

The Boatman of Hades

Colin McArthur

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2015

Committee:

Rebecca Brown

Joe Milutis

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing and Poetics

©Copyright 2015
Colin McArthur

University of Washington

Abstract

The Boatman of Hades

Colin McArthur

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Rebecca Brown

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences—Bothell

The Boatman of Hades follows the life of Odis Heathman: small-town cowboy, local legend, negligent father, businessman, and dreamer. Odis meets, or doesn't meet, depending on who's telling the story, God, and starts Heaven Ranch, a place of refuge for post-WWII Jewish families.

A Poetics of Grace

Tom Cruise, international movie star and champion bugler for the cause of Scientology, has gone through some changes in his life. He has been married to and divorced from two famous women. He has gone from small time bit-actor in roles like the Soda Pop in “The Outsiders” to an actor who gains more per film than the gross domestic product of the country of Tuvalu. I have been alive for all of these changes, and none has affected my life or my understanding of Tom Cruise more than the change he made when he got braces.

In 2002 Tom Cruise got orthodontic work. He, a mega movie star, stepped out in public with wires and rubber bands strapped to his face. I was confused why Tom Cruise would think he needed to change his look. Why was it so important to him to move his teeth at this point in his life? I hadn't seen anything wrong with his smile, and Lord knows it had worked on Nicole Kidman and Katie Holmes. The reason I couldn't see why there was anything wrong with Tom Cruise's smile was that I hadn't been *invited* to see the problems with Tom Cruise's smile.

That seems like a ridiculous statement. Why would you have to be invited to see? But, there are hidden things all around us. Atoms are flying around, there are plankton in the ocean that are only visible when you trouble the water at night, and Tom Cruise's middle tooth was visible by invitation only.

Tom Cruise had a middle tooth and he got braces to correct it. I needed clarification on what a middle tooth was. It is exactly what it says: a tooth in the middle. Imagine a straight line drawn

from between your eyes, bisecting your nose, and coming through the center of your palate. If, pre-braces, you drew that line on Tom Cruise, the line would pass through the middle of one of his front teeth.

How did Tom Cruise go through such a large portion of his career without ever fixing his middle tooth? The man has his picture taken for a living. How did Tom Cruise miss it? You can't see what you aren't allowed to see. And nobody had allowed Tom Cruise to see his tooth. Then he, like the rest of us, had to be invited to see his tooth and he got braces.

One joke here is that Tom Cruise knew so little about himself that he wouldn't notice that his own teeth were shifted. This is similar to what informs my poetics. The process of understanding my poetics has been transformative, and has revealed some things about myself I didn't see until I was invited to see them. Change, which has been the best and hardest thing about writing, was a place I had to be delivered to. And changing is a front row seat to your own pain.

I had surgery this year that is usually for golf addicts in their 60's and 70's. One morning I woke up and had a twinge of discomfort in my lower back, near my left buttock. I stretched it out, thinking that it would go away. The next morning it was there, and I began to notice it during the day too. Before too long it was all I thought about. It was more than a twinge and was growing to be more than a little painful. After several weeks of hoping it would go away on its own, I started to feel a strange twinge in my lower left leg. As the leg discomfort grew, I thought about how nice it would be just to have the pain in my leg and not in my back. I thought what a

nice compromise that would be, and I petitioned God, the person I had decided was responsible for this, to make my wish come true. But the pain in my back increased, and the pain in my leg scrambled to catch up with it. A disc in my vertebrae exploded.

Sciatic pain, which is the pain associated with a bulging disc, is strange and it feels dangerous.

The pain I experienced was both the bringer of hope and the executioner of that hope. Each day I woke up and hoped that the pain would go away and each day I tried to go asleep with the same screaming nerves. My hope was crushed daily. A person can only go through so much hope and letdown before they enter into a state devoid of hope and I was on the train to there, the closest thing to hell I could imagine.

I needed to change, but first I had to see myself. I had to see inside my own body with an MRI in order to recognize that a floppy sack of fluid had wedged itself into my nerve column and was crushing my sanity. I could never have known what was wrong without seeing.

I am fairly certain God exists. This statement is so loaded I could write my entire poetics paper on why I think this and the painful and joyful steps I have taken to get to this understanding.

But, for the sake of time and sanity, just know that deep within me is an understanding that I was created intentionally, by a Creator, and I call that creator God. I live my life each day as if there is a Creator of humankind, and that he had a plan when he plopped us down on this planet.

I have also come to understand that the Creator is confusing, which is like saying Carol Burnett is funny. My confusion deepens the more I get to know God. It's as if I am digging a hole and keep knocking my shovel into ornate treasure chests that only contain one-line notes instructing me to dig deeper. The confusion I feel over a God I believe cares for me is wrapped up in the

fact that the same loving God allows me to experience pain. I was confused even before I had any idea what deep pain was. But, I thought there was sincere understanding hidden somewhere in the pain. I believe that all of humankind experiences pain. Every artist experiences pain. Cormac McCarthy said, "Creative work is often driven by pain. It may be that if you don't have something in the back of your head driving you nuts, you may not do anything. It's not a good arrangement. If I were God, I wouldn't have done it that way." But God *did* do it that way. Pain is a part of the design of life, and as artists, pain is a connection to our creativity. It is the invitation to see the world around us. McCarthy also says, "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain." Pain is something that exists in everyone. It exists in all great art, and in all great artists.

Pain is a connection to God, the Creator. I believe that in order to be the most creative we must first know the Creator. And pain is an invitation to see.

There is a Catholic Church in my hometown. I have never been inside of it. This is strange because I come from a town, Wickenburg, Arizona, where there are very few residents and even fewer buildings. I have been inside nearly every non-private building. But never St. Anthony of Padua Church. I have walked by the church roughly a billion times and stood on the front steps as I waited for friends to finish with their catechism classes. But I never felt like it was my place. The priest attached to the church was a nice guy. He used to come to the high school and bum cigarettes off the kids who were standing across the street from the school, puffing between classes. He stopped me one day as I was passing through. He called me by name. I had never spoken to him before in my life. He asked me if I went to church. I told him that I didn't and had no intention of doing so. He asked me why not. I told him it was boring. He agreed. I said

that a lot of religious people wore funny clothes and asked him why they wore robes all the time.

He said it was his habit. I told him smoking was my habit. He explained that “habit” meant what he wore, that’s what his clothes were called. He wore it every day so that he could be easily recognized. Our habits are the things that expose what we are called to do. For Father Gerrard, the habit is an outward proclamation of his interior choice. For artists, our habit is seeing. The “habit” we wear is to look, unflinching at what it means to be human, and to look deep into the painful, joyous, and profound experience. Flannery O’Connor says, “I think this (seeing) is more than just a discipline, although it is that; I think it is a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things.”

I am trying to see who I truly am as an artist. O’Connor continues on:

“...learning to see is the basis for learning all the arts except music. I know a good many fiction writers who paint, not because they’re any good at painting but because it helps their writing. It forces them to look at things....Any discipline can help your writing: logic, mathematics, theology, and of course and particularly, drawing. Anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn’t require his attention.”

I am trying to look at pain—my own and others--to see how it connects me to my creator.

Doing this self-work is like falling down a mountain. You don't get to where you are going till you hit the lowest point. And that is where the most honest art resides, at the bottom, where the pain is.

There is power in the seeing, but there is also power in being seen. Artists are not solitary beings. In order to see ourselves, we need to be seen. We have to be invited to see ourselves. There is a story in the Bible where Jesus spits into mud and wipes it on the eyes of a blind man. The Bible says that Jesus, "...spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. So he went away and washed, and came back seeing...." To see after being blind is profound. And, getting to see the way people see you is also profound. It makes you vulnerable, and vulnerability has its payoffs, and its letdowns. When we see and are seen, we are thrust into the world in a way that is both caring and dangerous. This is the same way I see the Creator: caring and dangerous.

What does pain as an instrument of the Creator point us toward? Grace. That is what I believe and why I write how I write. I am committed to seeing the humanness in everything I put on the page. And nothing's more human than the recognition of grace. In the Bible grace is likened to flowing water. Grace pools in the lowest places, and our deepest creativity and deepest connection to The Creator are there at the lowest point. Grace is the link between a writer and every other human, and every other writer throughout history. The counterintuitive nature of a grace-led poetics is that the deeper you let grace take you, the more communal the experience of writing becomes. In his Nobel Prize speech, John Steinbeck said:

"Literature was not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches - nor is it a game for the cloistered elect, the tinhorn mendicants of

low calorie despair. Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed.”

We need literature and we need each other, and to see and be seen, to turn our eyes toward pain, both our own and others. For “habit of art”, as Jacques Maritain labels it, to be lasting and profound, we must wrap pain and seeing into our writing. Flannery O’Connor says this:

“Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I’m always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system.”

During the thesis process I have found myself plunged into nearly paralyzing doubt. I have been faithful to waking up most mornings, hours before I start my full-time job, and sit at the screen of my computer and try to get the words down. I had not expected the process to be so painful. I found myself not wanting to go to work, not so that I could stay and write all day, but so that I could curl up and die. I prayed I would be put out of my misery, like a rabid dog. I felt incurable. Most of the mornings I sat at my computer, not typing a goddamn word, and felt like I had been exposed. I felt like I had no business being in an MFA program. At times, this has been devastating. But, something else has been happening along the way. I have found that every writer I talk to has had the same experience. We are plunging into reality and being washed over by grace. It is painful at first, to find that you have been seeing things in a light that was bent, or seeing yourself *creating* outside that light. It’s humbling. That creation is disconnected from the source of creation itself. We must go through the pain to reveal the grace.

That process is the only true habit of art that I have found that works, beautiful and honest, which are the same thing. Seeing, being seen, creation, pain, and grace. This is my poetics.

The Boatman of Hades

Colin McArthur

“I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is.”

John Steinbeck

East of Eden

Prologue

For \$13.50 you can gain entrance to Friedreich's Mining Camp, one of Arizona's premiere ghost town experiences. The property is built on the bones of Friedreich, a town sprouted out of the desert when a German found a nugget of gold the size of a baby's head. Friedreich invited all his German friends to come get rich. They built a town but failed to get rich. Each German died or moved on, and left their dishes on their tables when they did. The tables and dishes are still there, preserved for patrons to view.

The current grounds boast a mill, a surveyor's office, a one-bed hospital, and a general store where a man in arm garters will pour you a sarsaparilla for \$3.50. Karl is the great grandson of Friedreich himself and he is pouring Barq's out of aluminum cans into frosty old mugs while the tourists aren't looking. This sleight of hand is one of the many touches Friedreich's Mining World uses to make it one of Arizona's premiere ghost town experiences.

The original buildings of Friedreich's have burned or rotted to the ground. The grounds have been looted over the years. Teenagers have spray painted nearly everything. But buildings have been restored and dolled up. Weeds have been pulled from the floorboards, and ADA approved sidewalks have been installed to accommodate wheelchairs. Graffiti has been sanded out, but if you look, near the mouth of the mine, you can still make out, "I HAVE A GOLD SHAFT TOO, BITCH." Friedreich's is conveniently located 29 miles down Highway 81, mere minutes from the town of Hades, Arizona.

Central Arizona is dotted with abandoned mining strikes, cow camps, and various other outfits that came and went and left their trash behind. In every direction from Hades you can find spots with a couple standing walls and a historical plaque.

To the east of Friedrich's are the ghost towns of Buzzard City, Perros, Lone Pine, Salt Flats, and High Peak. To the west are Big Fork, Bill's Junction, Sweet Water, and Aguas Fuegos. The town of Hades sits in the middle of the highest concentration of abandoned towns in the continental United States. All of these sites have the faintest heartbeat's left, and legend comes in and does its CPR. It raises the dead.

Nine miles to the northeast of Hades, is a nameless ghost site you won't find it in any tour book. Hundreds of people know about it though, and have visited. Thousands more know about it and won't go near it. The area is littered with dried flowers, candles, and bicycle tires. Arizona Fish & Game comes on a regular basis to remove Torah Scrolls from among the rocks. The rangers found that the coyotes had a taste for the parchment used in the scrolls and the ink hits their palates right. There are also coyote skeletons and the bleached bones of a horse.

There are no buildings, mineshafts, walls or historical plaques. There is no woman in time period garb, wrestling with a butter churn, no sarsaparilla. Those who know its story aren't expecting to see anything when they make their pilgrimage to the rocky crag overlooking the desert. Most of the people who go there don't want to see a structure. To have evidence would indicate that they had been lied to. To the faithful that make the nine-mile trip outside of Hades, the stone has been rolled away. With a tiny pinch of mystery, you can write checks for eternity.

The Boatman

My name is Carron Heathman. That's C-A-R-R-O-N. Not Karen. K-A-R-E-N. I am a resident of the state of Arizona and a taxpayer to the municipality of Hades, Arizona, a town so small it squeaks when you drive through. I have spent my whole life here.

I once went to New York City, only time I have been out of the state. I bought new jeans and some high top Converse shoes because I didn't want to look like a hick. The weather was as hot as a pistol, so hot that halfway through the afternoon I had to buy a pair of shorts from some damn place. \$35. Can you believe that? I said to the salesman, buddy, for \$35 these shorts better make my wiener look like the Statue of Liberty . He didn't laugh. New Yorkers take their statues and their liberty serious. So I walked around the so-called greatest city in the world with my pasty white legs exposed and my sparkling new Converse rubbing blisters into my feet. I couldn't get back to Hades fast enough.

Another fact about me: I am a convict. I have been convicted in a court of law, by a judge, for a felony offense I didn't commit. I spent eighteen months, five days, six hours and forty-one minutes of my life in prison. I didn't make any friends or have any pen pals when I was there. I didn't get any degrees or better myself. I got a number of prison nicknames, none of which stuck. I didn't like any of the nicknames, and I didn't like any of the other inmates. But being locked up is like regular life. It will teach you things whether you want it to or not. The chief difference between the two is that in jail you are told when to eat and shit and shower. You make no decisions in jail. Inmates have already made all of their decisions before going in. You also see heinous violence. But the free world is a pretty violent place too. Don't kid yourself, civilians.

