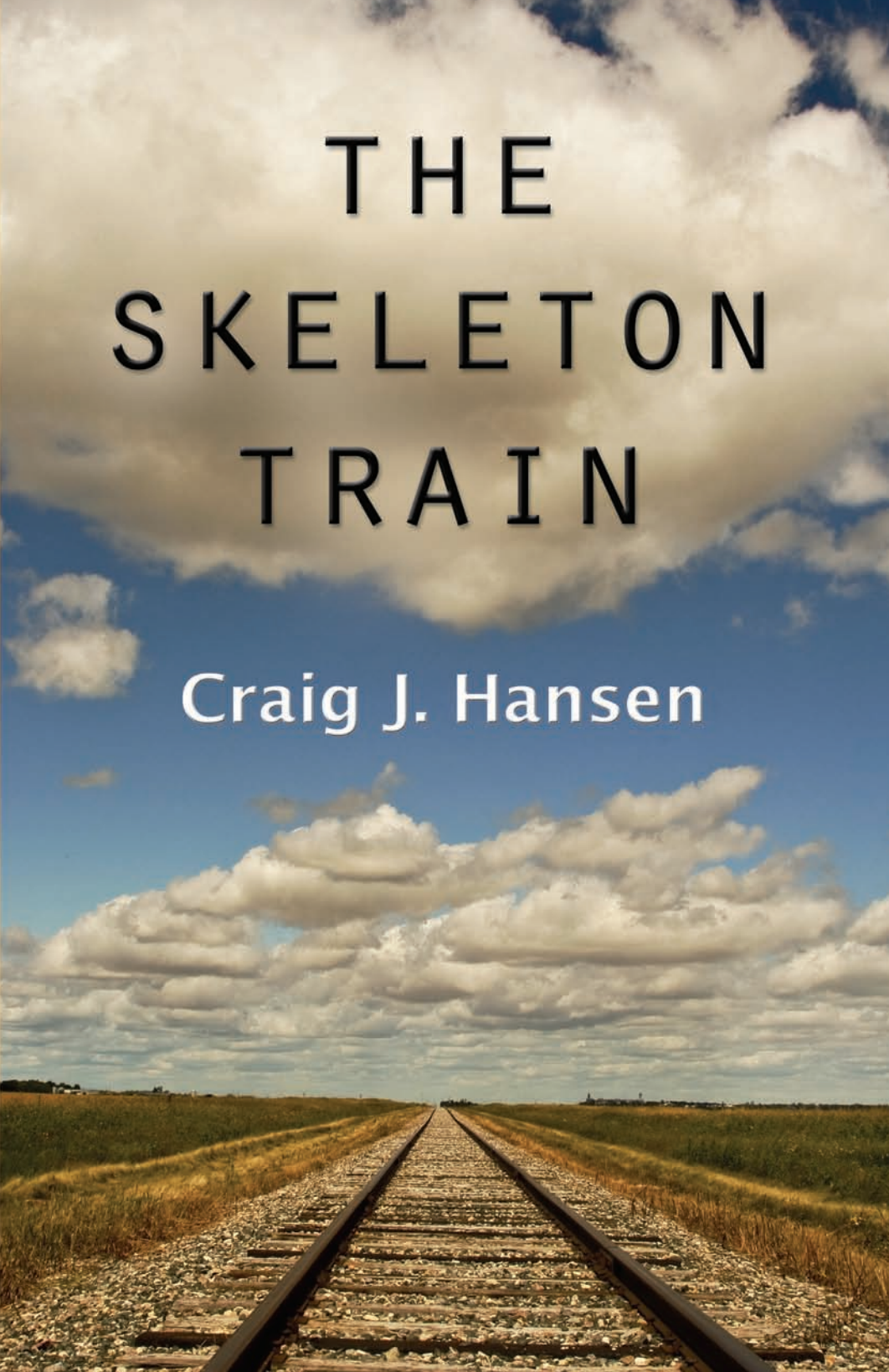
Combining adventure, poignancy, and wry humor, The Skeleton Train tells the story of Jason Audley, a young man on the margins. Appearing alienated, even troubled, Jason's internal life is rich. He's resourceful, forgiving, and sometimes daring. Jason narrates his wild quest for a missing girl, a quest that brings him into the quirky and dangerous world of freight train riders, and a quest that teaches him much about himself, friendship, and the consequences of choices.

