayla savored more than the winning: unwinding with teammates, mostly lifelong neighbors and friends. For a short time, nothing to work on, no points to score, no one in front of her to chase down, just the familiar feel of the locker room. Thick wooden benches smoothed by all those asses, feet, backpacks and equipment bags. Improbably loud metal lockers that banged shut with a clamor that ricocheted off the white tile. The reassuring spin and click of Master locks. Nothing in there more valuable than having earned your place for the season. Grown out of the awkwardness of being naked in front of teammates, even the showers were a kind of oasis for Gayla. Four on a side, like two families of silver-necked geese facing off, all

eight showerheads open at once, full pressure and hot enough to raise a thick cloud of steam. The idle post-game chatter, teasing, boasts, lots of laughter. Limber white bodies, long athletic arms and legs, bright in the water. The locker room was entirely theirs, free from expectations of home, classroom, track, tomorrow.

Knowing his twin like prairie grass knows wind, Galen was content to wait in his truck in the small lot next to the gym. He drove a 1980 Ford Bronco, mostly red, but dark blue doors and a white hood. He'd been working on it since his freshman year, when he got it for free from a friend's dad who'd given up on it himself because it needed so much work, knew Galen's gift, and told him "It's yours, if you come by this weekend and tow it off my farm." Fourteen years old, Galen felt like Mr. Clewes put the world in his hands. By the summer of his sophomore year, it was drivable; by the end of his junior year, it drove well and looked mostly the way he wanted it to; and by the time he was a senior, other than needing a paint job, he'd done everything that needed doing, and that part of his world, like Gayla's locker room, was an oasis.

As he leaned forward to change the radio station—he'd put in a new Bose sound system that rocked the Bronco—Galen looked up just in time to see a man he almost recognized quickly enter the gym by the side door entrance to the small hallway leading to the locker rooms. After four years of football and wrestling, he knew the door well—the one that never locked; if you were running late for practice, you used it so coach didn't see you.

Even as he turned the radio dial and saw the man glance quickly over his shoulder before slipping inside, Galen felt something in his gut turn. He was out of the Bronco before he thought about it, moving the thirty yards to the side door like a reaper cutting across a wheat field, deliberate and destructive. He entered the hall, boys' locker room to the right, girls' locker room to the left. He covered that space in

three of four strides, pushed open that door, then a second that had been installed when he was a freshman after enough mothers pointed out that every time the door opened anyone in the hall could see straight back to the showers. The first thing Galen saw was Gayla's legs, set apart like the poster of Greek wrestlers across the hall. Bare. Mortal. Struggle. The squeeze he had felt in his gut tightened. As he fixed on her attacker, Galen saw a flash of silver. Two, three, four steps between the lockers, then up and across the bench, Galen launched into him like a hoplite armed with only his twinned fists. His one thought was *separation*, get him off his sister, get in between them. Gayla saw him coming and pivoted just enough. Just as her attacker turned to see what was coming, Galen's thick forearms caught his head, shoulders, chest all at once, pile-driving him onto the still-wet shower room tile. Stay up, Galen thought, on top, don't stop. And he went to work.

Afterwards, the police thought that the killing blow might've been the first, when 260 pounds of Galen drove the intruder's head into the tile floor. After that, it didn't matter that Galen had broken the man's jaw, eye socket, nose. The thought of his sister exposed and attacked, her legs splayed to gain traction and time, fueled Galen as if he was indeed a reaper.

The coroner confirmed the cause of death as head trauma from the initial impact with the tile floor. Several tiles shattered and had to be replaced. The color didn't quite match and it was several years before athletes using the shower didn't think of skull and blood when they saw the pale cross of the new tiles.

It was Gayla who stopped him. *Galen*, she put her hand on his back. His arms like pistons. *Galen*. *It's over, Galen. It's done. Galen*. He stopped, breathing hard. The attacker under him. Motionless. Only the wet shower floor seemed to be moving, as blood, the assailant's and Galen's, mixed slowly into the drain. The eight long-necked geese, heads bowed in silent witness, still dripping, like weeping pallbearers

now, the body laid between them. Only then did the twins notice the hunting knife jutting out of Galen's thigh like a gear shift. The glimmer of silver in the attacker's hand. It was intended for Gayla.

Galen closed his eyes and remembered that he left the Bronco's engine running.

For years, everyone talked about it as *the time when*. It was one of those local news events that caused a temporary ripple in the outside world, and a permanent one inside. No matter how many seasons came and went in Seward, the ripple remained embedded, a part of the place like a buried bone, pushed up on occasion by frost, pushed back down by the indiscriminate but sometimes merciful plow of time.

It was self-defense, everyone agreed, and of course it was. The attacker lived in Osceola. Ran a small business. Out in the open. Loved high school sports. Became infatuated with Gayla when she emerged as the gangly but gazelle-like freshman from Seward. He blended in with the crowds at her meets and games. Nothing unusual about that. But he only watched her. No one noticed until it all boiled over that one early evening in March of her senior year. Gayla fought back and bought herself just enough time for her brother to get there. The county prosecutor apologized for having to follow the case to its end. The jury deliberated for less than an hour. Appointed defense counsel had no witnesses to call. No family or friends showed up for the deceased. Clete was there to support his friends. He went with his grandfather, who knew and liked Curtis Spangler. It was supposed to be over then. But a lot had ended well before the final gavel. Gayla quit sports, forever. Galen stored his Bronco and pretended to forget about it. They both stayed on at home rather than go to college. They would take over the farm. Eventually, they both got married, moved into houses closer to town, started their own families. Never straying too far from one another. Twins born a minute and half apart—about as long as Gayla

struggled in the locker room on her own before Galen appeared—and born again in blood.

Clete remembered watching Galen leave the courtroom, his mother on his arm, his father's arm around Gayla's shoulders. Clete and his grandfather followed. Clete said something about being glad it was finally over. His grandfather said something about hoping that was so.

Not intending to remember all this in the time it took to go from truck to farmhouse, Clete feels woozy. He reminds himself where he is and when. How did time bend like that? How does place shift from here to there and back? He is out of the sun now, into the shade cast by the house, near the side porch.

Clete always thought Galen did the only thing he could, acted heroically. But who knows what he or Gayla did or felt in those few moments when she was calling his name as blood mingled and slid down the shower grate. Protecting one life and taking another, two arcs colliding indecipherably. No one will know what that felt like as those moments collapsed one into the other or whether time would untangle them enough for either sibling to really live wholly in the present.

Clete stops and again tugs on his hat, rolls his shoulders. He takes a knee, pretending to check on Arrow, but really taking a long moment to get his legs back under him in the here and now before knocking on the Spanglers' door.