I am currently unmarried and I have never had children of my own. But I was a son. I *am* a son. I am the son of the now infamous Odis Heathman of Heaven Ranch. We had a strained relationship. I always wanted to just be Carron. Not the son of Odis Heathman. I wanted that when he was alive and after he died too. But now I think being his son is okay. I am a changed man. It has taken me my whole life to get to where I am, kind of like I have been gathering evidence to make the case that having Odis as a father was alright. Now that he is gone I want to learn to be his son. I am Carron, Carron Heathman. The one and only son of Odis Heathman.

I.

In 1958, Better Homes and Gardens named Hades, Arizona, “The Most Charming Town This Side of Hell.” The magazine printed an 11 page spread in the October issue, detailing the nation’s “best kept secrets” and “hidden hamlets.” The article made 21 separate references to and puns involving the town’s name. In addition to the more than 2,000 words, there were four black and white photos of town attractions and the townspeople. The photos were taken by the author, Ari Hershkowitz, who had flown to Phoenix. As he disembarked his plane Ari was greeted by the neighing faces of a hundred penned horses.

Ari boarded a bus from Phoenix to get out to the Hades.

“What's your name?” the bus driver said.

“Hershkowitz. Ari.”

“You going out to Heaven Ranch?” The bus driver asked. Ari was surprised that the driver knew by his last name that he was going to visit the ranch.

“Not as a guest,” said Ari.

“Huh,” The bus driver said, and closed the door. Ari was his only passenger and “huh” was the only word he spoke. Ari was terrified and excited.

Ari was let off without a word in the casual malaise of a southwestern September. It had been hot on the bus, and more heat punched him in the neck when he stepped off the bus. His article would read, “The desert heat wraps like a warm blanket through the day, warming ones bones like a hot stone to enjoy the chilly desert nights.” What he said when he got off the bus was, “Holy shit.”

Among the photos he took was one of the “The Hanging Tree.” This tree was used for hanging criminals sentenced to death when Hades was a municipality of the territory of Arizona. A crude sign that said “The Hanging Tree” was nailed to its trunk. Ari asked Joe Stevens, who ran the liquor store next to the tree, if the sign was from “the old days.”

“I painted that sign five years ago.” Joe said.

“How did people know it was ‘The Hanging Tree’ before the sign?” Ari asked. Joe didn't say anything. He waited for him to see the smooth groove in the lowest branch. Ari snapped the photo for Better Homes and Gardens. Joe asked Ari if he wanted him to be in the picture with the tree. Ari took another photo with Joe smiling. Joe told Ari that his great-great uncle had been hung from the tree.

Heaven Ranch was the brainchild of Odis Heathman. Ari had simple directions from a flier. He went out Highway 81 until he saw the water tower with the word JEWS. When Ari had first received the pamphlet he had to read the text several times to believe it was true. Now that he was staring at that very water tower, he still didn't believe it.

It appeared to Ari that Odis Heathman hadn't done much of the work on his ranch in perhaps two hundred years. Odis was fat, and dressed in the gaudiest cowboy outfit that Ari, or any other person who could see had ever seen. The shirts was a mix of several different pastel colors, as if many ugly shirts had morphed into one shiny garmet. Ari immediately lamented the fact that Better Homes and Gardens was still printed in black and white.

Ari walked through the gravel parking lot of the ranch and he saw the Ford Thunderbirds and Cadillac Eldorados crammed up in front of the mesquite branch curbs. The luxury automobiles had trailer hitches welded to their back ends and pulled single-horse trailers. When Odis saw Ari looking at the cars he assured him, "You'll be pleased to find some folks just like you here at Heaven Ranch," and slapped him on the back. Ari got the sense that Odis was a safe man, if not necessarily a good one. He began to relax.

By "folks just like you" Odis meant other Jews. Ari thought he was being mocked, but Ari didn't feel mocked. He didn't feel understood, but he knew that Heaven Ranch was a place for him.

He soon met dozens of Jews, families from the eastern seaboard. The guests were clad in the pastels that Odis has made famous. Stiff, new jeans and cowboy hats and ridiculous shirts. They were trying to look like Odis. He asked Odis about his clothes. Odis told him that he had bought them from the circus fat-lady. Ari laughed and so did Odis. He thought Odis was making a joke.

Ari asked one of the guests where he got his shirt. The guest looked back at Ari with a proud, sincere face and said Odis took orders for the shirts when he went into town. What Ari didn't know, and what the guests didn't know, was that Odis was charging five dollars and buying them for half that.

"So Otis," Ari said.

"The name's Odis. With a D. O-D-I-S." spelled Odis. He pronounced his own name with the emphasis on the latter half, like the best was yet to come: oh-DIS.

"That's an interesting way of spelling it," Ari said.

"O-D-I-S is the only way I'm aware of how to spell Odis," said Odis.

Odis showed Ari around the grounds of Heaven Ranch and with grand sweeps of his multi-colored sleeve. He pointed out the bunkhouse where each guest slept on a bunk bed with a blanket Odis had purchased in bulk from the United States Army. The original color of the blankets was army green, but they now looked a sickly tan. Odis bought the blankets from a base that specialized in bomb testing. Ari asked if there was air conditioning in the guests bunk house. Odis laughed.

“Air conditioning? That sounds like a vacation. We’re here finding gold. We sell that search to our guests. We sell the real McCoy over here. And we sell it a lot,” Odis laughed long and hard. Ari didn’t know who Odis meant when he said “we.”

“Are you gold mining here? I thought this was a ranch.”

“Oh, we’re mining all right,” Odis laughed.

Ari quoted Odis in the Better Homes and Gardens article, “You want to know what it’s like to be a cowboy? Come on over to Heaven Ranch...the real McCoy.”

Ari interviewed ranch guests. The sweaty yarmulked men and scared women and kids were dressed for a ranch experience, but they had the thawed look of people used to freezing their asses off in Brooklyn and Pittsburg. Ari held up the brochure to Marv and Ellen who were busy picking the cactus out of their rakes.

“I bet that picture of this place looked pretty good when you were looking at it in December,”

Ari said. They squinted at Ari.

“The brochure could never grasp what lies in the heart of this place,” Marv said while he stepped a crisp boot onto the piece of cholla attached to the palm of his glove, “not in a million years with a billion brochures.” Ellen nodded.

Every person Ari talked to glowed about the ranch. They said that would return home and tell all their family about it. The guests said it was better than a summer in Florida. . Ari asked why.

The guests said it was because of Odis Heathman.

“That man is an angel,” said Dinah Bomberg. Everyone within earshot affirmed this. Ari laughed. The guests did not. A guest untangling white hot barbed wire assured Ari that the story was true.

“What story?” Ari asked.

“Odis Heathman went to the face of the Almighty and came back to tell us about it.”

Ari had the craziest thought that these sunburned Jews were telling the truth.

Ari Hershkowitz took pictures of cactus, horses, and smiling patrons in brightly colored shirts with the sweat wiped free of their faces. Better Homes and Gardens chose to print a pictures of Odis Heathman with his arm around his son, Carron.

“Karen, with a k?” Ari asked.

“Carron. C-A-R-R-ON. Carron,” Odis corrected. “How else you gonna spell Carron?”

Odis Heathman spoke with Ari for two and a half hours then lead the dazed journalist by the arm to the gravel parking lot. Odis told Ari the same story his guests had told. When the photos had been developed the pictures chosen for publication were of “The Hangin’ Tree,” Odis and

Carron, an uninspired picture of a mid-sized lake named Lake Dolor, and a cactus field. The editors mulled a long time over a photo of a lone bluff of non-descript rock formation littered with trinkets and scrolls of paper. Ari sheepishly told his editors about Heaven Ranch and Odis' story. He told them of the people in town whom he had met and didn't like the ranch. He told them about feeling uncomfortable in the town of Hades, but totally at ease at Heaven Ranch. He told them it somehow went deeper than being surrounded by cowboys versus being surrounded by Jews. There was a divide between fact and reality in Hades. Ari had a hard time articulating which he thought was which.

Better Homes and Gardens ran the picture of Odis with the caption, "This local legend resident is Odis Heathman, a ranch man through and through. All one has to do is ask his tribe of paying faithful guests to know that this colorful man holds the magical secrets of the healing power of the desert sun." When Ari Hershkowitz was getting on the bus to ride the three hours back to Phoenix he asked the new driver if he knew the story of Odis Heathman. The driver had. Ari asked him about the site from the brochure. The one that he had taken a photo of.

"Never been there. But I know what Odis says about it," the driver said.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" asked Ari.

"That's where God came down and told him how to rip off the Jews."

The Boatman

There is a lake next to Hades named Lake Dolor. I call it a lake the same way people on the east coast call their hills “mountains.” The lake runs close to the highway on its west bank, Hades is to its north. To the south you’ll eventually run into Phoenix. To the east you’ll eventually run into the Atlantic Ocean. I used to come out here as a kid. Even back then dead fish floated up to the surface. Tons of them. Like they were being boiled alive. I don't know who named Lake Dolor or why they did it.

The lake was drying up little by little with each dry year. You could count the rings of salt on the banks like you can with the innards of a tree. The legislature put forth an initiative to save the lake, and a scientist came up from the university to unfold the most ridiculous plan since pre-sliced cheese.

The scientist had an idea to spread vegetable oil over the top of the lake like a Greek salad. Somehow the oil on the surface of the water would disperse and create a film and put the kibosh on evaporation and save our lake. The scientist had all sorts of charts and examples of the research he had done on other bodies of water, ranging from a kiddie pool in his backyard to a pond he saved in Pinetop. The oil worked. It seemed like magic.

Each morning I get up and put on the snorkel mask I bought at the dollar store and swim in the lake. It’s starting to wear out a little bit, and eventually I’ll have to pedal to the store to buy another, but for now, it works just fine. I dive in and come back up smelling like the salad bar at a Luby’s. I get cans and bottles that boaters toss into the water. You might think that people

who are boating on a lake that had to be saved would take a little better care of it, but you'd be wrong. I suppose I shouldn't complain though, the litter of those rednecks keeps food in my stomach. But it's funny to think this place was saved so that people could come and trash it.

If you head south, you'd hit Phoenix. And if you go to the airport you'd see a horse stable. I used to own that stable. My father built it. My old man spent his youth on the back of a horse.

They were lean years and not the type of lean years that "build character." These were the lean years that scraped the fat from your ribs and left you with nothing. Work your fingers to the bone and you get nothing years. He worked himself and drank himself into the disrespect of Hades. Then something happened.

Odis started Heaven Ranch and made a fortune by not lifting a finger. I suppose this made him a rancher, but after years of dealing with money myself, I think he was a magician. He let people peek a little behind the curtain of his tricks, and they paid him. He made a pile on the ranch, but the real money was in storage. He anticipated that his customers, rich people, would buy their own horses. He anticipated that his customers wouldn't want to keep a horse in their Park Avenue apartments. He anticipated that his customers wouldn't want to have to fly into the airport and have to wait for the three hour drive to get a whiff of the ranch life. That's the reason you could find a boarding stable across the street from the regional airport, with the most well fed and well tacked horses the free world could muster, looking up in horror each time a 737 roared into the heavens. You flew in, hitched your trailer, and caught Highway 81 north, three hours to Hades.

To keep magic alive, you can't reveal all your tricks. And Odis was a champion at not revealing tricks. And, now that he's gone, I'm seeing that he left a lot of tricks inside me that I am having a hell of a time figuring out. Each morning I swim in the lake. And each day I ride Odis' bike into the town he made famous. And I thought that none of it made a damn bit of difference to anybody, and that God was jerking me around, teaching me the name of Lake Dolor and then the house showed up right where the water meets the shore, and I peeked behind the curtain.

II.

Odis Heathman had a problem. He looked down at his twisted and ruined ankle. He knew he'd have to cut the boot from his foot. When he thought about cutting the boot from his foot he said, "Dang it."

Odis' horse, Candybar, had a similar. The horse let out a long sigh. The wind from the sigh blew the wisps of Odis' hair around his freckled head. Odis' hat was long gone, and the odd right angle of the foreleg of his horse let Odis know that Candybar would be as long gone as his hat. Odis was not happy about losing his hat, horse, and half of his boots all on the same day.

Odis' was going to die. He was aware of forgiveness, and had even experienced some, but also he knew the desert.

Odis was going to die because he had fallen from his horse and snapped his ankle like a hard pretzel, and he couldn't walk the nine miles to safety. Candybar had fallen and snapped her foreleg like a hard pretzel too. Odis would have to put a bullet between her eyes, and a dead horse couldn't be ridden nine miles to safety. The sun beat on his head as Odis thought of this. His vision started to blur.

Many years later, Odis would use as a marketing tool a photograph of the spot where he was convinced of his impending death. The picture was on the brochure he sent each year in early December to New York State, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. It showed the bluff, with rocky crags jutting out, framing the beaming sun. The caption said, "The Sun Saves!"

Odis had grown up nine miles from where he lay. He had lived all of his days in the same desert, his homeland, except for the years he spent in Germany in the Second World War, laying Germans into the ground of their homeland. Odis had killed Germans in the name of universal peace and unity. He had not wanted to leave his home when he got sent to war, and when he returned home he vowed never to leave again. When he broke his leg nine small miles from safety he thought he was sure to fulfill his vow. This didn't comfort him.

Odis didn't didn't believe that dying was a step in the process of moving on to heaven as much as it was a period at the end of a rough sentence. Odis saw the end as the end. He had been told about a place named Heaven, had grown up in a town named Hades, and he fit right in the middle. He felt the dirt under his body. He felt his leg throbbing and a sickly wet sensation on the remaining working nerves in his ankle. He thought of being dust. He thought of being ashes and dust. He thought of the smoke from fires he could see over the forests of Germany. Dirt and fire, death and ashes were all there was.

Odis held the pistol he had always carried. The iron was hot in the sun. He knew his duty was to shoot Candybar. Odis learned a great many things growing up in the desert, around ranchers and cowboys, that couldn't be found in any schoolbook or curriculum. He had learned how to reverse a truck with a trailer, so cowboys and ranchers watching wouldn't call him a pussy. He had learned this lesson by screwing up reversing trucks and being called a pussy.