The Skeleton Train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The Skeleton Train

Craig J. Hansen

Chapter 1

"Pass the peas," Lydia says, but I ignore her.

"Pass the peas to your sister," my dad says.

"I'm not touching them," I say.

"I thought you liked peas," my dad says.

"Things change," I say.

"You know, that's enough of that. This is between your mother and me."

My mother watches us both while she eats.

"Fine," Lydia says. She leans over the table and snatches the peas.

"They're going to build on the empty lot," my father says.

That was Davey's house, across the street and one house down. It blocked everyone's view of the valley. That lot was steep, fell right into the woods. For those of us without a view, this was a place to stare into real blank space, not into someone else's yard or window.

Elysian Fields. Paradise for good Romans. A squatty tower greeted visitors to our neighborhood. It said so right on the tower, in letters of wrought iron. The place began as a bunch of shoebox houses crowded between corn fields. It looked like a Roman army camp. Very precise. No curves. The Elysian Fields grew, and they ran out of farm fields and expanded into stray patches of woods, muddy ponds, and the Purley Creek valley.

It's all Roman street names. The main road into Elysian Fields is Elysian Street. Very imaginative. Emperor streets connect to it, okay ones, like Augustus and Claudius. And crazy ones, like Caligula and Nero. Then are names of Roman places, like Ostia and Carthage. By the time they got to our area, someone was getting tired. We lived on Via Street, which means Street Street.

Our side of the Via Street is a row of split-levels. They are all the same. The west side of the street, with its woods, has houses for richer people. Most have four bedrooms; many have walk-out basements. One has bricks on the front. The east-siders and the west-siders didn't talk much.

"That's not a buildable lot," my dad said. "Too steep."

But Davey's father, Marlin, is a builder, stores and offices and such. And one day in mid-summer, a huge pile of creosote timbers appeared, crushing the weeds and sending a tarry smell up and down the street. Over the next couple months, workers constructed a layer cake of terraces, filled them with dirt and rocks, and started building a house.

"These columns are real fiberglass," said one dad. It was part of the daily inspection. This happened when all new houses went in. It had been a while, though, and Davey's house was a real draw.

"This place must be 2500 square feet, it it's an inch," said another, "and look at this driveway. I didn't know you could get green cement."

Davey moved in later that winter, just after a soggy four-inch snowfall. Davey stood at the end of his driveway. I stood at the end of mine. I walked slowly up the sidewalk on my side of the street, made a snowball, and lobbed it at him. Davey watched it, caught it with one hand, and whipped it back, hitting me between the eyes. I wiped the snow off my face, shook it out of my jacket.

"Jesus Christ," I said. I could see there was no point in escalating.

He shrugged, then smiled. "Do you like baseball?"

"No," I said, "I'm a basketball man."

"What grade are you in?"

"Seventh," I said.

"Seventh," he said then "See ya."

"Yeah," I said.

He joined our school the next week, Shifford A. Tarman Middle School. He joined 7A. I was in 7C. It was no secret what this meant. The smart kids were in 7A, the kids everyone ignored were in 7B. The artsy misfits, the aspiring criminals, the imbeciles, and everyone who wasn't white—that was 7C. I felt there had been some mistake. I tried to explain that to my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Myx. I delivered an impassioned appeal and she banned me from art for the rest of the school year. I sat in the hallway reading a book while my classmates painted, glued, and stapled each other. So it didn't matter to me. I liked reading.