Curtis Spangler still has the biggest smile of anyone Clete knows. The corners of his mouth seemed to go ear to ear, and into that wide space the man's teeth were up to the task: straight tablets white as snow. As someone might who has that kind of gift, Curtis shares his liberally. When the door opens, the shade of the porch shrinks back as Clete welcomes the bright smile.

"Somesuch, Clete, but ain't it good to see you, son!"

Somesuch is Curtis Spangler's word. He uses it like a Swiss Army knife. In one declaration, like this one, it might express boyish happiness. In another, it swapped in for a saltier word that a less self-governed man might use: "That somesuch water district meter man comes out here again babbling about usage and he'll get my boot." Often it was filler, a pronoun without antecedent when Curtis wasn't quite sure which word fit, as in "Maybe go into town and see if somesuch won't take a look at it for you."

"It's been too long, Mr. S. I'm glad to see you too." Because Clete knew his kids when he was a kid and had always called him Mr. Spangler, he had wanted to keep calling him that. But once Clete was out of college and working on his own, Spangler insisted on being called Curtis. In a compromise, Clete uses *Mr. S* and Curtis lets him.

"Minnie just made iced tea, real good batch, care for some or ready to work?"

"Maybe on my way out, Mr. S, if that's okay. I'm eager to look at what you're considering."

"Good answer, son. Let's get goin'. You drivin'?"

"Yessir."

"Good answer again." Curtis is tall and wide both, and he clears the porch in two strides, clapping a big hand on Clete's shoulder as he walks by. At sixty-eight, after fifty-plus years of serious farming, he moves well. It's as if the near constant work and worry had burned off anything extraneous that might weigh him down. Muscle, bone and sinew committed to tilling, plowing, harvesting, repairing, hauling, riding, storing, more repairing, nightly figuring with Minnie at the kitchen table, the wind throwing snow against the windows.

Wrapped in sunburned, wind-blasted, nicked-up skin; fueled on pots of coffee, pancakes, oatmeal, potatoes and corn, lots of beef, big slices of cake and pie; and clothed in sturdy boots, work pants that start stiff as boards and then become a second skin, good flannel and a

thermal sweatshirt, dozens of hats, and leather work gloves, men like Curtis make things grow, and then make some more, season after season, year-in year-out, in numbing cold, whipping wind, sudden hail—from mud to frost, cooling rain to taunting heat. He was constantly looking up to read the sky, looking down to read the earth, and reading water flow like a shimmery stream of prayer beads. He moves in and out of the tractor cab, the truck, the harvester; in and out of the barns, the workshop, the garage, the kitchen and, blessedly, bed, where he and Minnie sleep side by side in the winter under-quilts that she or her mother made and in the summer with one sheet and one cotton blanket, resting down into their bones, making love like they are each other's earth. These days, they are more likely to hold hands into sleep: *My Minnie,* he says, *My Curtis,* she replies. The fire is less intense but more even. They've arrived at an unnamed place they sought their whole lives: rather than traversing a footbridge of worry before bedtime—one hard day's work done and another to come—past and present are now evenly banked in the hearth and when they arise the warm embers of shared lifetimes are there waiting for them.

However fit Curtis is, rust gathers in the creases: knuckles on both hands swollen and dark; half the pinky and ring finger on the left hand lost to the threshing room floor one winter shortly after he and Minnie married; a slight limp favoring his left leg where it broke twenty years ago when the tractor he was helping Gabriel Collum get unstuck rolled back on him; a slight lean where his lower back wouldn't quite straighten no matter how much arnica Minnie rubbed on. But no direct hits, nothing that stopped him. And he remains grateful every day. Always for the Ogallala Aquifer, where all his irrigation comes from; and for having more good years than bad.

His body is an almanac of time and place. Acre-years live in him like tree rings, thinning at the edges. His is a story of the yield and the toll. Whether he held dominion over the earth or the earth held

dominion over him are just versions of the same tale, the answer varying with the season or the hour of day. Weirdly, this landlocked and mostly untraveled Nebraskan with one foot in the 20th century and one in the 21st makes Clete think of Tennyson's "Ulysses."

> *We are not now that strength which in old days*
> *Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;*
> *One equal temper of heroic hearts,*
> *Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,*
> *To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Clete's father would quote those lines when he was drunk. Stumbling home after a three-day bender, bleary and bloviating and old before his time. Clete heard those lines so often he looked up the poem in the school library. He read it in a study carrel where no one could see him. His father's beery recitation, knitting bravado to self-pity, was free of irony. Tucked into the laminated carrel, Clete felt a hub of shame insert itself at the center of his already spiraling anger. He promised himself it would be the last time he cried. And he kept it. At his mother's funeral just five years later, and his father's a year after that, his eyes were dry. It might have been a promise better unkept.

Standing here now with the calm old farmer, Clete thinks he understands why Spangler wants to buy the Collum farm.

As they approach Ole Blue, Arrow is already sitting by the driver's door, eyes on Clete. Clete swears that Arrow reads his mind. She's always where he wants to go, right on the mark. "I hope you don't mind riding with Arrow."

"Arrow's a somesuch good dog. My Lennie's on his last legs now, poor thing. Getting old just like his namesake. I think he's played out." Curtis had named his big German Shepard after Len Dawson, the

legendary Kansas City Chiefs quarterback who played nineteen seasons of old-school smashmouth football.

"Ah, yes," Clete remembers, "the Chiefs!"

"*Ole Len*…" Clete hears Curtis's lament from the other side of the truck. Separated from the big frame and smile, the voice on its own sounds small. Clete is caught off-guard. As he opens his door and Arrow springs in, he again feels an uneasy sensation of time shifting, like a bear rolling over in its dark den. He shakes it off, settles behind the wheel, and turns Ole Blue's engine.

12.

Irene remembers graduation morning at the University of South Dakota, 1997, like it was yesterday.

No one has called or written. No flowers from Grand-mère or Mama. Not even a card from Uncle Joe. Irene thinks *I won't be bitter*. She'll put it behind her. Take the high road. After all, she hadn't invited anyone, and how could she, not having been back home since she left almost two years ago. So next she's thinking, *It's time to go back, like I planned*. Take the RN exam in August and go back. And that's how she passes the ceremony, an internal dialogue of *what ifs,* looking ahead and behind, until she has herself convinced about the high road as the way out.

Afterwards, diploma in hand, she half-recognizes an administrator awkwardly jogging over to ask if Irene can "swing by" the provost's office, adding "And, oh, is now good?" Something's wrong. Irene feels a palpitation under her robe, high in her chest, like getting pinged by a jeweler's rivet hammer. Her first thought: *They're taking my diploma*. The ink's not dry. Sending me back to Pine Ridge empty-handed. Erasing the mistake of taking in the poor Lakota girl.