Odis learned to cut open a barrel cactus and drink the mealy water from inside if he was desperate. Odis had learned this by cutting open cactuses when he was so thirsty that his tongue felt like sand and he was so he thought he could drink his own blood.

Odis had learned that when a horse breaks its leg, your duty as a human being is to fire a bullet through that sweet animal's brain, then lovingly remember your companion for the rest of your life. For Odis Heathman, the rest of his life would culminate later that day, possibly that evening if the coyotes weren't too hungry.

Candybar's head was close enough to Odis' head that Odis felt the heat from the horse's ragged breath. He could smell the sour hay Candybar was digesting. Odis pointed his pistol. The gun had belonged to his father, a man Odis had barely known. Odis was about to murder his best friend with the firearm of a stranger.

Odis's father had left the desert against his will to go pour German bodies into holes in their own homeland during the First World War. He had wound up spending eternity in a shallow hole of his own on the French border with Germany. Private First Class Mike Hill of the US Marine Corps, by way of Hershey, Pennsylvania, had promised Odis' dying father that he would send his pistol to his young son in Arizona. Mike Hill made this vow with the utmost sincerity. He held the dying man's hand till it went limp, and then lugged a monstrous pistol from the hip of the dead man. Mike had to roll Odis' father's body over to get at the gun, trapped between his corpse and the muddy earth. When Mike rolled Odis' father over, blood gushed from Odis' father's body, leaving Mike holding a giant pistol with both hands covered in a stranger's blood.

Mike Hill considered delivery of that pistol to be one of his finest moments as a patriot. He fulfilled a vow to a soldier, brother in arms, father, and warrior, dying on the battlefield. Mike's heart swelled when he agreed to the noble undertaking, he had been singled out by fate. He walked around the trenches looking for other mortally wounded soldiers who might have deliveries to make back home. He quit searching after a man with a southern accent with a bullet hole in his neck gargled, "Fuck off, you fucking motherFUCK-ER," at him.

Blood shot out of this man's wound and onto Mike's uniform and Mike started crying. The wounded man looked at him and died. Mike hadn't seen a dead person before joining Marines.

He hadn't even seen a broken bone. He had seen his younger cousin fall from a tree and cut her eyebrow open. It bled with ferocity. Mike wouldn't get near his cousin for a year afterward. He thought of this as he turned away from the second dead man he had seen in a day and walked back to his foxhole. He clutched Odis' father's pistol like a baby.

Mike put all his passion and loyalty into a letter that accompanied the pistol he sent to Odis. It never once mentioned the word "death." It spoke of Jesus Christ and his redemptive power and Heaven and eternity. Mike smelled the ink on the page before folding it and putting it into the envelope. It was the first of forty letters he sent to Hades.

Mike never had children of his own. He wrote Odis once a year on Christmas. He never received a response, but had faith that he and the young man had a special connection. Mike wrote the first year about how much he missed Odis' father, and how much he was sure the young man missed his dad. As the years moved along, Mike's letters discussed his own father, his retirement, and his life without a family. Mike became increasingly desperate to share with

Odis the intricacies of his life and pain, and looked forward to December each year when he could get it all out on paper. Mike grew so close to Odis through these unrequited letters that he told his small group of friends of the boy he thought of as a son. Mike made a modest living as an insurance representative, and died from a pulmonary embolism on September 15, 1958, a week before the Better Homes and Gardens featuring a picture of Odis Heathman hit newsstands.

Odis received a package containing an ancient pistol that weighed more than a spare tire and a long letter from a man he didn't know. Neither Odis nor his grandmother, who was keeping an eye on Odis until his father got back from the war, could read, so when the package was delivered all Odis and his grandmother knew was what the mail clerk had said: "A heavy package, all the way from Candybar town!" The package was from Hershey, Pennsylvania. When Odis opened the package his grandmother yelled, "What in the name of Hell and damnation *is* that *thing?*" Odis knew exactly what it was, and even as a boy he knew what was meant by his father's pistol showing up but not his father.

Odis held the gun. Odis' grandmother told Odis to get the pistol out of her sight, and snatched the box, unread letter and all, and threw it in the manure pile. They threw papers into the manure pile for compost. Then they moved away from their home and left no forwarding address. But Mike continued to send his Christmas letters. The regional mail attempted unsuccessfully to deliver each one. When they couldn't, they kept the letters. After 5 years of receiving a letter from Pennsylvania they began an office betting pool for when the letters would arrive. None of them had met Odis Heathman yet, but he became a well-known name around the office. Shirley

Opal won the office pool for three straight years, from 1931-1934, and she would be the one to deliver the 39 unopened letters to Odis Heathman at Heaven Ranch in 1958. She brought a copy of Better Homes and Gardens to have Odis sign.

Odis, dying from bad luck in the desert, leveled his pistol at Candybar. Their faces were close.

Odis thought of his steady companion and felt the pain in his leg. Odis held the gun pointed at Candybar for a long time. His shoulder started to hurt. The gun had been to Europe twice. Once with Odis' father and once with Odis. It had killed men and broken the hearts of women and children. Odis hated pointing it at his horse. He resisted the urge to turn it on himself.

Just prior to blowing Candybar to smithereens, Odis had the first of many transcendent moments of his life. He looked into the watery black pool of his horse's eye and drew back the hammer on his father's pistol. When the hammer clicked into place, Odis went dark. He wasn't in the desert anymore. His life flashed before his eyes. Odis was saddened by how short and boring his life had been. He felt the earth under his body. He saw Candybar looking at him and he began to cry. The horse's tongue lolled outside of its mouth. Odis hoped Candybar had died on her own and he wouldn't have to pull the trigger. His arm ached. He inched closer to her.

Candybar's head jerked up. Odis fired the pistol.

Odis Heathman had seen some things in his life. He had fought in the Second World War at a time when the procession of brand new military science had become available to insane leaders.

Thanks to his participation in that war, Odis had dead humans. The dead humans had been in various stages of mutilation. Odis had seen dead bodies, dying bodies, and perfectly healthy

bodies that Odis knew would be dead. He had seen bodies ripped apart in such gruesome ways a soldier could be forgiven for just about any action taken in response. Odis had seen colors pour out of humans that were not natural, and were impossible to take your eyes off when you saw them. He had once seen the face of German soldier with the skin peeled off scalp to chin, leaving the soldier's eyes and teeth permanently exposed in a horrific, toothy grin. Odis watched this German soldier's final moments, watched the man turn his gruesome head side to side, with each turn letting out a sharp, "Nein!" The man didn't blink when he said "nein" because the man no longer had eyelids. Decades later, Odis would experience a breakdown in a pizza restaurant that featured a house band populated by robotic forest creatures. Odis became hysterical when the tambourine-playing field mouse moved its animatronic head in the same fashion as the German soldier. Patrons of the restaurant were alarmed at the famous Odis Heathman screaming while a racoon, a hedgehog and mouse sang "Cloud Nine" by The Temptations.

But all the dead Germans in Germany did not prepare Odis for killing Candybar. He was traumatized. He frantically wiped Candybar's blood off of himself. The harder he wiped, the more into his clothes it got. Odis rolled onto his stomach. The blood and sweat on his clothes made mud that caked on him. He fell into the underbelly of Candybar. The horse was still warm. He felt strangely changed.

Odis tried to stand up. He pulled himself on up on Candybar's corpse, using the dead animal as a seat. The horse's stomach squished under him. Odis felt nauseous. He tried to put weight on his foot, which was jutting out at an unfamiliar angle. The first thing that would touch the ground, a millisecond after the phantom foot missed, was the compounded bone of his lower leg.

Odis' broken leg smashed into the ground. Odis later told people he felt "pain," but at the time felt like a connection to the core of everything evil throughout all of history. Odis vomited on the corpse of his horse, fell over and lost consciousness.

Odis was interviewed for a magazine that made him moderately famous. The journalist was curious about Odis' motivations for starting Heaven Ranch. Odis told his story. The journalist could see that he was getting nowhere with him. He switched gears.

"Have you ever been sad?" the journalist, Ari Hershkowitz, asked. .

Odis laughed, "What do you think?"

"I think that you are someone who is tortured underneath. I am asking you, are you happy? Do you have things and people you love? Really love. Not cosmically. Really love. Like if they died you wouldn't know how to go on?"

"Well, I love all things."

"No, sir, I don't mean it like that. Have you ever loved someone so much that it broke your heart?"

Odis thought of Candybar.

"I never met a man that didn't love anything."

Odis smiled, rustled the hair of his son who was sitting next to him, got up and left the room.

Odis thought that things happened to everyone, and that if your luck was to be born rich, or in Miami, then you were probably going to enjoy things a little more than people from places like Hades. Life was full of luck, Odis would say, and years later at Heaven Ranch he'd swing his fat arm out at his guests and tell the receiver of his wisdom, "Just ask the Jews!" But luck would run

out, and everybody died. He once believed that all the luck in the world couldn't save you from death. But he had changed that day on the bluff. He had been on both ends of death. He had killed Candybar, and spared his own life. He believed in something, though he wasn't sure what it was. Like taking a wrong turn in a strange city, he had arrived somewhere, and had no idea how he got there. Odis stared at his dead horse and felt more alive than he had ten minutes before. His mind was clear, and blank. He rolled over and saw the desert below. He saw a blank canvas. He didn't know what his story was. He had taken a left turn into the garden and found it was his to plant. Odis looked again into Candybar's lifeless eyes and then he began to crawl.

This was the beginning of the story Odis Heathman told.

III.

Odis walked back to Hades. He was carrying the saddle he had been given by his grandmother; she said it had belonged to his father. It was bloody. Odis had on one boot, and the sock on his other foot had been worn through. Odis crossed Main Street and headed for the mercantile. The store was where anyone in Hades had to go in order to get anything they might need that they couldn't make themselves. The owner, Phil Fletcher primarily sold dry goods and tack. He eventually began sending out for Shabbat candles, yarmulke clips and gaudy western shirts. These items made Phil somewhat rich and somewhat unpopular.

Marty Hanson saw Odis Heading for Phil's. He had been part of the same cattle outfit Odis worked for.

"Odis," Marty said.

"Hi Marty," Odis said.

Marty didn't care for Odis. Neither did most of the rest of the cowboys that worked for the Miller Stock Co., and neither did most of the people of Hades. Odis was generally considered a pain in the ass. He was lazy and unreliable as a ranch hand. On two separate occasions Odis had been the nighthawk of the Miller herd and had fallen asleep in the saddle. On the first occasion, Odis alerted the rest of the workers that the herd wasn't contained by firing his pistol into the air. The herd spooked, ran over the outfit's tents and broke Marty's son Amos' leg. Odis was docked a week's pay. Odis swore he could set Amos' leg properly. It healed crooked and Odis nicknamed Amos "Hopalong." After falling asleep as nighthawk for a second time, Odis was sent out to look for eight lost head of cattle but didn't come back that evening. By the next morning Miller

formed a search party. Marty volunteered in the hopes that he'd be the one to find Odis' corpse. Miller was more intent on recovering his eight missing head. Before the search party set out, Odis wandered back into town.

"Odis, you are carrying your saddle," Marty said.

"Yes I am," Odis replied.

"Why?"

"Because there is no horse to put it on."

Marty thought of Amos' crooked leg.

"Where is your horse, Odis?" Marty asked. He wanted to ask Odis why he wasn't dead.

"He's up on Scott's Bluff, where I was." Odis said.

"Why isn't his saddle on him?"

"Because I'm holding it right here." Odis said.

The town of Hades held a parade for the soldiers returning home from World War One. The soldiers walked down Main Street following a five-piece brass band made up of men too old for war. The band had learned "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and no other songs. The old men repeated the song all the way down Main Street and to the lip of Highway 81 before they stopped.

Each of the soldiers was in uniform. Most of the fighting men of Hades had enlisted in the Army. Out of twelve, three were Marines. Odis' father, one of nine Army recruits, was the only man from Hades killed in the war. Tig Wheeler, one of the three Marines, led Odis' father's horse down the street in the parade. Odis sat in the crowd with his grandmother. All of the residents of Hades came out for the parade. The small street was jammed with ranchers and shop

owners and wives and families of the soldiers. Odis was in the front row. The ten waving soldiers and the one soldier leading a horse drew nearer to Odis and his grandmother. Odis saw the looks of the people around him. It was an exciting day for them. They looked at Odis with pity. Odis didn't like it. He felt like he was the butt of a sad joke he didn't understand. Before the parade crossed in front of where he sat with his grandmother, Odis stood up. Hank Hanson, who served in the Army, had a folded flag he was going to present to Odis and his grandmother. Odis never gave him the chance. He walked from his seat to the middle of the road. The men kept playing their song, but the parade stopped. Odis was going home. He wasn't comfortable. He didn't want to be in a place where he didn't understand what was going on. He didn't understand why his father had died. He didn't understand why he was at a military parade when his father wasn't there. He didn't understand why Hank Hanson tried to make him take a folded flag in the middle of the street when everyone was looking at him. Odis was embarrassed. He felt naked. Hank said something to Odis about service. Odis looked at the man and dropped the flag on the ground at his feet. A woman in the crowd gasped, and the wall of onlookers made a path for the boy to walk through. Nobody tried to stop him.

Marty Hanson looked at Odis' one sock and the smile on his face. Marty, and the rest of Hades, had been dealing with Odis for his entire life. Marty didn't think that Odis' hard childhood gave him any right to act the way he did. Marty had seen Odis sucker punch people in bar fights, had seen him kick dogs for no reason. He had been in the crowd on the day of the parade.

“The damndest thing happened,” Odis said to Marty. Marty hadn't asked.

Odis told Marty how he had broken his ankle, and how the pain was like lightning, and about Candybar. Marty looked down at Odis' foot with no boot and no broken ankle.

Odis told Marty he almost turned his gun on himself, but at the last minute got a wild hair to live. He couldn't explain it, he explained to Marty. He told Marty about clawing his way through the desert.

“And I know this sounds crazy,” Odis said, before he told Marty about the house.