Our science teacher was prepared for 7C. "See this jar?" he asked, holding up a one-quart canning jar. "See this fish?" With his other hand he displayed a dead, six-inch catfish. He placed the fish in the jar and screwed the lid on tightly. "If there's noise, if there's backtalk, if there's any kind of trouble, the lid comes off." He held up the jar for our inspection. "We'll get aerobic decay first and then anaerobic. When I loosen this lid, after this little fellow turns to gray goo, the smell will be worse than you can imagine. Very penetrating. Eye-watering. I'm used to it. But you..."

He paused, then continued, "Remember, it's not me who opens this jar. It's you. Cross the line in this class and retribution will be swift, extreme, and automatic. Any questions?"

Davey and I spent some time together during that year, but Davey's mild interest in me wore thin when he discovered my social status. I'm not sure why it was so low. On the plus side, I was normal height, normal weight, and dressed inoffensively. On the minus side, I was shy, my parents were getting divorced, and I played the piccolo. I wasn't the lowest, a pariah, untouchable. That came later.

Davey, on the other hand, had no minuses. He was tall, had curly blond hair, blue eyes, and extraordinarily white teeth. He smiled easily. And he was a natural athlete. He was great at math. And, though not particularly talkative, said the right things at the right times.

That spring was eventful. Here's why. First, my mother went back to college during the divorce. In June, she moved in with her poetry teacher Anna Bella Wolcott. Second, Lydia, three years older than me, got her driver's license. On her first trip by herself, she opened the garage door, started the car, and backed over our dog. It had been a dachshund named Milly. I'm not sure who I missed more, Mom or Milly. Third, my dad lost his job, found a new, better one, and then lost that one, too. Fourth, I got acne.

"You've got acne," says Dr. Wendt. He wears a red vest with his white shirt and bow tie. He looks jolly enough, but his eyes give him away.

"There is a medical treatment for this," Dr. Wendt says. "But it's dangerous stuff. Causes suicides. Besides, maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I see this acne condition a bit differently. You see, acne is the result of lifestyle choices." He grabs my chin and moves my head this way and that. "You need to stop shoveling chocolate and French fries into you."

"I don't like chocolate. I hardly ever eat French fries," I lie.

"Don't lie to me, son. Your face tells the story. You have to exercise some self control. And touching yourself. Masturbation. Acne has been linked to masturbation."

My mother is sitting in the room with me. I look at my feet.

"Self control, my boy. I can't do it for you. Your mother can't do it for you. You have to do it all yourself. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now how are things going otherwise? You are going into 8th grade?" He pauses. I nod. "What section?" he asks.

"8C," my mother says quietly.

Dr. Wendt frowns. "Not smart like your sister, eh? Well, you had better learn to do the best you can with what God gave you. Mind, body, and soul."

"You heard Dr. Wendt," says my mother, searching her purse for her keys. "Where are my car keys? I told you to remember where I put them."

"I don't remember," I say.

"Yes, you do. You remember everything."

"Coat pocket."

"You heard Dr. Wendt," she repeats. "It's up to you, Jason."

I nod, then say, "What about the medicine? Can I get a second opinion?"

"I think we can get along fine without a suicide," my mother says.

I knew it was my fault. Davey's mother had told me the same thing, early in the spring when we were still hanging out. I resolved to do better. For weeks, I ate no butter, no ice cream, no candy, no french fries, no snack food, nothing that had ever encountered a whiff of grease. To be safe I avoided all red meat and most starches. I lost 11 pounds and my acne became

pathological, covering me with inflamed, festering lumps. Whenever self abuse entered my mind, I thought of my Great Grandma Penance, moldering in her grave.

When I went back to school in fall, students stared. A few asked "What happened to you?" I didn't have a good answer, I just shrugged and tried to keep my head down, which, of course, invited closer scrutiny. Younger kids, particularly 6th graders, who are generally in humanity's cruelest stage, taunted me as I walked home from school. I could have pounded them. I knew how.