Irene cannot recall the provost's face, but still hears her words. "Have a seat, Irene," like she was about to have day surgery. "A beautiful ceremony, wasn't it, Irene? We're so proud of you, Irene." Irene smells it now: something's really wrong. The provost, sitting too close on the little guest couch and sounding shaken, keeps repeating her name robotically. Then it comes, "Irene, we received bad news." The room wobbles. "We're so sorry, Irene, but your mother and grandmother passed away." Irene goes blank; disappears even from herself then immediately reappears, but different. *Wait? What? Passed away? Both?* The robot mouth is moving. The robot hand is on her hand. "If there's anything we can do. Anything at all." Sinking again,

Irene latches onto the word "anything" like a float ring. *Anything. Like what anything?* What could the robot do? "We got word this morning from your Uncle Joe. We had to decide when to tell you, Irene. We thought it could wait ... till after the ceremony, so you could ..." Robo-provost mercifully stops short of "enjoy your accomplishments." The rest breaks into fragments. "Nothing to be done ... Receive your diploma ..... Top of your class... We're so sorry, Irene."

Every time she hears her name, Irene wants to turn invisible again and stay that way. *Nothing to be done*. She will feel the inadvertent weight of that phrase for years, an anvil between two urns on the sagging mantle of her heart. *Nothing* is just what she had done for twenty-two months. Nothing but kill Grand-mère and Mama. Surely it's her fault.

Irene sees herself once again leaving the lopsided, weather-beaten house. She hears Grand-mère's keening and her mother's lament following her. She picks up her pace but the old Lakota songs fill her ears and become a part of her.

Irene's back. The provost's hand is still on hers, so she calmly puts her other hand on the provost's, nods once, and lifts it off hers. Irene hears her own voice, *I have to go*. The robot mouth is moving again but Irene hears only the old Lakota songs.

A day after her biggest step forward in life, she's going backwards. Back to Pine Ridge.

Irene has a sleepless night to think about it. *What does one wear when returning to say goodbye to a dead mother and grandmother you abandoned after they gave you everything?* Irene packs and unpacks her duffel. Good thing she doesn't have many clothes to choose from. Febrile now, she packs and unpacks again.

Midnight. *I don't know why I stayed away*. She was only seventeen when she left. She put her head down and spent two years flat out in Vermillion. And she slayed it. If she wasn't on campus, she was at one

of her jobs; if not at school or work, she was on one of her punishing cross-country runs. Lectures, clinicals, the library, then home to her apartment, where she was either cooking, eating or asleep. Busy, so busy ... *so conveniently fucking busy. What was I thinking?*

1 a.m. *I fooled myself*. Irene thought she was doing all she could. She sent money like clockwork for twenty-two months, including that first month when she went to sleep every night with Grand-mère's shawl covering her face and woke every morning thinking she was back on her mushy Pine Ridge mattress.

2 a.m. *What more could I give?* She was getting off the rez, yes, but she was getting out of the way too. No one needed to worry about her. She had the scholarship and she would make good on it. She'd return but not before she had her degree in hand and "RN" after her name. She needed that validating armor to go back. When she could afford a house, she'd get Mama and Grand-mère off the rez too. Irene hasn't stopped moving since she got the news. She smolders with fever. Unpacks and repacks again. Dozes on the floor using the duffel as a pillow.

3 a.m. *Nonsense*. *You didn't go back because you didn't want to*. Self-loathing like a yellow vine wraps around her ankles, spirals up her legs, slowly covers her body in ropey mustard-colored shoots and gnarls. Each lie she told herself, each excuse, was a viny knuckle pressing deeper until they simply melted into her.

She rouses at 7 a.m., after drifting off around 4. Fever gone. She strips off the sweaty T-shirt under her robe and showers. Calms herself. Practices her pre-run breathing. Makes coffee and fills a thermos, fills her water bottle, grabs a couple sports bars and apples, and throws it all in her USD day pack.

Irene has a brand-new used Toyota Celica. A month before graduation, she bought it cheap off a med school student she knew. Someone she slept with a few times her first year in Vermillion, and

maybe a few more times thereafter. But the important part was, he was moving and parting with his metallic green, 140,000-mile Celica. Irene was pretty sure he had a Native American fetish. He was nice, had a little bit of money, paid for everything. He was big and warm, more of a cold-weather boyfriend. She avoided him last summer. Besides the price, it had two features Irene loves: the hatchback and the 5-speed manual transmission.

Irene pops the hatch, throws in her duffel, pulls it shut. While pacing the night before, she stressed over which route to take without deciding. Simplest would be 29 North to Sioux Falls and then I-90 West—300-plus miles. More direct but probably slower, she could take 44 West to 18 West through farmland and dozens of small towns, close to the Nebraska line. As she turns over the Toyota, she decides to make a loop: I-90 on the way out and the state routes back. That way she can try to ground herself in the Badlands, listen to what the otherworldly rock has to tell her, and screw up her nerve before returning to the rez.

The three hours of sleep felt pretty good but won't last and she is scared of falling asleep at the wheel. The coffee is strong. The water is cold. If she could only clear her head. In an hour, she's at Sioux Falls. From there it's straight west for 270 miles. When she started, the rising sun was off to her right, skimming over Iowa, searching for anything in Nebraska sticking its neck above the still waking Plains, throwing its light with equal disinterest against phone poles, gas stations, church steeples and cemetery walls like thin yellow primer. Now it's behind the little green Celica, tailing her like she's a fugitive from what for twenty-two months she'd pretended was her new life. Without hurrying, the sun's old rays would catch her soon enough. Irene had a brief crazy fantasy of hiding out in a sandstone crag in the Badlands until the sun gave up searching and passed over to California, leaving her to drive off to Canada under cover of darkness.

Canada, really? Chill out, Irene tells herself. She takes another swig of coffee, finishes an energy bar.

The early June sun is soaked up by crop after rising crop. Irene feels them all around her, the irrigated fields of corn and wheat and sorghum and alfalfa. Unnatural circles—agricultural imprints, man-made medallions that snuffed out the prairie and much of its wildlife in just a few generations. Once every revolution, tiny water particles floating between sprinkler heads and crops are caught in the sunlight and turn white before evaporating. These are the misty clouds of center pivot irrigation. The long sprinkling arms make their circles and discharge the Ogallala's water at highly calculated rates, guided by sensors for wind and heat and evapotranspiration and soil wetness. But from above they look like simple, old-fashioned analog clocks, the kind Irene had seen in black-and-white movie scenes set in train stations and airports, posting times from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Tokyo. In the movies, those circles and sweeps meant that something big—good or evil—was coming.