Odis said he had crawled for a while when he came upon a Victorian house, with white trim and bright yellow paint. He had never seen a building so beautiful. No road or tracks led to or from the house. It looked so perfect Odis thought he had died. There was a green hedge on either side of the front porch that looked like it had been watered that morning and trimmed right before he looked at it. He crawled towards the house and began to forget about the pain in his body. The closer he got the easier it was to crawl. When he was near the steps he got right up and walked inside. Didn't Marty think that was strange? Marty remained silent. Odis went inside this building and it was like passing into a new universe. He stood on his ankle as easily as if nothing had ever happened. He felt quenched. He walked straight through the house to a back room as if he had known he was meant to go there.

For years after Odis came down from the bluff, the people of Hades were faced with the awkward position of hearing something that is obviously untrue and having to listen to it repeatedly.

Over time the tale became a punch line. This didn't bother Odis. He had come down from the bluff a changed man.

“So let me get this straight, Odis,” Marty Hanson said, “you went up there and found a magical house that healed you. Then you went into a room and met...”

“God,” Odis said.

“Uh-huh. And what did he have to say?” Marty asked.

“God doesn't look like we think. But He's nice. He's all broken up about all sorts of things, but He's still nice,” Odis said.

“What do you think I think God looks like, Odis?” Marty said. Odis laughed.

Marty shook his head. Odis smiled, turned and walked toward the mercantile, bobbing up and down on his remaining boot.

“You'll never believe what He's asked me to do!” Odis yelled. He laughed.

The Boatman

I get tired of the stories. I have never liked a single one of them. People talk about Odis while I'm around like they forget he is my dad. Was my dad. It's my fault. I did enough over the years to tell people that I hated my old man's guts. But there is a kind of pain that comes with being talked about behind your back. And when people think that they can talk about Odis behind his back with me right there, well.

I knew two brothers in Hades who fought like wild animals. They could barely be in the same room with one another without a brawl breaking out. The older one broke the younger one's nose so many times his face was mashed like a flattened basketball. Everyone called him "Mash." They called his brother "Slugger." Slugger and Mash were violent toward each other, but nothing compared to what someone else got if they talked about one of the brothers while the other brother was around them. Then they loosed hell.

I was in the Wagon Wheel the other night and somebody was telling the story where my old man got his bike stolen. I hated that story. It made Odis look stupid as shit.

Over the bang of the jukebox I heard some blowhard holding court about the bicycle my father rode from the day his horse Candybar died till the day he couldn't move his legs well enough to pedal. The story goes he went to the mercantile and traded a \$75 saddle for an \$8 bicycle and left the change on the counter. After that you could see him, pedaling through Hades, smiling like a monkey on a vine.

He kept popping the tires on the bike on cactus thorns and rocks, so he made his own that were solid rubber. The tires made his bike almost impossible to ride, like pedaling through quicksand. Waving and sweating and smiling and pedaling. This created all sorts of confusion as my old man grew fatter and fatter. How could a man who rode his bike through molasses on two anchor tires be so damn fat? My old man had been riding his bike around for three or four years when it got stolen.

There is a volunteer fire department in Hades. In reality it is a bunch of men leaning on old firefighting equipment drinking beer. But occasionally they are called upon to put out fires. The story went that Odis used to ride that dumb bike to all the fire calls. Come up huffin' and puffin' on every smoking building and cat caught in a tree. There used to be an old smokehouse out at Salt Flats. Someone from the department called my old man up and told him there was a fire out there. At the time, he wasn't in his Jew mansion, he was living over on Squash Blossom, in his grandma's old place. The place at Salt Flat was a good fifteen, twenty miles from his house. He got on his bike and pedaled all the way out there, only to find no fire. Odis leaned his bike up against the old house and walked around to take a look. The other firemen were hiding, watching him. As he was wandering around, someone tossed his bike inside and lit the place on fire. Another person saw my old man two days later pedaling that sooty bike down Main Street. The tires had melted in places and cooled. The bike rolled along, bopping him up a little in the air with each rotation. He looked like he was riding in a funhouse mirror. Someone called out to him, "Odis, what happened to your bike?" He yelled back, "It got caught on fire out at Salt Flat." Odis never thought people were giving him shit, but they were constantly giving him shit. I wish he had passed that on to me.

I hear things like this all the time. Sometimes I think people tell these stories because they want me to join in. Like that would be fun for me. They are ladeling up shit-stew and passing me a spoon. I usually end up laughing with them, but what I want to do is scream. Or hit them. Or cry. The stories are mostly true, which makes them harder to hear. Except one. Odis' big whopper. It's my favorite. Now. It took me a while to come around. It took Hades a while to come around.

IV.

The first guests to come to Heaven Ranch were Josef and Ethel Rose. They had no intention of spending a summer in the heat, no intention of working at a cattle ranch. They had been driving west. "West from Poland," Josef would tell anyone who asked. He spoke softly in impeccable English, with a European accent. The drive had started one night, in Brooklyn, when Josef woke in a sweat and woke Ethel to go. They took his brother Jacob's Studebaker. Josef thought to call his brother when they got to Pennsylvania, waking him in the early morning.

"Jacob, I have taken your automobile," Josef said.

"Why did you do that, dear brother?" asked Jacob.

"Because, my brother, I am afraid."

Jacob nodded to the receiver and hung it up. The brothers didn't speak again until Josef and Ethel returned to Brooklyn eleven weeks later, tan and lean.

Josef and Ethel didn't know where they were going. They drove through West Virginia and Kentucky. They changed tires and ate at diners in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Locals stared at them like they were space aliens. They were served, being white, but as soon as they opened their mouths to speak, the locals were edgy. They drove through New Mexico Josef stopped the car on the highway to gawk at the landscape. There was nothing in sight. Josef began to relax.

The Rose's took Route 66 to Flagstaff, Arizona, before taking a left and heading to the center of the state. Josef had been feeling better and better the fewer people he saw. He wanted to go to Mexico. Ethel didn't care. She sat quietly and looked out the window. They had lost

everything, and Ethel thought she was too tired to start over. She was in no hurry to begin rebuilding, so wherever they were was fine. West Virginia, Texas, Arizona, it didn't matter. She loved Josef, but something was broken in the world, not just them. If rebuilding their lives was going to take a long time, rebuilding the world was going to take forever.

The Studebaker blew a head gasket 45 miles outside of Prescott. The desert was creeping into view, overtaking the pine and brush. Josef and Ethel could see saguaro cactuses in the distance, straight pins jutting from the valley below. You could see for miles in every direction. Josef looked out in the distance for any indication of another car. He didn't see any. As the afternoon wore on and it became clear that Joseph wouldn't be able to get the Studebaker running, he asked his wife if she wanted to try and walk out of there. She laughed.

“You can see for a hundred miles, Josef, there is nothing.”

“There has to be something somewhere, my love. No matter how desolate the place, there has to be something for us somewhere.”

“Then you better start walking.”

The Roses began to walk down the road. The temperature was hotter than anything they had ever experienced. They saw no cars, no buildings, only heat waves and desert. Josef jumped when he saw a field mouse scurry across the pavement and come to a stop. They trained their eyes on the small animal. It was the first living being they had seen all afternoon. Josef took a small step forward. The mouse didn't move. He took another small step. Josef stared at him. Josef didn't see the snake coming up behind the mouse. Ethel did. Ethel was convinced the snake was coming to kill them. She had been waiting for this moment for the past decade. Ethel turned her back. Josef stared, and didn't blink until the flash of the snake wrapped its mouth around the

small mouse. Josef gasped but kept watching. As the snake muscled the mouse by its jaws, Josef began to cry. He could see the mouse move down farther and farther into the snake's belly. Ethel kept her back turned. She didn't see the sides of the snake move with the little kicks from the mouse, slowly dying inside the reptile. It also prevented her, however, from witnessing the barn owl swoop onto the scene and tear the snake apart. Josef screamed, and held his hand over his mouth, as if his soul were trying to escape. The snake was not dead, but was writhing while the owl pecked its eyes out. And there, from where the talons of the bird had split the snake, the mouse rolled out. It shook, hopped up, and scurried away, covered in snake blood. It ran off the road--alive. Josef turned around to his wife. He felt he had never been farther from home in his life. Then he thought that he didn't know where "home" was.

The Roses walked back to their broken car. They had come to the United States from a country that had been turned inside out. Josef left New York to see if God still existed in any part of the world. He was prepared to drive everywhere looking for Him. Ethel had been convinced of God's departure long ago, but loved a good car ride. She liked the idea of riding off into the sunset. Out to the west, where the sun sets and extinguishes each day. Ethel thought this was likely the end, that the desert would consume them. Mercy. Josef had a terrible headache. His mouth was dry. His vision was blurred. His heart raced. None of this mattered to him. Death was not what was on his mind, but life. He knew it could be salvaged. He just needed to get the car running. When the Roses got back to their car they didn't find God. They found a large man in a gaudy shirt, who leaned his bicycle up against their car while he looked under the hood.

V.

Odis told everyone his story. He cornered old men in the cafe and stopped women in the street.

He told kids barely old enough to talk and stood at the field gate waiting for football practice to end so he could tell Coach Hines and his players. Odis made certain he told Wick Waltham, the Baptist preacher.

“Fine day, pastor,” Odis chimed.

“I agree, Odis. Fine day.”

Wick had presided over the fiasco of Odis’ grandmother’s funeral where Odis showed up late and drunk and loud. Wick saw himself as better than most of Hades, and that God had bestowed him upon the community to provide some answers. Answers were what Wick thought amounted to as comfort. When Hades asked God, Wick Waltham answered. He had never had an answer for Odis, and it never occurred to him that his God might have created unanswerable questions or unexplainable people.

Odis told Wick that God had personally asked him to start a dude ranch for His people. God’s people were Jews-it said so right in the Bible-so Odis brought them.

Odis’ news stopped Marty Hanson on the morning of Odis return from Scott’s Bluff.

“You’re going to do what?” Marty asked.

“Bring all the Jews to Hades. Start a ranch.”

“Why would you joke like that, Odis?” Marty said. He felt intention in Odis words. Marty had been around long enough to know when talk was talk and when it wasn't and there was

something confident in the way Odis told him that he was going to fill up their town with God's chosen people.

Marty was silent. Odis smiled at him and walked off.

Talking about God was Wick Waltham's territory. To have Odis Heathman spouting off about God required damage control. Wick wasn't scared that anyone else would believe Odis. He was scared that Odis would believe himself.

Wick had breakfast every weekday morning at the Spur Diner. He held court to people who were looking for a little comfort in their lives. Wick relished this. He told farmers that God cared about rain. He preached that God forgave the strayed. He loved to be the man with answers. After Odis' story got out, Wick sat in a booth with the mayor, the sheriff, and a pack of ranchers and cowboys.

"You hear about Odis Heathman?" Stan Miller, owner of the stock company, asked. The men nodded and blew into their coffee.

"Son of a bitch went up to Scott's Bluff and came down crazier than a shithouse rat." The men nodded.

"What do you think, Wick? Horseshit or no?" Another rancher asked, with a crooked smile, knowing what he, the preacher, and everyone else thought.

Wick Waltham sat in the corner of the booth, wearing a snap button shirt and smoking Lucky Strikes. He took a second to respond, as if he hadn't stopped thinking of Odis for his whole life.

"Oh, I think brother Odis has his reasons. He has been through a lot, you know." They all knew about Odis' father and grandmother. "And loneliness can make a man do funny things. God is a

friend to the lonely. I'm sure Odis will see this clear when his thoughts have shaken out, and he remembers that God is more near than come cockamamie tale for attention."

"Yeah, I see that, but the man said he is going to bring Jews here to Hades. Now, we ain't never had nobody like that around here, and to be sure, I'm not interested in starting now." the sheriff, Bucky James, said. There were audible agreements from most of the men.

"Well, if I thought Odis Heathman was the kind of man who could convince anyone to do anything, let alone get Jews out to Hades, then I might just be able to believe anything. Forget not, gentlemen, that brother Odis Heathman is a dipshit." Wick crushed out his cigarette and the men laughed. The bell on the door chimed and Odis strode in. He raised his hand at the men sitting in the corner. The pastor motioned for him to come over and join them.

"Sit down, Odis." He said. "How are you doing?"

"I have never been better in my entire life. You heard I met God, right?"

"I know, Odis, you told me. It's just that..."

"Nobody believes that shit, Odis. You've fucked around long enough in this town." Bucky James yelled. "And if you think for a second we are going to just sit back and let you try to bring Jews here, you've got another thing coming."

Odis sat quietly for a moment. He turned and looked Bucky straight in the face and said, "What are you afraid of?"

"Now, now, I'm sure Odis here isn't really..." Wick started.

"Yes I am really." Odis cut him short. "I am really going to start a ranch. And I am really going to populate that ranch with Jews. And, yes, God told me to do it, face to face. And if you don't believe me, then you can get your happy asses up and leave." Odis was wringing his hands while he spoke. His eyes darted around the restaurant.

And one by one the men gathered up their things and left. When it was just Odis and the pastor remaining, Wick took a hard look at the man.

“They don't believe you. And neither do I. God will not be made a fool of, Odis Heathman. And I am talking about the real God, not some drunken vision you thought you had.” Wick said, and left Odis alone with eight half-eaten breakfast meals. Odis got a fork and ate every one of them. He shoveled the food in without stopping. He sopped up syrup and ate pads of butter. He wiped each plate clean with his finger and drank each cup of coffee to the final drop.

Odis was fat, or rather he became fat. In Hades, where most of the men worked labor, few men were fat. As his waistline grew, Odis clothes started to stretch. His shirts were so small on him that the buttons strained and pink flesh showed where the material gave way.