My mother was adopted, to add a girl to a family of four boys. Four mannish boys. Most started shaving at 10. They all were wrestlers. Two were state champs. When other mothers got mad, they screamed at you or ran crying from the room. My mother put me in a chokehold and threw me to kitchen floor.

"That's enough backtalk," she'd say through gritted teeth. When I was eight, I got in a fight with a kid at school. I won, due to my knowledge of chokeholds. He had three older brothers who chased me for blocks after school, until they cornered me in my own front yard. I screamed for help. My mother came out the front door, took in the situation and said, "All right, that's enough of that. One at a time!"

My mother's brothers were broad-shouldered, beer-gutted, and oddly bow legged. They had a complex geometry, while my mother was simple and linear. Tall, wiry, pale—she had small ears, a high hairline, and a surprised look that gave no warnings and no information. Backed by her army of brothers, she was used to getting her way, particularly with men, who had to learn to interpret vague nods and vacant glances. My father never learned this. That's why they divorced, I imagine. That, and the fact that they had nothing in common.

"We need to have a chat," my father said to my sister and me. "As you know, your mother has decided to move out. Sometimes

adults may seem to act in ways that you may find puzzling or inexplicable. Unexpected. You may feel blind-sided, hurt, betrayed, humiliated. Maybe guilty. These feelings are natural when your mother does something so completely bizarre." He smiled weakly. "Throughout human history, we see a parade of costly decisions promulgated on flawed, frail imitations of reasoning." In college, my father had been a double major in English and history until he switched to accounting and flunked out. "So try to keep this disaster in our own lives in perspective. Many, many have suffered, and now you join their ranks."

"What are you babbling about?" asked Lydia. At this time, Lydia was between junior and senior year in high school. She shared my mother's linear frame and my father's frizzy Welsh hair. She looked like a white Angela Davis. She excelled in sarcasm and advanced placement classes. I think she despised my father and me.

"Your wife is leaving you, father," Lydia said, "because it is the natural consequence of her growth as a person, as a female person."

"So we are like innocent civilians killed by bombs?" I asked.

"That's enough," said my father. He rubbed his stubbly chin vigorously. "We have to pull together here."

"You two can," said Lydia. "I'm moving in with Mom."

"I don't think that's a good environment…" my father began to say.

"Look," Lydia said, "I'm out of here in a year. I'm seventeen. I'm an adult. I can certainly choose where I live. And Mom invited me."

"When?" I asked.

"Yesterday," she said. "Don't tell me you didn't receive an invitation?"

"You're super, super skinny," I said to Lydia. I knew she hated that.

"At least I'm not a gorilla like Dad," she said. She knew she could get to me by insulting our father. I was immune to her direct insults. In truth, I rarely understood them.

"We'll see about this moving business," my father said.

Two days later, Lydia moved out.

Chapter 2

Long before Marlin built his house, and, in fact, long before half of the homes in Elysian Fields even existed, we moved in. It was a gap-toothed neighborhood--new homes, weedy lots. Blacktop roads led nowhere. Corn stood sentry on the borders. You entered Elysian Fields from County Road 2, a shoulderless road that ran the width of Purley County. Across the road and down half a mile stood Baker's Landing, a trailer court. It was said to be inhabited by gypsies. The trailer court, along with the construction sites of new houses, provided our summer entertainment, as both were strictly forbidden.

We had two ways to get to Baker's Landing--a risky dash across the highway and then a half mile down, or the secret route. This route took us into the valley and then along Purley Creek. You followed the creek to the shotgun tunnels. These were twin concrete tunnels, sixty yards long, that ran under the highway. In one ran the creek, ending in a foamy waterfall and small pond. The other was for us, as far as we could tell. From there, you

turned left, following a utility road cut through the woods. This connected directly to the last street at the back of the trailer court.