When Irene was thirteen, her Uncle Joe gave her a slightly used Sony Walkman for her birthday. Through high school, she and it were inseparable. She had to replace those fuzzy pads on the earphones a few times, the earphones themselves once, and by the end she had to pry open the cassette door, but it was a lifeline—the boxy birthplace of her love for music. She soared with Mariah, celebrated with Whitney, got nasty with Britney. Her male cousins were listening to rap, Tupac and Dre and Wu-Tang. She sometimes liked the defiance and swagger, but the bravado sounded tinny to her. Without consciously intending to, she was drawn to women's voices. Selena, Aaliyah, Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige. When she wanted to slow things down, walk with someone through the weirdness of being a teenager, she put in a Tracy Chapman tape. Chapman's voice sounded like it might've been dragged across gravel before turning into song and that

thought gave Irene comfort. But her musical godmother was Rickie Lee Jones. There was something exotic about Rickie Lee. The smart voice, unexpected chords, and risk-taking made her hard to categorize. Irene liked that part too.

Irene made sure to put the *Flying Cowboys* CD in her day pack and that's what she popped in first. She listens to it for the next two hours, from White Lake to Kadoka. It isn't about cowboys exactly, their ghosts maybe, but this is Rickie's world and she makes her own magic. Maybe Irene can do the same. She wonders if there is a ghetto or two in her mind. One would take the shape of the reservation; the other of Nebraska. White men made both. Was it ever right to think she could leave one for the other? Was she just trying to revere engineer history?

The music rolls on. *Horses. Cowboys. Rodeos*. *Ghosts.* Feeling lost amidst once-familiar landmarks, Irene lets the stories carry her away. How much of what she set out to do is already undone? She sings and grieves her way west.

Somewhere along the way, closer to the Badlands, she crosses from Central to Mountain Time and "gains an hour." The idea of gaining time has never seemed so necessary yet so futile. Twenty-two months. Silence. Twenty-two months never coming back. What's an hour?

She knows she's at Wall when she sees the eighty-foot, fifty-ton, concrete green-and-white brontosaurus. Wall Drug is a phenomenon. A storefront pharmacy born in the Depression to God-seeking proprietors who nevertheless grasped the power of simple roadside advertising. The bold brontosaurus was not their first innovation. The first, in 1936, was putting painted wooden signs alongside old Route 16A. More and more Americans were driving, exploring their country, and in the summer they got hot and thirsty. So the signs were simple, brilliantly so, spaced out for drivers to read in passing and be lulled into pulling in:

Get a soda ...
get a beer ...
Turn next corner ...
Just as near ...
To Highway 16 and 14 ...
Free Ice Water ...
Wall Drug.

And it worked. In time, the earnest family business grew into an all-in-one, only-in-America hungry-for-everything tourist extravaganza, averaging twenty thousand highway pilgrims a day. A perfect place for Irene to lose herself in the crowd and put hot food in her belly.

She parks as far as she can from the long lines of motorcycles, looks up sympathetically at the solitary brontosaurus scanning the horizon as if for a mate. Entering the café, she pauses to read a plaque about the historic paintings of the Wild West housed there, then slides into a booth and closes her eyes. It's like she walked off the stage in Vermillion and straight into this booth. Everything in between is a blur. She's famished. She went for a run yesterday morning before graduation, made a yogurt-banana smoothie afterwards, and hasn't had real food since.

Irene is listing against the wall, eyes still closed, when she hears the waitress, "Sweetheart, I think I better bring you some coffee."

She doesn't even open her eyes. When the waitress returns, pot in hand, poised to pour, Irene declines the coffee.

"Chocolate shake, please, thick. And pancakes. And scrambled eggs, please."

"You got it, honey."

The shake shows up first. Just like she'd hoped: tall glass, filled to the brim, striped straw, long-handled spoon. The shake is half gone when the steaming pancakes and eggs arrive. Irene drizzles maple

syrup, unrolls utensils from their napkin, and makes short work of the piping hot cakes, so airy she has to remind herself to chew. She finishes half of the remaining shake and turns to the eggs. She squirts ketchup on the toast, then scoops eggs on top to make an open-faced sandwich, topped with salt and pepper. She polishes that off while the eggs are still hot. Slides down the last of the shake.

Irene realizes she's been hunched over the table since the food arrived, like a convict or a coyote. She straightens up, sits back, leans into the cushion. Burps. She's starting to feel like things might eventually be alright, like not everything is her fault, when she notices the painting on the wall just above her. It's a Plains warrior in the foreground, running towards the viewer, but he's twisted so that his back is turned. He's anonymous. He's looking back at his pursuers. Three white cowboys on horses. They want to kill him. Their guns are out. The running man is almost naked, a loin cloth and moccasins are all he has. He carries a slender, almost effeminate tomahawk. He too is slender, almost effeminate. Honestly, he's already dead. The riders are upon him. They're adorned with the celebrated trappings of the White Wild West: big hats and chaps, boots and stirrups. The horses are fierce-looking, nostrils flaring like dragons. Irene can hear the pounding of their hooves. *How was he caught alone and on foot like this?* The slight warrior, possibly about Irene's age, will be shot through in a moment and pitch headlong onto the rocks in the foreground. Another anonymous dead Indian. It's only him between Irene and the blood lusting riders. *He could be Lakota*, she thinks. *He could pitch headlong out of the painting and onto my table*. He's framed by a tall and inhospitable sky. An unnatural infusion of orange into yellow. There's something sickly about the mixture. Irene notices that the perspective is also off-kilter. The whole scene tilts dizzily to the right, for no reason. The ground dips sharply to the east. It's as if the imminent violence has corrupted color and scale and balance. For

a moment, Irene thinks she's going to lose her lunch right there. She readies herself for a loud cascade of half-chewed pancake and yellow egg to launch across the table, then fights it off, puts a twenty down, heads for daylight. She gets as far as the closest cluster of Harleys lining Main Street, ducks between two, and vomits in three convulsions that splatter a good amount of chrome.

So much for feeling better. From Wall, it's a short drop due south into the Badlands. Route 240 makes a scenic loop with places to pull over and safely gaze. Anywhere from an hour to two depending on how often she pulls over and for how long. Irene has no idea what she's looking for; maybe just procrastinating before seeing her uncles. In her rearview mirror, the head of the brontosaurus disappears like a periscope into an asphalt sea.

The Badlands don't start out as planned. They scare Irene. She's trying too hard and the harder she tries to wrest meaning from limestone and shale, the worse it gets. She feels the profound pull of place, but it's too deep to locate. She might as well be on the moon.