Odis started to overeat that first morning at the Spur, and continued till it was a routine. He would go to a restaurant, sit down with people he had known his entire life, those people would get up and leave him and their food sitting on the table. Odis Heathman didn't pay for a meal in a restaurant for a year. He also ate alone in every one of those restaurants. He ravaged the plates like he was angry at them. He scraped gravy from plates with his finger and sucked it off like it was a chicken bone. He ate the pads of butter melting in little dishes next to the empty plates. Cleaning peoples abandoned plates in solitude felt therapeutic to Odis. Nobody had particularly enjoyed Odis' presence before, but he was tolerated. Now even those days were over. Odis' parting gift from Hades was platefuls of chicken fried steak, eggs, roast beef, stew, coffee, tea, beers, pies, pork chops, and anything else. They were the remnants of a community where Odis was no longer welcome, and he devoured every scrap. He grew fat and lonely.

The circus came through Hades, which was the only reason Odis had any clothes. He would have had to go to Prescott, or possibly Phoenix, if he had wanted to get clothes that fit. Riding 60 or 70 miles on a bike was out of the question. A circus troupe came to town and went broke. The performers disbanded after not being paid, and they sold off their belongings at the mercantile. Wick Waltham bought the ringmasters top hat and wore it at his home with his wife. His wife bought the trapeze girls outfit. Odis bought 50 silk blouses from the bearded lady. She was getting rid of her clothes to foot the bill for a bus ticket to Alamogordo. She was also gargantuan, and the shiny, colorful, ruffled shirts were a perfect fit on Odis. He laughed out loud when he tried the first one on. He saw the circus people laughing with him, and the people of Hades walking away.

A physician came to Heaven Ranch as a guest and insisted that he check on Odis' health. He was named Aaron Roe, and he came to Hades upon the insistence of his brother. Aaron's brother was a widower who kept a black smudge on a small piece of glass as a reminder of his wife.

When Aaron first saw Odis he immediately thought the man would die before his eyes.

"I must look at you, Odis," he said.

"You are looking at me right now," Odis said back.

"Yes, but there is more going on inside that we can ever know by looking at you." Aaron said.

Odis grinned and unbuttoned his blouse. Aaron listened to his chest with his stethoscope. Odis' heart sounded perfect.

VI.

Odis bought a parcel of land north of Hades for Heaven Ranch. The land was vast and barren. It had one small building and a water tower, just off the dirt road that led from the highway. The adobe house that belonged to the previous owner of the plot stood out of sight from Highway 81. A left turn for those heading south and a right for northbound travelers would put them on the dirt road to the ranch, and the adobe structure, which came to be Odis' office and house. Three dusty miles. Odis had traded Phil Fletcher his saddle for a bicycle at the mercantile, and during the same trip he secured the funds to purchase the land. People saw Odis go into Phil's with a saddle, and walk out with a bike, and thought he had left his good sense in there on the counter as well. They didn't know that Odis had a hand-written and witnessed note for over \$800. He took that note as collateral later the same day to buy the parcel of land off the highway.

After he set the saddle in the back, Phil walked back up to the counter. He saw Odis' looking over his desk. Phil picked up a letter and waved it back and forth like a winning lottery ticket. "Right here is the answer, Odis." Phil said, not knowing that Odis genuinely had a question. "Things are changing. I got this fella here that says he is looking for..." Phil squinted at the letter and picked up his glasses from the counter, hooking the curled arm over one ear, while the other arm waved crooked in the air. "...says he is looking for "artifacts of the old west." Says he is gonna pay "top dollar." You ever heard anything like that in your life?" Odis shook his head. "Hell, they can take Polly Fletcher if they want ancient artifacts from the old west." Polly was Phil's wife. "You got anything to sell this fella?" Phil asked. He was joking. Odis pulled the pistol from his hip and lay it heavy on the counter. Phil looked up at him. He connected the dots between the letter and Odis' pistol.

“What's gotten into you, Odis?”

Odis told him.

Phil had seen the gun before. He had known Odis' father. He had known Odis' grandfather when he had toted the gun. Phil had seen that style of revolver come and go in his days in Hades, which was where all his days had taken place. He had seen all men carry pistols like this one when he was a kid, then fewer and fewer as the years wore on. He hadn't seen a pistol like Odis' in twenty years when Odis laid it across his counter.

“Well, I'll be dipped in shit.” He said.

The pistol was a Colt Navy Revolver, and Phil couldn't be sure, but he assumed that it had been a relic from the Civil War. That was what he told the man from the letter. He dialed the man on the phone with Odis watching, long distance charges be damned, as soon as he understood that Odis was serious.

“Yessir, got it right here. The real deal, just like you asked for. Well, looks to me like its in pretty good shape. Yessir. Well, with a finders fee for me of course.” Phil looked at Odis while he was speaking.

Odis told Phil about his plans, and what he was going to do with the money. Phil didn't care.

“Listen Odis, I don't give a shit what you do on this earth. You can strip naked as a jay-bird and run through the church bazaar for all I care, long as I get some money out of the deal. And today you made me \$80, so I'll believe whatever horseshit tale you want to tell me today. Tomorrow is another story.” He said.

Odis got a note, written by Phil, and notarized by him as well, that held the promise of more money that Odis had ever known in his entire life. He took the note, and his bicycle and headed toward the door. Phil was inspecting the pistol.

“Hey Odis, how long you had these bullets in here?” He asked.

“Since I got back from the war.” Odis told him. Phil looked in and saw that there were two shells missing from the cylinder chamber. He cared, but didn't ask.

Odis rode out past town, down the dirt road off Highway 81, and bought the piece of land he had seen advertised in the newspaper the week before. He paid \$621.88 for 83 sections of what had been advertised to him as useless desert land.

“Odis, this is just some scrub out there off 81, you know that right?” Jim Shay, owner and seller of the land had told him. He had advertised the land in the hopes that eventually it would get noticed when the town got bigger, and the freeway needed to go through. Both of these things happened, decades down the road, but it was Carron, not Jim or Odis who had the windfall from land speculation.

“I know that, Jim. I need the land. Doesn't matter what it looks like.”

Odis told Jim the idea for the ranch. Jim had heard the story already from Marty Hanson. Jim looked at Odis for a long time. He laughed.

“Ok, Odis, I'll sell you this land. Seems like it's just going to be you out here anyway. You and that pickled mind of yours.” Odis didn't say anything. Jim looked at Odis' bicycle. Jim sighed.

“Listen Odis, it seems like you are a little down on your luck.” Jim had grown soft of Odis' routine, and had felt like Odis had gotten a bum deal out of life. He wasn't necessarily a charitable man, but he thought he could try to reason with Odis. “I know this hasn't been the best

life for you yet, but you don't have to go making up all sorts of stories. I'll sell you this land. I'm a businessman. But I just want you to come clean. There was no house, no broken ankle, and you never met God." Jim looked right in Odis' face.

"Yes I did, Jim. So fuck you. Take this money and fuck off. Do we have a deal?"

"Odis, come on. You have to be..." Jim started to say, but Odis stepped closer to Jim than he felt comfortable with. "Now, Odis, don't go getting yourself in a place you can't get out of."

Odis shoved his money in the front pocket of Jim Shay's shirt then inched closer to him, their faces almost touching.

"Odis, you don't get yourself out of my face and ain't going to be no magic house that's going to pour out of the heavens to save you." Odis stuffed the money farther down in Jim's breast pocket, gave Jim a push, and pulled away.

Jim had punched Odis before. They had grown up together and Jim had been on the short end of Odis' antics. When they were teenagers, about to ship off for the war, Odis had gotten drunk and turned over a horse trough on the Shay property and slept in the damp, empty wood. When Jim woke him up in the morning and realized that he was going to have to haul eighty gallons of water to refill the trough, he gave Odis a choice.

"Odis, you can either fill this damn trough yourself, or I can punch you until you are unconscious. Your choice." Odis rolled over in the trough as if he was pulling the blankets back on himself. Jim Shay pulled him out and up and knocked him unconscious. Jim knocked Odis unconscious a second time. Jim worried he had killed him. He stuffed the deed to the land in Odis' breast pocket, got in his truck and drove off. Odis was unconscious long enough to get a sunburn on his face. He had bled heavily from his nose, so the burn only affected the exposed

parts of his face. For the next week Odis walked around with a streaked sunburn. Odis smiled brightly and showed the deed to anybody he hadn't told, and many of those he had.

When Josef and Ethel Rose set foot on Heaven Ranch they were astonished that it was called a “working” ranch. There was plenty of work to be done, but no actual work taking place. Josef asked how the ranch was going to be built, Odis said, “That’s where you come in.”

Josef was dedicated. Josef headed west without intention, but he stood, at Heaven Ranch with purpose. He rubbed his hands raw on the first day of work. He worked them till the skin hung off them in sheets, exposing the tender flesh beneath. Odis plucked stray skin from the handle of the shovel Josef had been using. Josef looked at his hands and laughed, then held them out to Odis like a child playing in the mud. Josef took his shirt off, tore it in two, wrapped his mangled hands and got back to work.

When he recovered from heat stroke a week later, Josef bounced out of bed and pulled a clean shirt onto his peeling body.

Josef helped dig the lines for plumbing; he unloaded lumber for bunkhouses he and Odis dreamed up, he drove nails into wood himself. Josef dug fenceposts, dug latrines, and dug huge rocks from the uneven earth to smooth things out. Josef couldn't remember the last time he had a shovel in his hands and now he didn't go an hour without plunging his into the dirt. He liked it.

He got asked to do tasks, never told what to do. He could have walked away from Heaven Ranch whenever he pleased, and because of that freedom he didn't go anywhere.

Ethel was not as excited as Josef. She stood for a long time by the Studebaker that Odis had repaired for them as Odis and her husband looked out over nothingness with excitement. She watched Josef smile and nod as Odis gestured to spots in the desert, pointing to patches of nothing and saying things that made her Josef smile. She felt alone. She was used to feeling alone, but that didn't make her like it. She looked at the sad, little adobe shack. It was a one-room building with no bathroom. Only then did she cry.

During her early days at Heaven Ranch, Ethel sat in the Studebaker with the windows rolled down. It was the only shade she could find. The dark car heated up to unreal temperatures during the day, so even in the shade with the windows down she felt like she was being boiled alive. She watched Odis and Josef toil in the sun. Josef was laughing all the time. She started to resent her husband. They had had so many months of just clinging to one another, so elated to have made it to the United States as a tandem, when so many had been torn apart, families and individuals. She couldn't have dreamed that she would ever be mad at Josef, forgiving him anything in the wake of what they had been through. But there, in the searing automobile, she stewed.

Ethel slept in the Studebaker. One night she was awakened by a moon so bright it lit up the desert. It looked like it was day, but an eerie blue sunshine had swept over the land. She was exhausted. She was dehydrated. She wasn't sure if it was night or day. Ethel got up and opened the door. She stepped out with bare feet onto the ground. It was cool. In a haze she walked from the Studebaker, and out to the water tower. She saw Odis, leaning against one of the legs of the tower.

“Fine evening, Ethel.” he said. She didn't speak. She saw that he had built a little nest around where he sat, and it looked as if he had been there for several days. He was giving them the adobe hut to sleep in. She had assumed Josef had been sleeping outside under the stars, but he had been in the hut, with a bed. Ethel wasn't upset that she wasn't in the house. She was just upset in general.

“Ethel, you ever look out there,” he pointed out to nothing, bathed in blue light, “and think, my Lord, I am just a blink of the eye?” She stepped closer to Odis but remained quiet.

“I mean, look at this. We are here in this place, nothing around us but bugs and animals, and just the two of you being here has tripled my world. Three blinks.” He laughed. “Three is a lot more than one, I don't have to tell you that.”

She listened to the night. He was right. They were alone. There were also three of them. In that moment she felt the weight of isolation and the crush of company. She took a deep breath. It felt like she had loosened something inside her chest. She sat down next to Odis and looked at the nothing together. She wasn't scared. She didn't think that he was going to harm her. This was a new feeling for Ethel. She hadn't trusted anyone but Josef for a long, long time. And as her husband snoozed off his brutal work day in a house made of mud, she sat next to a stranger in the night. She was not afraid. She began to blink her eyes rapidly to match the tears. Odis stared at her as she cried. He wasn't a good comforter. He fiddled with the rocks around him and the buttons on his shirt while Ethel cried. Odis stared at the buttons on his clothes and the fleshiness of his hands.

“These darn things are so hard to deal with. They are so small and the things working them are so dammed big,” Odis said, filling the air with his words. He looked down. He was starting to sweat. Ethel looked at him and smiled and cried.

Life caught a simple rhythm as the weeks of that first summer wore on. Josef, and now Ethel, woke at dawn each day to find Odis leaned over a small fire, heating water for coffee and hard boiled eggs. They all ate the same diet of coffee and eggs every morning, without fail. In the Rose's first week at Heaven Ranch Odis had bought a side of bacon for them to eat. He woke early, as usual, and cooked the bacon over his small fire. He grew more curious why Josef and Ethel weren't touching the bacon.

"Aren't you two going to get some of this bacon into you? It sets the day off right," he said, as he slid a piping hot piece down his throat. The Rose's looked at one another. Josef forked a piece of the bacon and held it up. He watched the grease drip off of it. Ethel looked at him as if he was sacrificing one of the children they never had.

"We don't eat bacon," he said to Odis, putting the piece back into the pan.

"Why not? Everyone eats bacon!" Odis said.

"We are Jews." Odis knew this. "We don't eat pork. It's part of our beliefs." Josef felt a little silly saying this. It felt like a rehearsed speech he was giving for the first time, as if as a boy he had been trained what to say if he was ever offered bacon by Odis Heathman in the desert of Arizona.

Odis was embarrassed by his oversight, but not in his lack of knowledge about his guests. He felt confident that the Lord had told him to bring them out there, not to learn every nuance about their inner workings. Odis was also embarrassed that he had cooked enough for three that morning, and had purchased enough for three months. He ate all of the portions at that day's breakfast and continued eating each morning at a feverish pace, until all three months worth of pork were gone. He didn't eat bacon another day in his life after that.

Ethel and Josef felt at home at Heaven Ranch; even though there was not much ranch to speak of, and what was there they had helped build. They were surprised at Odis' lack of surprise over their comfort. He had told them that God had prepared him for their arrival. They had heard Odis' story, multiple times, but it only registered to them that he believed it the more comfortable they got. The story had been fantastic, yes, but what a fantastic world they had seen in their lives. To the Rose's, Odis' story was the reassurance they had been looking for. God was absolutely real, just absent. To them, seeing God face to face meant at least they knew where He was hiding. This gave them comfort. Then, somebody defaced the water tower. And somehow, God became as real to them as He ever had been.