The last trailer on the last street stood off by itself, dilapidated and forlorn. Osage orange trees crowded the little trailer. These trees bore a green fruit—hedge apples--about the size of a softball that was sticky, poisonous, and furrowed like a brain. Hedge apples were said to repel spiders. The trees themselves were miserable, thorny, twisted things, like trees from Transylvania. Living in a trailer in this part of the world was an act of desperation. They were hard to heat, harder to cool, and blew into fatal shrapnel in even the most anemic tornado.

Because we knew the people who lived in trailers were inferior to us, we walked its curved gravel streets, whispering about the general state of disrepair and mocking those who did their best to mimic our suburban life. But our disdain was mixed with fear. We knew dogs were meaner in the trailer court, and the people who lived there wouldn't hesitate to kill outsiders. But what most captured our attention was the last trailer.

"A witch lives there," an older girl told us confidently. "I've seen her with my own eyes."

"What was she doing?" we asked.

"You know, witch stuff. Like I would hang around there."

The truth of this seemed obvious. We responded by sneaking around the trailer and pelting it with hedge apples, leaving sticky dents in the flimsy exterior. Once a crone's voice shouted at us from a window, terrifying and satisfying us. We planned nighttime raids, but those never took place, and eventually we moved on. Still, I was fascinated.

"What exactly is a witch?" I asked.

My mother chopped carrots, tucked her hair behind her ears. "What do you think a witch is?" she asked me without looking up.

"A woman who goes bad," I said.

"Bad. In what way?"

"Uses magic and stuff, to do evil."

"What kind of evil?"

"I don't know. Curses. Eating kids."

"And kids don't deserve to be eaten?"

"No," I said. "Not if they're little kids."

"Do you think there are male witches?"

"Maybe, but men have guns and tanks," I said authoritatively. "Do you know any magic?" I asked my mother.

She turned toward me, smiled a little. "Sure, all women do."

It's August. I'm getting ready to go back to school. 8C awaits me.

"Let's review our situation," Dad said. He is Tom Audley, 38, college dropout. Ex-GI, where he spent most of his time in a typing pool. He is great at typing. He has red curly hair, thin on his head and like a sweater on his back. He stands in front of me, wears a white tee shirt, too small. Black pleated pants strained over the hams. His eyes are pale and soft, like his skin. He smokes.

"You are starting school in a week," he says. I nod.

"Well, let's take a look at how things stand. Looking forward to school?" he asks

"No," I say.

"I hated eight grade," he says, exhaling smoke. "I hated ninth grade."

"I go to the high school for ninth. That will be better," I say.

"Not likely," he says. "Probably worse. You getting pimples on your neck, too?"

I shrug.

"Well, here's the deal, chief. We're broke." He stubs out his cigarette. "You may have to go live your mother."

"I don't want to," I say, though I am actually kind of mixed on this. They probably eat regular meals over there. I still hadn't met Anna Bella and I wanted to.

He nods. "Good man. Maybe you could get a paper route while I'm looking for work."

"Maybe," I say. Tom Audley wasn't looking very hard. For years he was the bookkeeper at an insurance office. Then the company went belly up. He was stuck at home and he and my mother avoided each other. Then he got a job as an accountant for the school district. He wore a tie, left home at 7:30 and came home at 4:45. He shot baskets with me every evening. He had an awkward, squatty shot, but he made like 80% of his shots. Then our school district combined with another one. Not quite as much development on our end of town as people expected. They merged services and my dad lost his job. Low seniority.

I cut the grass for the sake of appearances. No one trimmed and weeds overgrew the shrubs. I kind of liked how it looked and we definitely had attracted more leopard frogs.

"We have to economize, buddy." Tom says. "That means no more fruit and vegetables. Too damned expensive. Unless we get them by hunting," he said. He got up, went to the fridge and pulled out a watermelon. He held it in one hand, like it weighed nothing.

"You got that hunting," I say.

He smiles. "Yeah, once in while wild game will come right to the road and you just have to reach out and grab it."