She guides the Celica onto the Yellow Mounds Overlook. It might help if she gets out, feels the ground, sits still. She steps off the paved area and scoots down a few yards, takes a seat on a pitched patch of rough shortgrass. Irene leans back on her palms and stares into the panoramic past. She recalls two words from high school geology: deposition and erosion. That's what made this eerie, holy place. Deposition made the horizontal striping, layer after layer of rock and clay and maybe silt and mud and all that ash. Erosion made the wild ridges, canyons, crags, crevices and spindles. Restless winds and rivers—the White and the Cheyenne—carved through like muscly snakes eating the loosest deposits. Even now, Irene recalls, the Badlands are actively eroding. Weather will have its way and ultimately erase what seems unerasable.

Irene has what she came for. The dynamism and duality of the Badlands. Seemingly permanent but vanishing. Ever-changing. There's comfort there, old as the Earth, bigger than Irene, bigger than Robo-provost, bigger than all of us. Even the indecipherable Badlands will be deciphered by time. The flooding pain of Irene's loss has not abated, not one drop, and yet a tiny fissure in her grief has opened, through which the worst of it will slowly drain away.

It is after dark when Irene arrives at Pine Ridge; just as well, less to see. The Celica's headlights turn up a green and white *Entering Pine Ridge Indian Reservation* sign. It's like entering any town, city or state in the U.S., but the reservation is none of those. This is a nation. It's 2.8 million acres of Lakota Nation. The sign has been hit with buckshot so often it's more hole than sign.

The air smells of the day's heat and wood smoke. Even in June, there's not enough nature flowering on the rez to put fragrance in the breeze. When she pulls up to her mother's house, she sees a blaze in the fire pit out back, sparks shooting skyward. Were one to carry to the old roof, Irene imagines the whole thing bursting into flame and gone in minutes. A good half dozen figures sit around the flames. Irene turns off the Celica and, fearful of losing whatever momentum she has, quickly gets out and half-walks, half-stumbles towards the mixing light and shadow.

Uncle Joe—his name is Edward Hears Thunder, but everyone, not just his many nieces and nephews, calls him Uncle Joe—stands and walks to Irene as the rest watch in silence, some staring across the fire, others peering over their shoulders. The wicked waif returns.

Bone-weary, Irene collapses in Uncle Joe's arms.

When she comes to a few minutes later, she's in her childhood house, sitting in Grand-mère's treasured recliner. Uncle Joe is nearby on the frayed, tapestry-strewn divan. He stands and hands her the glass

of water that he'd set on the card table next to her. He's smiling the famous, low-key Uncle Joe smile.

"Welcome back princess. Quite an entrance."

"Hi, Uncle Joe."

"Hello, Irene."

He's like serenity, if serenity wore a charcoal gray pinstriped vest, white tee-shirt, black jeans with a silver-plated turtle belt buckle, and black biker boots. Edward Hears Thunder is (*Wait, was?*) Mama's oldest brother. She had five. One died in Vietnam. His name was Charles. Charles' best friend, both on the rez and in Vietnam, was Irene's dad. He came back from the war invisibly scarred in ways no one understood then. He told Mama about her brother's courage, his service to a country that neither of them—the poor Lakota and the poor white—had hesitated to fight for. And that's how Uncle Charles died, being brave. Mama had known Charles' best friend as the skinny and smiling white kid always hanging around the rez. He too came back different. Still skinny, but less smiley. As Irene's mother told Uncle Joe years later, she fell in love with him anyway on that the first day he was back, when he sat with her, tears in his eyes, and told her over the course of several hours, sometimes with her hand in his, everything he could remember about her little brother. They married two months later. Irene was born nine months after that. One more month, then he was gone.

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Joe. I should have been here."

"Why? No one could change this. They did not suffer. Probably never saw it coming. On their way to the clinic. Big 18-wheeler going fast. Driver must've fallen asleep or been on drugs. He's dead too. Truck's still out there, on its side. Spilled some kind of pesticide. Stinks like hell."

"I should have been here. Come back. I never came back."

"Well, we hardly noticed you'd left, if that helps, Running Through The Hail."

"Ha. Thanks... Uncle Joe... I... " Irene drops her head in her hands.

Running Through The Hail is Uncle Joe's name for Irene. He loved tradition and, without being heavy-handed about it, understood her encounter with a particularly sudden and fierce storm as her rite of passage, and her connection to her ancestors. "You can run through that, little one, you can run through anything." Irene wasn't so sure.

"Let me save you some serious guilt-tripping. Your Mama and Grand-mère didn't want you to come back. I didn't either. When one of our young people makes it out of here, all too often they come wandering back after a few months because they feel guilty, because they think they can or must help their families, because they're just afraid. Then it's game over. No leaving."

Irene looks up like a kid who wants to know how the story ends.

"Of course we missed you, Irene. Every day. We helped each other get through it. But we didn't want to see you back here. Not until the job was done anyway. Speaking of which, did you get the job done?"

"I graduated yesterday, Uncle Joe."

"Damn right you did, Running Through The Hail! Goddamn right!" The laconic smile breaks open like a piñata full of sunshine. Uncle Joe is off the divan and walking to Irene with his big arms open. She manages to stand. He hugs her with the warmth of a brown bear and she feels his ursine delight. She holds on, listening to his reassuring heartbeat. *Ta-thum; ta-thum*. From the gray center of their shared grief, Irene somehow feels nothing but golden love. Already, grief is shifting. *Deposition and erosion*.

Suddenly, she steps back and looks stricken, "But, Uncle Joe, that song Grand-mère sang the day I left. The song of mourning. You know it? I didn't mean to hurt them."

"Oh that. She told me about that. That was no mourning song, girl. That was a sacred hunting song. She was wishing you well among the white tatanka!"

"But it sounded so ... sad."

"I know," Uncle Joe smiles. "Grand-mère made every song sound sad, didn't she?"

Irene sleeps in Grand-mère's recliner. Uncle Joe put his sister's blanket over her. In the morning, she takes a long run past three-legged trampolines; refrigerators on their sides next to broken ovens, next to toppled sinks dangling plumbing like silvery intestines; too many abandoned vehicles to count, generic generators and repurposed car batteries that run a few hours' worth of electricity a day; outhouses; satellite dishes connected to nothing but wind; POW flags, *Original Department of Homeland Security* flags, handmade Seven Council Fires flags; motorcycles and horses. A box spring on edge like a repudiation of sleep. A pile of unused donated clothes so big that from a distance it looks like a mosaic sweat lodge.