Josef and Ethel had never set foot in the town of Hades. They'd been stranded on the road with their car, when he got the Studebaker running, were whisked by Odis straight out to Heaven Ranch. Odis took the money they gave him for supplies and made the runs into town by himself. The only person that had been out to the ranch was Rusty Baker, a mechanic who came out to do maintenance on the pump to the water tower. Rusty had been cordial, even friendly to the mysterious, quiet guests. The Rose's waved as Rusty drove away. He took a left in the distance, onto Highway 81. What the Rose's didn't know was that Rusty Baker went straight to the Spur Cafe and told the men that crazy son of a bitch, Odis, was really going through with it. Had two people out there on that ranch with him right now.

Odis didn't tell the Roses how in Hades he was met with sideways looks and half-threats about his intentions. What he couldn't keep secret was what they saw the morning they got up and

didn't find him around the usual cook fire. No eggs, no coffee. Ethel got the sickening feeling that they had been abandoned. Josef was holding his shovel, looking in all directions with panic. As the sun lit up the desert, the Rose's simultaneously spotted Odis in his garish shirt, on top of the water tower. In the night, vandals had scrawled the word JEWS in big letters across the tank. When Odis came down from the tower he was surprised at the Rose's lack of surprise. It was as if Josef and Ethel had been waiting for something like this to happen since they got to the ranch, and now it had. They were still alive. No worse off than the night before when they laid down to bed. This was the first time the Roses had been threatened since their previous life. It gave them a strange comfort. As if they could laugh with God at the hate of scared people. They hadn't been sure if God still lived, and then they were laughing with Him.

Odis dropped that can of paint he had toted up the ladder. He had not tried to cover up the word JEWS, but attempted to paint a Star of David on either side. Ethel had told him about the star a week before. She had called it a shield. Odis saw the defacing as a perfect opportunity to run his flag up Hades flagpole. And with the shield, and God's encouragement, Odis turned what was meant as a violent act into a marketing ploy.

"You know Odis," Ethel said, "the Star of David has six points. Not five." She knelt down into the dirt and traced the double triangles of the shield with Odis as Josef happily gathered up wood for the fire to cook their eggs and coffee.

VII.

A national news story that broke that detailed the routine persecution of Jewish people in a small town. The story was picked up by the AP wire after its details were confirmed by the regional fact-checker. The story was buried behind several sections in the New York Times, but if you read the Times cover to cover like Jacob Rose did, then you would never have missed the headline: “Terror and Torah in the Desert.”

The story told of his brother and sister-in-law, along with hundreds of their friends, who had gone to the desert to a dude ranch. It was reported that the ranch was popular place for the local cowboys to use as target practice. The story claimed that authorities were of no help because the authorities were part of the mob. At one point the journalist asked why the people kept coming back to the ranch if they were under such duress from the locals. The Times ran a quote from Earl Rothwell, 59, of Newark, New Jersey, who said, “This place is actually (sic) Heaven.”

When he pressed further, the journalist got the whole unlikely story of Heaven Ranch and Odis Heathman. He was told about the magical healing house in the desert, and shown a house on the property, a yellow Victorian-style, with green shrubs surrounding it. There were five men in yarmulkes with cans of yellow paint touching it up. The journalist asked if he could speak to Odis. He was told he could not. He asked why Odis, a native son of the town, couldn't appeal to the citizens. Earl got tears in his eyes.

“Because, Carron is leading them.”

After Earl explained who Carron was, the journalist penned another national article about Heaven Ranch.

During the first summer, Ethel, Josef, and Odis endured the graffiti on the water tower. Odis dealt with sideways glances when he was in town, and heard comments said behind his back. It didn't matter. He kept telling people in Hades his story, reminding them that God had sent two Jews his way. Ethel and Josef being there gave him confidence. He assured everyone there were more people to come. He went to town in the Studebaker and bought nails and glue, coffee, eggs, toilet paper, candles, cups, plates, and other goods in bulk. Marty Hanson wasn't taking Odis seriously. He saw Odis almost every time he came into town, and every time he saw him, Marty would ask, "How's God today, Odis?" and wait with a smile for Odis to answer. The first couple of times it happened, Odis took the question seriously and reminded Marty that he had only been in front of God once. Now Odis said, "Fuck you, Marty."

One day pressed Odis further.

"Seriously Odis, where is He? Why don't you tell me?" he said as he followed Odis from the mercantile. "I know you got those Jews out there, so where is God?"

"I don't know, Marty. The last time I saw Him, He was in that house over on Scott's Bluff. You know. I told you."

"There ain't no house out on Scott's Bluff," Marty said.

"Yes there is," Odis sighed.

"Well then, Odis, why don't we go out there and have a look?"

Odis agreed to accompany Marty to Scott's Bluff that evening to show him and the rest of the naysayers what exactly he was talking about.

Back then, Scott's Bluff was accessible only by horse or foot. After things took off at Heaven Ranch a crude road was cleared. The work was done by Marty's son, Odis handpicked him for

the job. Odis insisted on riding in the cab with Amos, talking nonstop and calling him “Hopalong.” Amos let the nickname slide for most of the day, making a concession to the insult. Odis was paying him handsomely for routine work. Eventually, though, Amos couldn't take it anymore.

“If you call me Hopalong one more goddamn time,” Amos threatened as he got back into the cab, “I’m going to kick your fat ass out of this truck and you can walk back into town. I swear, if you call me that one more time. I’ll ...you just better not.” Odis laughed and looked at Amos, wondering when it was going to register with his hired help that Odis walking back into town from this very spot was why he had a job clearing a road on this very day.

“My apologies, Amos,” Odis said, “I thought you liked being called Hopalong.” Odis laughed again. Amos couldn't figure out if Odis was laughing at him.

Marty offered Odis a horse to get up the bluff. Odis declined, then retold Marty about killing his last horse. Marty looked at Odis.

“You know I know that right, Odis? You know that's why we are going up to Scott's Bluff? I mean, really, you know that right?”

Odis laughed.

As Marty saddled his horse in the waning sunlight, Odis retold the story of the house. Odis scrambled along the boulders, huffing and puffing, and told Marty once again about the strange freedom he felt when he had last walked on those rocks. He told Marty about how each thorn that got lodged in his foot was a reminder that he had been saved. How the pain reminded him of joy. Marty was uneasy. He was ready to pin the asshole to the wall using the asshole's own words, but the more Odis talked freely, the more sick Marty felt. Eventually, as Odis was

describing the smell in the house, Marty told Odis to shut the fuck up. Odis sensed the change in Marty and didn't talk and didn't laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, Odis,” Marty said. “You may be able to talk about that house like its there, but we ain't going to see anything.” Marty was becoming less convinced of his own words.

Odis couldn't help himself. His silence didn't last long.

“I know I've only been to it once, but damned if I don't see it near every day. I'll just be sitting around in the shade and that place'll pop into my brain. Crystal clear. I can feel what my skin felt like on that day. It's like it's right before my eyes. Like I am being told to remember.” Odis said. They were weaving their way through the rocks. Marty's horse made a series of small slips, which prompted Odis to retell the story of Candybar for the second time in the span of five minutes.

When they reached the top of Scott's Bluff, the sun was about to dip below the horizon. They didn't have much daylight, but they had daylight enough to see that there was nothing to see. Marty rode up first, with Odis crawling the last bit on his hands and knees through the steep rock. Odis heard a tremendous laugh, then turned to see Marty looking at him with semi-wild eyes.

“Where is it, Odis?” Marty said. Odis said nothing. The house wasn't there. He only saw the pile of Candybar's bones.

When things were booming at Heaven Ranch, Odis would take a select few of his guests to Scott's Bluff each summer. He charged an additional fee for the experience. Odis told the story

of his illumination on that spot. He stood, with his back to the guests, at what would have been the front door of the house. He described in such detail what the place looked like.

“It was as welcoming a home as I ever saw. Every need of my comfort was met as soon as I stepped into it. Like I was being wrapped in the place. It was holding itself around me.” At this point, Odis mimed like he was opening a door and slowly walking in. The first time he did the tour, a woman gasped as he turned the imaginary handle, and as Odis walked across an invisible floor the crowd followed with apprehension. It was the same routine: he showed the crowd Candybar’s bones. He crawled toward the house. He stood and walked to the front door and walked inside. He continued down the hallway. He turned another imaginary doorknob. He didn't go in right away. The guests knew what was behind that door, even if they were all in the desert, with no actual house. In a bit of showmanship, Odis told the guests that only he could go into this room. He asked for their privacy. He asked them to turn their backs to the space. They did. Odis walked into the “room.” “God?” Odis boomed, with his head turned toward his guests to make sure they heard.

“Odis, there ain't nothing here!” Marty yelled. He walked over and picked up one of the bones. Odis looked at Marty with tears in his eyes.

“Marty, there ain't nothing here,” Odis said. As he clutched the bone to himself his eyes darted around crazily looking for the house. He didn't move. Marty felt like he was going to be sick. But then he felt a strange, new feeling toward Odis. He still hated Odis, but he also felt bad for him. It wasn't the type of bad you felt knowing that Odis had grown up an orphan, or when you saw a group of men razzing him. It was a bad feeling that made Marty wish they had seen the

house when they got up to the bluff. He wished what Odis had said was true. He hated Odis and his lies, but Marty hated pitying him more.

VIII.

By the end of the first summer at Heaven Ranch, Josef and Ethel Rose had lost fifteen pounds apiece. Their skin had gone from pasty to tan. They had the skin of those who had been burned, healed, and burned again. Each burn darkened them, made them look like they had tough leather over their bones. Josef's coal black hair lightened in the sun at the same time his skin was getting darker. When his brother threw open the door of his Brooklyn apartment, Jacob was about to shut it in the face of the strange man before him.

“Jacob, it's me, your brother. Your Josef.”

Jacob wept and welcomed his brother and his brother's wife into his apartment. He feared that they had died and he been given them back for the second time. He looked at the strange beings they had become.

“What have you done to yourself?” Jacob asked Josef, sneaking glances at his hair.

“I haven't done anything, Jacob. As usual, everything has been done to me.” Ethel laughed.

Jacob had never heard Ethel laugh before.

At the ranch, the Roses built the frame of a bunkhouse. They dug trenches for a below-ground plumbing system that could accommodate hundreds. They killed rattlesnakes, shot coyotes, and smashed wasps. Ethel and Odis watched Josef bludgeon a spindly cow that had wandered onto the Heaven Ranch property.

Josef asked Odis if it was legal to kill something that found its way onto your property in the state of Arizona. Odis told Josef that he wasn't sure about the revised statutes regarding feral animal disposal. Josef was strides ahead of Odis' words, shovel in hand.

They ate everything except the wasps.

Ethel had thawed during her time at Heaven Ranch. She still had life within her under the ice that had formed around her; soul and hope and love. She had been worked and fed. She was free to tell her story or keep silent. This was all she needed to go on.

Odis went into hibernation after the Roses left, which became his routine every off-season. Odis didn't lift a finger when guests weren't in town. He moved back into Hades, to the disappointment of nearly everyone. He took his clothes to his grandmother's home and settled in among the dust and dry rot. He went to the Spur and to Phil's, and used words like "destiny" and "will" when he talked to people. The citizens of Hades were not impressed.

"Odis is just out there goofing around, friends," Wick told his listeners at breakfast. "No need to get upset. He had those two poor, wretched creatures stumble their way out there, but thats all.

Its a long way from wherever they are from to out here. They won't come back."

Marty Hanson hadn't told anyone about his trip with Odis. He got a strange feeling that maybe Odis was doing something bigger than any of them had thought. He had been affected on Scott's Bluff. He couldn't explain it.

"God's will is a little bigger than Odis Heathman, friends," Wick said. All the men chuckled, Marty joined in the laughter a half beat late.

Odis slept late, rarely bathed, and rode his bicycle wherever he went. He joined the fire department, but was late to most of the calls. He didn't work a day after buying Heaven Ranch

and meeting the Roses. They had left him with money to sustain him through the winter. Money was set aside for building projects and a meager allowance. Odis didn't do a project all winter.

The Roses went to work telling everyone they knew back east about Heaven Ranch. Josef told every Jew he could find, people passing on the street. Often Josef would go on and on, and would end conversations by saying, "Hi, my name is Josef." He told shoeshine boys, rabbis, hot dog vendors, and homeless men. He didn't see any difference between anybody.

Ethel knew that a reserved, welcomed conversation would be better received. She narrowed her audience to their family and their synagogue. Ethel did as much beating around the bush as she could about what they had been doing for the previous months. When she felt like she had whittled down the group to people she thought didn't hate her, she reiterated Josef's tales of Odis to the select few. She told them of the house on the bluff. She talked about how she had been convinced that God had left the scene of His own crime, but that God was really waiting for them in another desert. They simply had to trust, like they had once had before.

The Roses canvassed their corner of Brooklyn till everyone had heard the name Odis Heathman. Most people thought the Roses had lost their minds, but there were a few small clusters of people who had nothing else to hope for. These were people like Josef and Ethel: tired, beaten, and no longer looking for God. If Josef and Ethel knew where He was they were all ears.

Ethel heard her neighbors slander her husband for the wild tales he was telling. When she entered a room, voices hushed. She didn't care. Something had happened to her, something good. It was if her life had been a failed experiment until the first summer of Heaven Ranch. That summer had felt to her like she had been shown the starting point of her own life.

The last woman that Ethel spoke with that winter, on a late February day when the bite had been taken out of the cold, was Elsa Slowitz. Elsa had been Ethel's neighbor in Poland and New York. "Elsa, I know it sounds like I am crazy. But Josef and I are happy." Elsa looked out the frosted window at a jacketless Josef.

"And this man, he said that God prepared him for our arrival. All of our arrival. Yours and mine. God, Elsa! Remember Him?" Ethel laughed at her own words. Elsa turned and looked out the window at the new day.