No farmer grew his watermelons next to the road. You had to get past the corn, up near the outbuildings, where they could watch them.

"So you want me to steal stuff?" I say.

"No," he says. "You be good."

Just before school started, my mother took Lydia and me clothes shopping. I got to meet Anna Bella. I knew what she would look like, because I knew what poets look like. She'd look starved and otherworldly. She'd start sentences and not finish them because she's lost in her head. She wouldn't care what she

looked like but she'd be beautiful. And I was right, except I didn't expect her to be black.

"I'm Anna Bella Wolcott," she says, extending a thin dark hand with pink fingernails. "I'm pleased to meet you, Jason. I hope we can be friends."

I think carefully about what to say. How do you talk to a poet? "To be or not to be," I responded. "That is the question."

She looks at me seriously. "Let's make it 'to be,'" she says.

I stand in a three-fold mirror, watching my duplicates stare into infinity. Lydia is trying on clothes.

"How's your father holding up?" my mother asks.

"Fine," I say. "He's got some leads on a job."

This isn't true.

"Where?"

"I don't know, places that need bookkeeping, like bookstores."

My mother nods then she says "You look thinner."

"That's because I'm getting taller," I say. I am nearly even with my mother now. And I am starting to thicken in the chest, arms, legs, and neck, like Tom. I didn't like this part one bit.

Lydia interrupts. "I look fat in this skirt," she says.

"No you don't, it's perfect for your hips," my mother says.

"You think so?"

"Your legs are bony," I say, just to be mean, and her face falls. "Well," I add. "Good bony. You know, strong."

"Jason, maybe you'd like to go pick out a couple of shirts?" my mother says.

"You always ask me questions," I say.

"Is that so?" she says.

My mother, Astrid Audley, family name Sorensen, is a reserved person. Maybe her brothers' noise made her quiet. Her brothers' names are Kyle, Karl, Kris, and Ken. These are all allegedly Norwegian names, even though the family was Danish. It

was a Norwegian community in the upper peninsula of Michigan where they grew up. My grandmother died right after adopting baby Astrid. She wasn't Astrid then. Her name was Melody but they didn't like it. Not Norwegian. Grandmother blew up in a church—gas leak—while she was helping with flowers for a funeral. It was very tragic. The town lost its church, its pastor, and three stalwart church ladies in a single fireball. It was a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church. Very conservative. They knew this was the work of either God or Satan. The community tended to think it was God, which brought the reputation of the victims into question. It had been hard enough for Danes to fit in anyway, and my mother's family moved south to Wisconsin, to a town that welcomed Scandinavians of all races.

I don't know much about how Astrid grew up. I only know her now. She favors loose clothes, like baggy dresses that reach below the knee. She wears her dark hair straight and long, which gives her a pioneer look. She is most lively when wrestling me to the floor. In our civil moments, Lydia and I agreed that she was rather strange.

Astrid worked at a gun magazine as the circulation editor. The magazine was devoted to sportsmen who had black powder weapons, like muskets. It featured unlikely hunting stories and expert black powder advice. She only worked twenty hours a week but then she quit.

"So," my father says, "how's your mother?"

"Bad," I say. We're riding in his boxy old Volvo. It's my first day back at school.

Tom looks straight ahead. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. She's awful quiet."

"Well, she's always quiet. I have to do all the talking. Usually it's the other way around. Most women talk, talk, talk. Not your mother. We could drive up to Milwaukee and she'd go the whole way without saying a word."

"What are you doing today?" I ask.

"Doing some research. Thinking of starting my own business. Financial stuff." He glances at me and smiles.

"Don't do anything stupid," I say.

"Hey, now don't you talk like that to me. I know what I'm doing." We pulled up in the school's circle drive. I opened the door. "Go ahead and walk home," Tom says. "I'll be out this afternoon."