When she gets back, Irene asks Uncle Joe if Mama can be buried with her diploma and Grand-mère with her running shoes. Uncle Joe loves the idea. "Smart. Mama might want to boast a little and we want Grand-mère's feet to be comfortable. No wonder you graduated at the top of your class!"

Mother and daughter are buried on the reservation. The ceremony is brief. Uncle Joe says a few words. Many others do too. Small tributes. Pieces of songs. Thanksgiving. Commending their spirits to the sky. Irene's cousins stand around her, those closest put hands on her shoulders, her back, her arms. She cries the whole time. She cries for Mama and Grand-mère. She cries for the hands on her back. She wants to keep that feeling of connection as long as she can, to the living and the dead. *Deposition and erosion*.

She rises early the next morning. Uncle Joe is outside waiting for her.

"Where'd you get this funky Toyota?"

"A friend."

"Oh, so she's smart and has friends too! Well, when you come back—and make sure it's *not* too soon—if you still have this jalopy, I'll tune her up. By the way, I tucked something in your duffel. They'd want you to have it. Consider it a graduation present—and not just graduation from school."

One more Uncle Joe hug. *Ta-thum, ta-thum*. Irene gets in the car and puts on her shades even though the sun is barely up. Eyes welling, she holds it together. As she drives off, she leans forward and pats the dashboard, "Uncle Joe's just playing, girl. We're okay."

37.

Sunday, September 8, 2019. The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time in the Catholic Church. Kathy always liked the formulation *Ordinary Time*. It was reassuring. Ordinary sounds safe, predictable, orderly, just like the numbered Sundays set one after the other in the liturgical calendar, a steady run from Epiphany to Advent. Ordinary time is tied to the changing seasons, the spin of the Earth, the Earth's laps around the Sun. Kathy herself thinks of it as a spiritual workout schedule, a hard but good run that should get her closer to the Father by following a trail left by the Son. Sometimes it feels like a bracing cross-country loop, sometimes like tedious laps around the high school track, and sometimes Kathy just doesn't show up.

It's too rainy and cool to walk to St. Bonaventure's, so the Reynolds family piles into the Odyssey. As usual, they arrive on the first few notes of the entrance hymn while Father Peter is led up the center aisle by two altar servers. There's a new coat rack in the side vestibule off the parking lot where jackets are hung instead of stacked wet on the pew. Kathy has a disproportionate love for the coat rack. She used to hate the little ordeal of stripping off raincoats in their pew and piling the wet mess next to her. Nods and smiles to people in nearby pews. Mike has a sleepy Celeste on his lap. C.J. brought a sketch pad and a handful of colored pencils. Kathy tries to be present. This might be her last Mass at St. B's or anywhere else for a while.

Somewhere after the first hymn—one lap around the track—Kathy zones out and only returns during the First Reading. Book of Wisdom. She sits up straight, blinks her eyes. The reading is about how we are so small that we can't hope to understand the vastness of God. Not gonna happen. Instead, Wisdom tells us, "All we can do is make guesses about things on Earth." Discouraged, Kathy looks at Mike, who smiles and shrugs as if to say *Guessing has worked for us so far*.

Kathy manages a smile back. Celeste is mercifully asleep. C.J. is drawing intently—looking repeatedly at something off to her right.

Another lap around the track.

The Second Reading is one of Paul's letters. *Good*, Kathy thinks *St. Paul is cool*. Saul the Taxman. Might've made a good lawyer, but ended up on the road to Damascus, saw the error of his ways, and went all in on God's love. Enter Paul. And Paul, well, he wanted everyone all-in. This got him in trouble with the Romans, who were more comfortable with fear than love and threw Paul in jail ... a lot. Prison turned Paul into a letter writer. This Sunday's letter is a nice note under weird circumstances. Paul sends a slave he befriended back to his master, but he also sends a letter imploring the master to welcome and love and liberate the slave, for all their sakes. It's a heartfelt letter, short and sweet, but the reading doesn't say if it worked. Paul was sainted, but what happened to the slave?

Another lap. Kathy's nervous about keeping pace.

Father Peter steps to the altar. Kathy makes a small sign of the cross on her forehead, lips and heart. Unless you really focus, this graceful gesture becomes automatic, so Kathy says the words aloud: "May the Word of the Lord be on my mind, my lips, my heart."

The Gospel is from Luke. Charismatic Jesus has acquired a large following—not metaphorical, crowds literally follow him. Like any good teacher, Jesus doesn't waste opportunities. As they walk together from town to town, he teaches. Today's lesson is a good news, bad news story. The good news is that everyone is welcome as long as they don't bring hate; bring your cross and we'll carry it together. The bad news, or maybe it's just the label warning, is that before you sign on, make sure you're up for it because *you have to give up everything else*. Don't half-ass it; no Mickey-Mousing; or, as Jesus puts it, don't be salt that loses its saltiness. Salt? Kathy is intimidated. She's sweating.

Luke sounds like St. Paul, and Luke should *not* sound like Paul: *All in! Romans be damned!*

Another lap and Kathy's not even sure what lane she's in.

It's the home stretch, the homily. Kathy draws a deep breath and leans forward in the pew. Father Peter talks about commitment and forgiveness. Forgiveness and commitment. It's all fine, but ordinary has her worn out.

Kathy looks at Mike. Celeste is awake now and chewing on a soft rattle. C.J. is still bent over her sketch pad. Another hymn. The sign of peace. The offertory. Kathy watches young families, parents whose kids are off to college, and older couples slow-march up to receive communion. Recessional hymn. Last lap. Kathy's feet know the way.

As they retrieve their still-damp coats, Kathy says to Mike, "Hon, why don't you and the kids get donuts at Frosty's and then come back for me? I'll check in with Father Peter." Mike knows what that means. They've been discussing it for months. He's happy for Kathy. And for donuts. "You got it, hon. And you got this, too. I'm with you—and soon a glazed donut will be too."

The front doors are open and Kathy sees that the rain has stopped. The sun pushes into the church. When Father Peter is done saying goodbye to the last of the parishioners, he closes the big wooden doors and blots it out. He returns up the center aisle, where Kathy awaits in front of the altar.

"Hello Father Peter," she says. "Thanks for your sermon. I enjoyed it."

"Hello Kathy. So glad you did. What can I help you with?" He loves his flock, but he can tell something's up and impromptu one-on-one is not necessarily his comfort zone.

"Well, I just wanted to say thanks. I," Kathy pauses, surprised by the tightness in her throat, "I'm going to, we're going to, take a break from Mass for a while."

Father Peter, short and wide, is a young priest from Chicago. After eighteen months in Lincoln, he's learning to like Nebraska. He's clean and smart and earnest. He's a Cubs fan and often works baseball into his sermons. This is the first time he's received a farewell like this. Not that people haven't left his parishes, they just never say goodbye. He's appreciative but flummoxed. Plus, Kathy Reynolds is formidable.