The small group that went to Heaven Ranch that next year were the sons and daughters of war, the grandchildren of war. They were all like the Roses had been the spring before: lost. They didn't trust life. The Roses said that they had not been beaten or spat upon. Nobody had bothered them. They felt peace. This was good enough for the group.

The newcomers expected to find a strange, singular man, alone on his ranch. But when they arrived, they saw Odis holding a baby boy.

The Boatman

I don't know where he got the name Carron from. I grew up with boys names Elsey, Rufus, Collis, Rosie, and the youngest Corner twin, Constantine. Girls were given boy names too.

Andie and Joey Templeton were the sisters in grades on either side of me. But never before and never since did I ever come across a boy named Carron. I suppose now that I'm an adult I kind of like the name, I don't have to share it with anyone. And it is the first thing I can remember that made me not like my father.

My first day of kindergarten I had to stand up and announce my name to the class. Each student had to stand up and say their name, their favorite color, and what they had for breakfast. I stood up and said, "My name is Carron," and the whole class burst out laughing.

I tried to change my name to C. "My name is C. Heathman," I'd tell the teachers, but even the most well meaning teachers would fall back into calling me Carron. A new teacher came in to work at the high school, said my name on the roll call then asked, "What were your parents thinking?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Maybe they were thinking that after a dozen or so years I would get to field an annoying question from a dipshit, just my luck, that day is here."

I spent plenty of time in hot water over the name Odis gave me. In the Johnny Cash song, "Boy Named Sue," a boy is named Sue by his father who splits. The kid has to grow up fighting on account of his name, and he grows strong and mean because of it. Toward the end of the song there is a chance encounter between the boy and his estranged father. They beat the shit out of each other then the dad explains he had to name the kid Sue because he knew the name would make him tough. That was my story too, except the father hadn't gone anywhere. He got to see me come home each day with scrapes or bruises. This made me hate him.

When I got older a teacher told me about the Boatman of the River Styx. Charon.

“They call him “The Boatman of Hades.” His name is Charon, too. Spelled different.” The teacher helped me look up the Boatman. I read all about how Charon took people to the afterlife.

I liked the part about where he stuck a coin in the mouth of the dead people. That felt like kind of a cool thing to do. I imagined myself knocking people out and putting a coin on them. Like my calling card. But I knew Odis had no intention of me being the Boatman, because Odis would never put a coin in anything but his own pocket. When I realized that Odis had just named me Carron for no special purpose it made me feel even less like I mattered. I’d always be Carron. The guy with the funny girl’s name.

I think that teacher thought he had connected with me on some level, and this was going to be my big breakthrough.

“Hey, Carron, you been reading about your namesake lately?” he asked me.

I told him no. And I didn't plan on doing any more research.

“Well, then I guess you’ll never know that Charon is the name of the Pluto’s most important moon,” he said to me. Like I gave a shit.

IX.

Carron Heathman was a below average student at Hades High, struggling in math and science.

He publicly didn't mind the occasional D+, even joked about it with his other D-earning friends, but when he was alone he would tear his report cards to pieces.

Carron was a JV football player and a wrestler in the 132 lb weight class, posting a winning record for each of his years on the mat. Carron knew that there were bigger and smarter men. He didn't need to be the biggest and the smartest, but he recoiled at the idea of being the smallest and dumbest. If nothing else, he wanted to be bigger and smarter than his father.

Carron didn't have a car. By the time Carron was old enough to drive his father could have bought him any car. He could have paraded down Main Street in a different Dodge pickup every day, and waved to the girls at the ice cream shop with a tanned arm out the window. But Odis never offered a car and Carron never asked.

Odis rarely remembered Carron's birthday. It wasn't that he hated Carron, but Carron felt like his father had always looked upon him with surprise, as if each day he was shocked to find that a sixteen-year-old son of his had materialized out of thin air the night before.

"Morning, Carron," Odis said, standing before his son on Carron's sixteenth birthday.

"Hi, Odis." Carron said. Odis adjusted a bright neckerchief in a mirror. Carron waited. When he was finished getting the neckerchief just right, Odis turned toward Carron. Carron braced himself and tried to hold back the smile bursting from within him. He waited for Odis to say happy birthday. In his dreams, Odis said the words then threw open his door to reveal a cake and

a car and a party. Carron felt dumb when he thought these thoughts. Odis tipped his hat, said something about money, and walked out the door. Carron walked five miles to school on his birthday. In third period geography, Mrs. Taylor wished him a happy day and gave him a crumbly, dry brownie she had baked especially for all of the people with birthdays in March. The brownie made his throat dry. He thought of his father.

The first time Carron vandalized Heaven Ranch was an accident. Carron knew everyone he went to school with. He had been going to school with the same small group of people since he started his education, and their class pictures were always the same kids, aging a year at a time. To say Carron was well liked would have been a stretch. It wasn't that Carron was mean to people, or had any ill-will of his own to speak of, he was nice. The problem was Odis. Carron wanted better. He wanted his father to want better. He could wish upon every star and to the God of all things great and small, and it wouldn't change the fact that he was the son of Odis Heathman. And because of that fact, and because they lived in Hades, Carron Heathman wore a reputation that stuck to him the day he was born and wouldn't wash off. He tried to make the best of what he had. But it always hurt, and he always felt awkward. He wanted an easy way out. His father was rich but did nothing with the money. He didn't lavish gifts on Carron, and he didn't lavish affection on him. Carron wanted a life where, for a little while, he didn't have to be Odis' son. His chance came in the form of Ken McCown.

Ken McCown was a kid whose parents didn't like him, and his parent's friends didn't like him. His peers at school were terrified of him. His mother was afraid of him, and his father thought the boy would be dead long before he would have gotten his money's worth out of him. But Ken got a pass because the same terror he issued upon his family and Hades doled out on the football

field. There was a river of terror flowing through the young man, and he bid all rival teams to come and dip their toes in.

Ken McCown broke people's bones, spit in their faces when the referees weren't looking, and called anybody he thought was black a "nigger" (Ken McCown played against exactly zero black football players in four years at Hades High). He delighted the fans of Hades and kept the stands packed each Friday night. For six days a week Ken was the scourge of the town, but on the seventh day he created chaos. He was loved for it. During his high school career he led the squad to back to back district championships, the only Hades had ever known. He played fullback and linebacker, and chewed tobacco on the field. So, when Ken McCown, feared and respected, came to Carron Heathman and asked him what he was doing after practice, the natural response was to do whatever Ken said.

Carron and Ken drank beers after practice. Ken was used to drinking. Carron was not.

"You want a nipple for that beer, son?" Ken asked. He had been calling Carron "son" since they left the school, riding in Ken's truck. Carron laughed and toed the ground. He wanted to cut Ken back, maybe he'd think Carron had some salt. But maybe he'd kill Carron where he stood.

"This ain't my brand, Ken." Carron said.

"What's your brand? Milk?" Ken said, and spat a mouthful of lukewarm suds onto Carron's jeans. Carron had hoped that all they were going to do was drink beer and bullshit, wait around while adults passed and tipped their hats to Ken. But he knew that wasn't all Ken had on his mind. He was fueling himself up for something. The danger made Carron excited.

"What's say you and me go for a little ride?" Ken said.

Ken McCown died in the Vietnam war, after failing out of Arizona State and losing his football scholarship. He made national headlines after shattering the personal foul record for the NCAA. In November he was playing college football, by August he was dead. His funeral was held in the high school gymnasium, where only complimentary things were said about him. Carron got up to speak and identified himself as Ken's best friend. He mumbled some other things, he was drunk.

"That son of a bitch and me were best friends," Carron slurred into the microphone. Wick got up halfway from his seat to stop the speech, but sat back down.

"Ken, the bastard, he and I had some times," Carron went on, "we tore this town to pieces." The crowd stirred. People didn't think Ken and Carron had been friends. They knew that they had been together the night Carron went nuts and crashed a car and nearly killed a Jew. But the crowd had no idea Carron thought Ken was his best friend.

"Ken McCown was a piece of shit." Carron said. The crowd gasped. One or two people laughed out loud. "He was the devil. Doing devil things right under all of your noses. And you acted like he didn't do anything boys won't do. And now he's dead and half his body is still back in Vietnam and you sit up here and talk about how great he was. Piece. Of. Shit." Carron turned and directed these last three words at the casket, closed, because, as Carron had said, only half of Ken was in the box.

Several men, led by Wick, descended on the podium, grabbed Carron and tossed him out the back double doors of the gym. The crowd settled a bit, but could still hear the young man outside screaming, "Son of a bitch didn't own up!"

Carron closed the door on Ken's truck. It didn't latch.

“You gotta slam it.” Ken said. Carron slammed it. It didn't close.

“Slam it, you pussy.” Carron slammed the door with everything he had. Nothing. Ken walked around to the passenger side of the truck and shut the door on the first try, with force that seemed so effortless Carron couldn't stop himself from smiling. He didn't know if he really thought it was that great, or if the beer was kicking in.

“Like I said, princess, you gotta slam it.” Ken said. Carron laughed.

The two boys drove over the curb onto Main Street and out toward Heaven Ranch. Carron, cloudy with beer, didn't notice their direction.

Ken stopped the truck on the highway when the water tower came into view. The word JEWS and the stars were visible from the road. Each season the water tower got a fresh coat of paint.

For the first few years Odis himself climbed up and painted. Every subsequent year he delegated the job to a guest. They loved it. The job got so popular that Odis started a lottery to see who got the privilege of doing the work he didn't want to do. The first year he was approached with a bribe from a guest to rig the lottery, Odis did away with the lottery all together and sold the job to the highest bidder.

“It would fucking suck to live out here,” Ken said to Carron. Carron agreed.

“Yeah, it fucking sucks,” Carron said. Ken shot a sideways glance at Carron that he didn't see and cracked a wry smile. He knew Carron was at his disposal. He would go along with anything. Ken loved this position. He found power over any and all things to be life's sweetest joy.

“You know how to drive a car?” Ken asked Carron.

“Of course.” Carron said. He had never driven a car.

“What kinda cars they got over there?” Ken said, pointing to the ranch.

The Roses had each driven a car across the country the second summer of the ranch. Josef drove the new Ford Vedette the couple had purchased upon returning to New York, Ethel drove the Studebaker they borrowed then bought from Jacob. They came home after their second summer with only one, having left the Studebaker at Heaven Ranch for Odis. The car sat parked in front of the adobe hut for most of the time, Odis preferring his bicycle. He used the Studebaker as he had the summer before, making town runs for food and small supplies. He often ran the car for weeks, a month at a time without filling the gas tank up. When it wouldn't turn over he would make the bike ride to the filling station and ride lopsided back to the ranch. He never once took the car to get any work done, not a single tire rotation or oil change. The Studebaker ran like a top till the day Carron and Ken McCown stole it from the ranch.

When Ken McCown asked which car they should steal, Carron pointed to the one that belonged to his father. Carron had never faulted his father for not being present in his life. Since the time Carron could bathe himself, he had lived in a separate building from his father on the ranch. The talk about Odis Heathman had never been quiet in Hades. That didn't change just because Carron was around. He had to endure slights about his father that ranged from the whispered to the blatant. Carron had lived a life of embarrassment that went deeper than a forgotten birthday.

When any given classmate at Hades High razzed Carron about the fact that he slept in a bunkhouse with snoring Jews, or that he walked miles to school and back each day, he stood up for himself, but secretly relished in the fact that he was being made fun of rather than his father. This was the biggest reason Carron wanted to destroy what he could at the ranch: he wanted to pay his father back for being himself.

The two boys crouched at the barbed-wire fence that encircled the property of Hades Ranch.

Ken held a bottle of beer in one hand and clipped the wires of the fence with the other. The wires snapped free.

“Looks like we’re all clear for takeoff, pilot,” Ken laughed. Carron saw his father’s car, the one that was not shiny and bore no plates. He didn't check to see if it was unlocked. He saw the keys dangling from the ignition. He picked up a rock and fired it through the driver’s side glass. The rock landed on the passenger seat.

One of the last times Carron saw his father, they ran into each other at the new supermarket that had been built a block from Phil’s. They were in the liquor aisle. Odis laughed, Carron didn't.

“Looks like we got the same shopping list, don't we boy?” Odis said, holding up a shopping list.

Carron didn't say anything. Odis told his son about the ranch, and for the millionth time about God’s good and faithful plan for Odis’ life. He told Carron how, despite some hiccups over the years, things had turned out well. Carron gritted his teeth. He wasn't yet twenty-five and was a full-blown alcoholic. He had spent eighteen months of those twenty-five years in the state penitentiary in Florence. Odis had provided the testimony that sent him there.

“You know, boy, God doesn’t just have a plan for me. I’m sure He’s got something rolling around up there for you too, if you look hard enough. Maybe you don't even have to look. God came and found me. Maybe you just gotta get on your belly and crawl toward Him.” Carron knocked the bottle of out of his father’s hand, then threw down his own fifth of gin and stomped out the door.

Carron hesitated at the window of the car. Carron looked at the adobe hut. A window air conditioning unit hummed in the night. Carron heard rustling from the guest bunkhouse. Ken was antsy. He was in unfamiliar territory. Why did he break the window? Why was Carron just standing there?

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ken whisper-yelled. Carron ignored him and reached into the cab of the car and blew the horn.

People came out of the bunkhouse, pulled on robes and put on glasses. They formed a human wall between Carron and Heaven Ranch. The night wasn't cold, but the guests huddled together, by instinct. Carron blasted the horn again. The small light in Odis' small house clicked on.

Carron didn't move. Ken was about to leave. He yelled for Carron to leave then fired a half-full beer bottle into the crowd of sleepy Jews. The bottle came down with a thud against bone.

Carron got into the Studebaker and turned the engine over. Carron looked in the rear view mirror at Odis, who was standing, backlit in his doorway, watching. Carron, rather than gassing it out to Highway 81, threw the car in reverse and sped backward toward the adobe hut, Odis in his sights.