8C. Sci Fi acne. My eyebrows are trying to grow together. Davey has nothing to do with me. Neither does anyone else. I shamble the hallways, half a head taller than even the girls. I turn fourteen, take a job working 10 hours a week as a dishwasher at a steakhouse. Tom Audley gets temporary work here and there. This cleans him up a little. His grandparents came from Wales to work Appalachian coal mines. Tom escaped by joining the Army, then got out and went to college at the University of Illinois on the GI Bill. He met Astrid at a wrestling match. She was watching her brother Kyle. Tom talked. Astrid listened, and pretty soon they had Lydia.

Shunned, I get bored. So I turn to reading. We have a lot of reading material around the house--eighteen years of Black Powder Sportsman, a dozen Reader's Digest condensed books, and Tom's college textbooks, I read them all.

Why I do this is complicated. I knew I was an underachiever. I had been told so. It's a comfortable place to be. As an underachiever, you are all about potential. If you try and turn out to be mediocre, your life is over. I was reasonably careful not to apply myself too much. I didn't want to know what might happen. But that was in public. Away from school, I'm different than that. I can reach a bit, and no one knows. After school, when I should be hanging out or at least watching TV, I read. I dig into Tom's college books, starting with the Norton Anthology of American Literature, stumbling through the first 100 pages, and switched to

Copi's Symbolic Logic, and very soon afterward, read the first half of Chagnon's Yanamano: The Fierce People. If the mix of textbooks, literature, and class handouts is kind of strange, Tom's notes in the margins are even stranger. His handwriting is tiny, cramped. Sometimes I think he makes good points. Sometimes his notes have no connection to the subject. Sometimes he drew pictures.

I bring Tom a textbook, show him two small sketches of boobs. I look at Tom and smirk.

"Jesus, Jason," he says. "Grow up."

Maybe I learn things. It's hard to tell. It feels like I comprehend things as I read them. But I can't put it into words. For a while, I start raising my hand in class. When called on, I find my head swirling with information and my tongue sticks to my teeth.

The 8C English teacher talks about death as a theme in literature. "Can someone give me an example?" she asks the class.

"Texas Chainsaw Massacre," says someone.

"Why, that's a wonderful example," the teacher says. "Any others?"

The urge to say something overwhelms me. I raise my hand and blurt "Thanatopsis" before I'm called on.

"Mr. Audley, I'd appreciate it if you would wait until I've recognized you. Now what was that you said?"

But now nothing comes out. I look at her with pleading eyes. But she is stubbornly patient.

"William Cullen Bryant," I finally whisper. "1821 version."

After class, the teacher asks me where I encountered William Cullen Bryant. I stare at my hands, veiny, connected to thick wrists. "I don't know," I say. She looks at me for moment. She can sit absolutely still, like she's in a wax museum. I've noticed this before. She and Astrid would get along great, sitting side-by-side, in perfect noncommunication.

"Well," she says finally, "I'd like to see your book report turned in on time for a change. You could get A's if you wanted. I can't do it for you. Your mother can't do it for you. You have to earn them yourself."

Tom watches me read. "Don't bother with the humanities," he says. "They'll just let you down. Here." He tosses an accounting textbook to me. "Here's the secret, chief. You've got to offer what people want. It's not too early to start thinking about that. Make yourself marketable."

I toss the book back to him. "I don't know about that," I say. "Anna Bella does poetry, and she lives in real nice house."

"You got that wrong," Tom says. "She's a teacher, a college teacher. She gets paid to teach and probably makes damn good money. Anyway, she does poetry because everyone else is afraid to try it. Now the Welsh, everyone is a poet. Everyone is a singer. Just because you can do what other people will pay for doesn't mean you can't have a soul. It's a matter of perspective."

"I'm not going to read an accounting book," I say.

"Try this one. Meteorology," Tom says. "You could be a TV weatherman. Those guys make big bucks."