"Can I ask ... why?"

"Father Peter, it's not you. It's me. I've been sitting on this for a while. It's not the Church's sins, either, dark as they are. It's not a protest. It's just harder and harder for me to feel connected, to feel ... *moved*. It all feels, well, ordinary. It feels the same—the Mass, the readings."

"The homilies?"

"I need to be *out there* more."

"You can. We can. We do. Don't we?" Father Peter has a parishioner to save. "We have our outstanding community work. We've helped so many. So many count on us. On you. You've done it: food drives, holiday outreach, the new families committee, interfaith dialogues ... "

"Yes, yes, all great, Father." Kathy's not feeling heard. She doesn't want to debate. She steps on the gas a little, switches from first to third person. "We have to get out of *our* community only, out of *our* comfort zones. Make some waves, probably. We have a lot to atone for right here in Lincoln, in Nebraska, across the Plains."

"We atone to God."

"We can atone to each other too. And not only in our backyards here in Ashland, or once a month in Omaha. I mean, bigger. I mean the Plains. This isn't even our land, Father Peter. Christianity as much as U.S. Cavalry cleared the Plains."

"Not so, Kathy, not so." Father Peter wags a finger at Kathy. Since she's a few inches taller, it's at the level of her breasts. "My goodness, priests and nuns don't carry guns. Offering a pathway to God, to salvation, is never a bad thing."

"Salvation to some feels like genocide to others. 'Hey good news y'all, we can help, we can crucify the savage in you and you'll be reborn white."

"That's a horrible thing to say, Mrs. Reynolds, horrible. Our doors are always open. No one is barred. What I preach, what I try to preach, is a gospel of forgiveness."

Kathy looks around. She hadn't intended to put it on the line like that. The pews are empty now, but she imagines them filled and doesn't see a single face like Irene's. And why would she? Instead she sees the photo in Irene's house, the one of the kids lined up like trophies in front of the Carlisle School.

"Yeah. Well. No. Agree to disagree. Who are we forgiving? Ourselves? Salvation or starvation is some choice. It was all bad." Kathy wants to say more but is suddenly aware of standing in the chancery, in front of the altar, beneath the crucifix. It's not exactly a conference room in the Grassley Suite with a Keurig and creamers on the console. She may be leaving, but it's still a church. She looks through the sun-lit colors of the stained glass and feels cramped, thinking of all the sacred space *out there*.

"At the very least, the Lakota and other Great Plains tribes took better care of the Earth than we do."

"Oh, I see." Father Peter's eyebrows go up. "But perhaps they did not have our responsibilities."

"Responsibilities to what?"

"To feed 350 million Americans and half the world."

"So that's how you see it?" Kathy looks past Father Peter to the altar. Right after Mass, the deacon had removed the brass candles and

altar linens, dimmed the lights. Stripped, the marble table looks like a big white anvil—when hit with enough force, whatever is put upon the anvil will be forever changed.

"Sounds like a birth control issue to me, actually."

"Kathy, really..."

"I was kidding, really. But is there no irony when you say *Americans?*"

"I can't roll back the clock though, can I?"

"Sometimes I wish we could. See with our own eyes what it was like, the Plains in balance, even the Ogallala being formed. Magical. Maybe we'd feel differently."

"The Ogallala can't be seen."

"That's part of the problem. Can't mourn what you can't see."

"Kathy, that's a problem for science and businessmen. For technology. A solution will be found. Have faith."

"With all due respect, Peter, you're so wrong. Businessmen? Really? You didn't read *Laudato Si*? What did Francis say about responsibility? Protecting the environment is the obligation of 'every living person on the planet.' This is a moral issue."

Kathy regrets dropping the "Father" in front of Peter. Regardless, she's done it, said her piece face-to-face rather than just disappear. She's okay with that. She doesn't have to win over young Father Peter from Chicago. She knows what she, Clete and Irene have to do.

She half turns to go, then turns back. "Oh, but I want to share something, Father. For the first time, I looked up St. Bonaventure this week."

"Something to remember him by?"

"Funny, right? I guess so."

One eyebrow up, Father Peter looks guardedly interested. "And what did you find, Mrs. Reynolds?"

For whatever reason, perhaps to get some distance from the altar and crucifix, Kathy makes a small gesture to Father Peter with an open hand and starts walking around the front pews as he follows.

"Well, it was only online, nothing heavy duty, you know, the Book of Google," Kathy leaves her dumb joke hanging in the air, blaming Mike for rubbing off on her. To her relief, Father Peter takes it up, "Ah, yes, Brother Google. I'm familiar."

"Right?" *Thank you, Mike*. "Anyway, Bonaventure was one serious thirteenth century boss! I read about his book *Journey of the Mind to God*. Some title, right? Read some excerpts. Very philosophical. Very *deep*. I learned ... a lot ... I think."

"This is impressive," says Father Peter optimistically. "So why not stick around here after all and see how it all turns out?"

They turn a corner at the end of the front pew and walk down the side aisle towards the back of the church. As they do, they pass the first seven Stations of the Cross, from seven to one, depicted in the stained glass windows. It's like watching the first reel of the life of Jesus in reverse.

Jesus Falls the Second Time.
Veronica Wipes Jesus' face.
Simon Is Compelled to Carry the Cross.

"Well, because even Bonaventure is calling me to get more engaged *out there*. If you substitute the word Love for the word God, then what Bonaventure seems to be saying is, we get to divine love by starting in our own hearts, and to start in our own hearts means passing through our own sadness and pain, what he calls the Vale of Tears. Then he lays out all these steps along what he calls the Ascension, right?" Kathy's surprised by her rising excitement. "But the key for me is that if God or the Great Spirit is the Alpha and Omega, which Bonaventure believes, then aren't we—you, me, everyone—all the steps in between? Isn't it up to us to bridge the beginning and the end

every day? Now that's a big, big lift, and so to make it, to at least have a chance, our bodies and minds and spirits have to be aligned, right?"

"Right. I think. Say it again?"

"If the Alpha and Omega is God, then everything in between is us. The Great Spirit left a lot of room for us *to act*. What happens between Beginning and End is up to us. It's why we're here. To do the right thing in all the days in between. Those are ours. And we keep blowing it. Killing people. Killing the planet..." Kathy stops herself.

"Yes, I see. I think. We were given agency for a reason. *The days in between*. I like that."

"For me, if we're the steps in between, that means action, that means getting out there. Bonaventure says: *pay attention to things*. I love that. Look close at the physical world around you. He's very methodical, very detailed, and I missed a lot for sure, but he's also kind of mystical and he talks about beauty and beautiful creatures and splendor."

Kathy can't tell if she's right or wrong, but it feels right and Father Peter has perked up too, nodding his head a lot. In the sanctuary, he's usually the one talking; he's enjoying listening.

The acts of the life of Jesus roll backwards.

Jesus Meets His Mother.

Jesus Falls the First Time.

"Bonaventure talks about *res in se ipsis*, which means 'consider things in themselves.' And I get it because in the law we talk about *res ipsa loquitor*, which means the thing speaks for itself. What am I doing, you probably know that. Sorry."

"*Sic ego intelligo latin*."

"Good one, father. Anyway, most of the time, we don't let living things speak to us, do we, even if they're divine works? I don't mean just people. I mean trees, birds, rivers ... "

"Aquifers?" Father Peter smiles. He looks impressed. He keeps nodding agreeably. They're crossing the back of the church now, past the center aisle and half-filled basin of holy water, to the far aisle, where they continue their contemplative lap, circling back towards the front of the church and passing alongside the second half of the Stations of the Cross, starting at the end.

Jesus Placed in the Tomb.

"Aquifers. Entombed water. Got that right," Kathy continues. "As wise old Bonaventure says, 'Hey y'all, even though there's a lot of crap out there'—sorry, he says *concupiscence*—'keep a lookout for signs of the divine.' I mean, think about it: how often do we even see these real things anymore, really real—not the concupiscence we get on our phones? Bonaventure says, 'If you see it, you're seeing part of the One.' I think it's the One Love. The Great Spirit. I think that's our ticket. And when we see it, we have to act on it. Protect it, right?"

Jesus Taken down from the Cross.

Father Peter smiles for real. Nods even faster. "Yes. Right. Yes. Good! I see it, Kathy. Most important, I see it awake in you."

Kathy puts a bow on it. "If God or Love or the Great Spirit made the Earth, and if Earth is filled with divine works, well then we have to stand by her. That's where I hear the call. These are not ordinary times, Father Peter. I think it's the planet that's in a vale of tears now."

Jesus Falls a Third Time.

Father Peter sounds like a Cubs fan, "Yes. Go for it, Kathy. Get in the game. I hate to see you go, but I love that you're going so thoughtfully. Just remember us, remember the good we can do, and come back and check in."

Father Peter opens his arms wide, his red and white cassock like a giant cross, and Kathy accepts a hug. As she does, she looks up at the final stained-glass window.

The Weeping Women of Jerusalem.

Carried on the stooped back of a weary Jesus, the cross resembles an annihilating X. The weeping women on their knees, heads covered, beautiful in their grief. Looming in the background, the centurions, thick-necked and gray-faced.

"See these women?" asks Kathy. "We don't have to do that. We have the vale of tears, sure we do; but we have a vale of strength too. It's time we worked from strength to healing."

"No *Via Dolorosa* for you then."

"We'll see."

They finish their lap where it began, in front of the altar. It looks different now, less like an anvil and more like a supper table. Full of contradictions to be hashed out. Kathy extends her hand. Father Peter takes it.

"Thank you, Father Peter."

"Thank you, Kathy."

She hears a car horn. Must be Mike and the kids.

"Hey, want a donut?"

"Ha! I don't like donuts. Enjoy it, and your family, and go with God. *Ave atque vale*."

On the way out, Kathy thinks, *Who doesn't love donuts?* Then she thinks, *Best break-up I ever had*. And then, *What the hell have I signed up for?*

Back in the Odyssey, her daughters' faces are covered in chocolate and sprinkles, working through giant donuts. Through a mouthful of donut, Mike asks how it went.

"I said goodbye and, believe it or not, I got a big hug."

"I believe it. You could get a hug from a bear after stealing his honey."

"Maybe that's because I'm married to the best hugger in Nebraska."

"Tru dat, honey dew. Now," says Mike, lifting a white box off the back seat and opening the lid, "hug yourself around one of these."

Kathy extracts a glistening glazed donut, and as Mike puts the box back, she sees C.J.'s open sketch pad and pencils on the car floor under Celeste's little feet. With her free hand, Kathy picks up the pad. It's the Weeping Women of Jerusalem. That's what C.J. was looking at off to her right during Mass, a Station of the Cross she'd seen on so many Sundays. But the women are not weeping. This is C.J.'s version. The cross is not a heavy X but a twinkling star rising upwards. The women are not kneeling but on their feet in robes of red and green and gold. And they are holding hands, dancing in a circle around the ascending star.

Kathy is stunned. Her feisty ten-year-old gets it. She sees it. Splendor. Out of the Vale of Tears, into a Vale of Healing.

"C.J., honey, why'd you draw it like this?"

"Because he doesn't want them to be sad, mom. That's not why he did it."

"Did what?"

"Gave himself up to the bad men."

"Why'd he do it then?"

"So they could be happy. He was sad so they could be glad. Then he goes up in a star to watch over and remind them they can be happy. So they are. And they dance."

"They dance?"

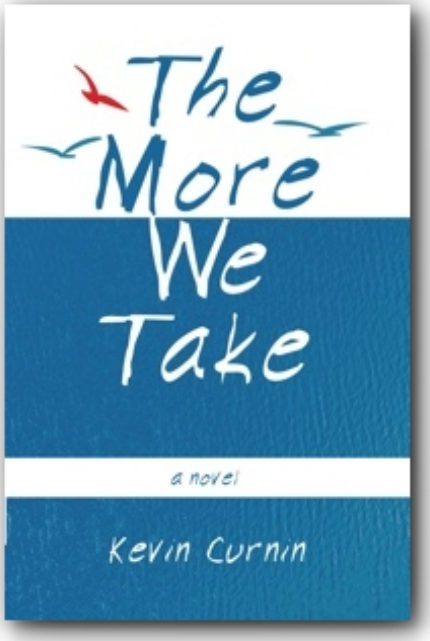
"Of course, mom. They have all those stars. They have each other. So they dance."

"Right. Right, they dance. Of course they do." Kathy takes in the revelation from the Book of C.J., looks at Mike with tears in her eyes.

"I saw it," he says, wistful. He raises his donut and Kathy does the same.

"Cheers," says Mike, blending high and low as only he can, keeping it real.

"Amen, sister!" Mike could be referring to her or to C.J., but Kathy is thinking of her mom and Irene and dancing through all the days in between.



When the Ogallala Aquifer dies, life in the Midwest will perish. Can ordinary Nebraskans turn the tide? Only with help of legendary Lakota chiefs. Their race not yet run, together they may stop a second desecration of the Great Plains.

The More We Take

by Kevin Curnin