It snows for three days. We always get some snow. Falls one day and is gone two days later. This is a lot of snow, almost 18 inches. No big winds, just, as the meteorology book would put it, a stalled cold front, feeding on moisture from the Gulf. It stays cold because of a trailing arctic high and snow becomes part of the routine, part of the look, part of the smell of a normal day.

I begin to get ambushed with snowballs on the walk home. Younger kids, mostly. I think it's the acne, but who knows. I take it as play for a while, and throw snowballs back. But it comes with insults, and I realize I'm being stoned in the biblical sense. It's a terrible realization. So I run, hounded by a wolf pack. After a week

of this, I ask Tom for rides home. Tom asks why on earth he would do that. I can't bring myself to tell him.

So I take a backyard route, and for few days, no problems. But, in the end, I'm too predictable. An unprecedented group waits for me—hardened, blooded troops mixed with nervous first-timers. Some are my age. And of these, one is Davey.

When the barrage starts, I stood there, absorbing hits. I don't have the will to run or fight back. I turn my head away and get hit in the ear, which hurts. I hardly notice the loosely packed, lobbed ones. These are thrown by those with moral qualms. One shot hits me square in the chest. It comes in hard, and I know it's from Davey. I look at him. He looks back at me, packing another snowball. He packs it methodically, making it smooth, condensed, dangerous. Then he turns and whips it sidearm at one of the pack, a big kid, who yells "What the hell?" when it hits. Davey laughs and rapidly fires off more shots before the others begin to turn on him. The pack melts away into small skirmishes, and I walk through it, shunned and untouched.

Tom and I share our supper of instant rice mixed with canned tuna. We use tuna oil as sauce.

"What do you know about computers?" Tom asks.

I shrug. "Not much." I'm shaking lots of pepper on the pale mass in front of me.

"Everyone says computer this, digital that." Tom smiles. "Have you noticed that in the news, computer are all about progress, and in the movies, they are all about wiping out humanity? We've only had them around for, well, hardly any time at all."

"Charles Babbage invented mechanical computers in the 1830s," I say.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"It was in one of your history books. Looked like you played Hangman through most of that course."

Tom looked thoughtful. "I do remember playing Hangman," he says. "But this computer thing. I've been giving this a lot of thought. I plan to start a computer business."

I drink some purple Kool Aid, try to sound casual. "What do you know about computers?"

Tom shrugs his big shoulders and laughs. "I don't know shit," he says. "I'll learn." He leans forward. "I'm going to sell the house. Give some of the money to your mom, and then use my share for capital."

"Where will we live?"

Tom waves his fork. "We'll get someplace cheaper. It's only the two of us. We don't need all this space." He pushes back his chair, goes to the fridge.

"Want a beer?" he says.

"Sure," I say.

"Here's the concept. What I think people want is a computer that goes with them, like a companion. Like a dog."

"A robot?" I say.

"No, no. A computer you wear in your hat."

I chug some beer. "You might be on to something," I say.

At the end of the school year, we move into the witch's trailer.

My first night in the trailer, there is this huge thunderstorm. I sit on my sway-backed little bed, turn on the overhead light. I can reach the switch from the bed. In fact, I can reach everything from the bed. The light is dim and begins to flicker. Lightning silhouettes the dirt and bug corpses on my tiny louvered window. The room has an abandoned building smell, sort of a blend of cement dust and cat pee.

As I sit there, a wolf spider, half the size of my hand, crawls down the wall. I dig out my BB gun and shoot it dead. Water begins to drip from the ceiling, and I notice that the walls heave in

and out with the gusts of wind. I lie back on the bed, with my BB gun at my side.

Combining adventure, poignancy, and wry humor, The Skeleton Train tells the story of Jason Audley, a young man on the margins. Appearing alienated, even troubled, Jason's internal life is rich. He's resourceful, forgiving, and sometimes daring. Jason narrates his wild quest for a missing girl, a quest that brings him into the quirky and dangerous world of freight train riders, and a quest that teaches him much about himself, friendship, and the consequences of choices.

The Skeleton Train