Carron spent the night in county jail, thirty miles up the road in Morrystown, neither for smashing the hut, nor for malicious destruction of private property. Carron sat in a holding cell because the beer bottle that had crushed in Hal Stolz's cheek. Hal was in his seventies, and the doctors at both the regional medical center, and the big hospital in Phoenix, where they pieced his face back together, agreed that Hal was lucky to be alive. He spent over a week in the hospital, and when he returned his eyes were so black Odis called him “racoan,” which he later shortened to “coon.” Hal monogrammed “Coon” on his shirt pockets.

The night of the incident, the guests huddled around to help Hal. When it became clear that they weren't still under attack, help came in swarms. The Jews of Heaven Ranch had known what it was like to be assaulted, but this was America, and the God of America had given them Odis Heathman and they were emboldened and they pressed charges against Carron. When the sheriff's posse arrived that night, Carron was sitting in the ruined Studebaker. The house crumbled around him. Odis had escaped the crash.

He watched while men wrenched the door open and took his son to jail.

Carron waited for Ken to come forward and help, but he never did. Odis' house had been destroyed. Once again he slept under the water tower as his new house was being built. He knew just what he wanted: a bright Victorian building, with white trim and yellow paint.

X.

Odis Heathman was relatively unknown besides the thousands of Jewish seekers that flocked to him each year, and then he was seen in *Better Homes and Gardens*. Odis was happy each year to see the shiny cars with horse trailers, pull down the dusty road to the ranch each season. He'd slap his thigh each time a new guest told him that they had heard of the ranch from one of his fliers. That was the extent of his reach. Odis got a letter explaining that the magazine wanted to profile Hades and interview him. A week later, he got a phone call.

"Mr. Heathman?" the voice on the line asked.

"I suppose so," Odis said. The voice asked if they could come and observe him and ranch as a part of their profile on the town.

"Why you looking at Hades?" Odis asked.

"We have heard great things about it and we want to come see for ourselves. We think you are a big part of that."

"Hades has been around forever, way before me," Odis said.

Odis did nothing to spruce the ranch up in preparation for the visit. Business went on as usual, and business in those days, consisted of hard work and bare-bones existence. The guests that were at the ranch that day were wary of the stranger who got out snapping pictures.

The story about the ranch was a small part of the article about Hades, but people read it for miles, including the employees of the regional mail system. Shirley Opal read Odis' name over and over again.

"Jim," she said to Jim Boyer, her boss, "Is this *our* Odis Heathman?"

Jim read the article, looked at the picture and went to the back of the office and got a stack of letters. He held the top letter up to the magazine, comparing the two names the way a bank teller might look at a counterfeit note.

“I suppose we should get those letters on over to Odis,” Jim said. Shirley’s eyes welled up with tears.

Shirley came back from her delivery disappointed. She told Jim Odis had been slovenly and disinterested. He hadn't gotten up when she walked to his front porch. She felt uncomfortable with the stares from the guests of the ranch. She had the feeling that Heaven Ranch was not a place for her. Her feelings persisted even after Odis announced from his chair, “You’ve come to the right place.”

“I don't know anybody in Pennsylvania,” Odis said.

“Well, Mr. Heathman,” Shirley said, “these have come from Hershey, Pennsylvania. And there are a lot of them. You know they make the candy bars there?” Shirley’s smile faded when she saw the ghostly look on Odis’ face.

“Who is Mike Hill?” Odis asked. He looked worried.

“I don't know, Mr. Heathman. We were all hoping you could shed some light on that.”

“Do you believe in fate, Mrs...”

“Opal,” Shirley said.

“Opal,” Odis repeated. “You know the opal is the national gemstone of Australia?” Shirley smiled. “Yep, it sure is. There were the world’s most beautiful rocks tucked away in the world’s most desolate land, and some do-gooders sent a pack of deranged convicts there as punishment.

And they shoved pick axes in their hands and sent them out to bring forth these beautiful gems that should have remained locked away. Criminals and thieves, Mrs. Opal.”

Odis tossed the letters onto the small table. The past was in the past. Eyes forward, he thought to himself. Eyes forward.

And yet, as his own son, who had just stolen his car, was barreling toward, the first thing that Odis thought to grab before ducking out of a side window of the hut was the stack of letters.

Odis testified against his son in the trial and Carron was sent down south to the state penitentiary for a year and six months. Odis told the court that he hadn't seen anything but tail lights coming at him, and only after his house fell to the ground did he see Hal lying in a heap. Odis was a showman in the courtroom. At one point he got up, attempting to stand on his chair to aid his testimony. The judge had seen enough of Odis Heathman. The jury didn't feel the same way.

They were all from Phoenix, had heard of Odis, and he was paying off. There were three citizens of Hades in courtroom: Odis, Carron, and Carron's lawyer, Wick Waltham's brother, Jed. Jed specialized in livestock litigation and wasn't much help to Carron. The jury deliberated long enough to have lunch and came back with the next eighteen months of Carron's life planned out for him. Ken McCown had not come to the proceedings. He had not shown his face near Carron since that evening. While Carron was getting fitted for his prison issue jumpsuit, Ken was trying on his college football uniform.

His first night in holding, the on-duty guard told Carron to give him his shoelaces.

“What do you need my shoelaces for?”

“So you don't hang yourself.”

Carron looked down at his feet. He was wearing cowboy boots, he spent the night in his socks. The guard's explanation had been that if Carron wanted to kill himself he could use the heel of his boot to cave in his skull. Carron said that he could crush his skull with just about anything, and made a list of objects in his cell that would do the trick. The guard had the toilet seat, chair, desk, and lamp taken out of the holding cell. This was Carron's new life.

The first week there Carron got a letter. There was no return address, but Carron could make out his father's rudimentary penmanship.

"Letter for you," the guard said. Carron opened the letter and saw his father's first sentence: "I think you didn't do it." The letter went on to say this:

I know it must be pretty tough sitting there in that cell. I don't blame you for the car. Its just a car and I can get any car. I'm not saying that proud. Its just the facts. There are things and then there are things. Things we care about and them that we don't. I never cared a lick for that car. Never cared all that much about the little house there on the ranch either. I never told anyone you threw that bottle. I just wanted you to know that.

Odis

Carron read his father's letter and tucked it away under his mattress.

The night Carron backed his father's car into his father's house, Odis was on the outside of the building after the crash, face down and bloodied in the dirt, arms pinned underneath him and unconscious. Men attended to Hal's broken face but nobody had taken the time to look after

Carron. An anonymous call had been made, saying that Carron Heathman had gone nuts out at Heaven Ranch and they better go.

The deputies saw terrified guests cleaning up blood and carrying Odis' body.

“What's going on out here?” one of the deputies yelled. No one answered. He looked toward the car imbedded in the house.

Odis penned his letter under the shade of the water tower the day after they sent Carron to Florence. Given the usual harshness of summer, it was a nice day. Odis had testified in support of the prosecution of his son. He believed the actions taken by anyone to be part of the process of building a life. Hadn't he, in this very desert, seen his own life almost end? And now look at him, sitting in the shade on a fine day, wealthy and famous. Odis knew Carron would be fine.

He had known that since the first time he held Carron as a baby.

The Boatman

I had money at one time, tons of it. Now that I live in a tent by the lake, the thought of me rich is unbelievable and sad. But I'm ok with it. I had the money my old man left me, and money from the sale of the ranch land.. People think I drank it up. They'd almost be right, but there is a world known to the recently rich that can't be understood by the average person. Ours is a world where vultures look like men in suits and new Stetsons. Men with other people's money between their teeth. I drank away a lot of my money, but I had help with getting rid of the rest.

Having money can turn people crazy. People do crazy things to chase money. A man found me who wanted to buy tons of fluoride so he could convince the state to pump it into the water system and do away with dentists forever. He said the fluoride would make the teeth of everyone who drank it hard as diamonds. We'd be able to eat rocks. I gave him a shit-ton of money. He bought his fluoride. The state didn't bite. I told him to keep the fluoride. He lost my money and left town. I didn't care. Money wasn't anything to me. Nothing was anything to me.

There was only one time that I got my heart invested in a money scheme. Nobody knew about it. If word did get out I'd be laughed out of the Wagon Wheel. Not sure that'd be such a bad thing. I was staggering out down the street toward my place when I saw a guy on the steps of my little house. I didn't get visitors. I remember trying to steel myself up to having to talk to some dipshit. The next thing I know this guy is inside my house making me a cup of coffee. I was still drunk for most of the beginning of his speech, and it took me a while to grasp that he was talking to me about butterflies.

Out south of town is a corner of the migration path of the western monarch. I didn't know this. That guy took me out there and I saw an orange butterfly. Then I saw another one. Then I saw a billion of them. Next thing I know I am engulfed in a butterfly swarm. I don't know what came over me, I wanted to lay down and bawl, but I didn't want to hurt any of them, so I stood there with my arms out and legs out straight. I held my breath. I was trying to spend the rest of my life there in that moment.

Monarchs fly from the USA all the way down to Mexico, turn around and fly back. That's like you or me walking to Tokyo and back. The crazy thing is, when they are heading south the butterflies are hibernating. They are stored up with fat and nutrients, and at some point they stop using as much oxygen and hang a u-turn for Mexico. Moving right along with their eyes open but their bodies and minds in cruise control. Then they come back up here, lay a shitload of eggs and die. I didn't know they died. I sunk all this cash into building these structures for the butterflies to have a little rest while they were plugging along in cruise control. I paid to have all these things built under the stipulation that this guy didn't tell anyone where he got the money. If people asked, and this motherfucker told, I'd have some serious sideways glances around the bar.

We got the structures built, and the guy had me come out to the site. He set it up for exactly when the migration would be in full swing. He talked about starting a butterfly zoo. When we got to the site and there were so many dead butterflies it looked like a black and orange carpet. This guy started crying like he was a little girl with a skinned knee. Truthfully, I wanted to cry

too. I had sold the land the highway was on, and the pesticides they used to keep milkweed from growing killed every insect in sight. Killed the caterpillars scooting around on the weed eating it, and killed the grown butterflies, choking them with poison. I asked the guy if he thought there was any money in a butterfly graveyard.

XI.

The height of Heaven Ranch's popularity came while Carron was in prison. There was no official count, but the bunkhouses, there were two of them then, were full. You couldn't judge the numbers based on beds alone, families and neighbors slept on the floors and outside under the stars. On rainy days guests slept under the water tower, or jammed together in the bunks, sleeping two and three to a cot. The older patrons slept like babies when it rained and their cots were full. They did it happily at Heaven Ranch. They paid good money to do it.

The cabins themselves were basic one room longhouses, with space enough for dozens of bunk beds lining the walls and a walkway down the middle. They were built by the people sleeping in them. They weren't sealed, insects and small animals occupied the space right along with the paying customers. It was nothing for a guest of Heaven Ranch to wake up to a tickling on their foot under their military surplus. To a person from the Northeast who hadn't seen a scorpion in real life, encountering one crawling on your leg was terrifying but also exhilarating. Scorpion stings looked awful and hurt like death. The guests got stung then remembered the thrill and the fear and the pain, and then that they had lived through it. Nobody needed to remind them that they could be stung, but each time they lived through a scorpion sting, the closer they got to believing they could be stung and live. The bulk of the guests were now in their fifties or older.

They had been coming to Heaven Ranch for long over a decade, and were beginning to see their lives coming back into focus.

A willing workforce had built Heaven Ranch and the same workforce built a house for Odis. The work went swiftly. The ranch buzzed. They were constructing the house that had delivered Odis. The guests knew it wasn't going to be the same house where Odis saw God, but, who knew,

maybe it too would welcome God. Maybe that was how magic worked, put yourself in its path and let it run into you. Carron sat in county for several weeks awaiting trial. While he was inside, the house's foundation was poured and the first walls went up. While Carron listened to testimony, as many people that the roof could withstand hammered shingles. By the time Carron was being transferred to the state penitentiary, the paint was drying and the shrubs were trimmed. The only thing that slowed construction was Odis' spotty memory. He would remember the color of the house vividly one day, and then when he saw it applied on the siding he'd tell the painters it was wrong.

"I'm not sure how...it's just...wrong..."

Josef Rose was the foreman. With each change that Odis made, Josef barked out orders. Each change Odis made, doubt grew in some of the newer member's minds. Why was he unsure of the details? But dust had settled on Odis' story. Josef didn't tell anyone about his doubt, and shamed others who spoke of theirs.

After he had painted the trim for the third time, Michael Abrams, an accountant from western Massachusetts, threw his brush down in the bucket of white. Odis told him it was the wrong shade again.

"This is bullshit," Michael said to Josef. "He doesn't know what he wants. He doesn't know what he is talking about."

Joseph wondered too.

In his second letter to Carron, Odis described the work that was going on at the ranch:

All day long you see people running, like a bunch of ants building an anthill. I snap my fingers and the horde goes this way, clap them and they go that way. It's been real fun. I kinda wish it wouldn't end. But the house looks beautiful. I'm pretty sure that it is just the way I remember it. A big beautiful thing. I'm thinking about getting an air conditioner for it. Wouldn't that be great?

Odis

Carron read this letter in his six by eight cell, which was on the east facing side of the prison. He kept his father's letters under his mattress in a stack. Carron read each one of them carefully, looking for clues of what his father was really trying to say. The letters were always the same: what was happening at the ranch. Odis had hoped his letters would make Carron feel less alone. They didn't. But they made Carron feel like he was about as far from community as someone could get.

When Carron was reading his father's fifth disappointing letter, a gigantic man snatched it out of his hand. The man held the letter above his head like a schoolboy, keeping it away from Carron. "Max!" the big man called over his shoulder. "Get your ass over here and read this letter." The big man's lackey leapt to his feet and took the letter from the giant, who couldn't read. The big man turned his attention to Carron. The smaller man read the letter.

"Dear Karen...you got a girl's name! Same name as my aunt!" Carron burned. "Dear Karen. Life is good here at the ranch. We have been having nice weather." Carron struggled against the big man, who was not laughing.

“I can't decide which color of yellow to put on the house. I am torn between Naples Yellow and Sunglow Yellow...Well, Karen! Seems like your old man has asked just the right special lady for help!”

Carron's face burned with shame. He broke free and grabbed Max by the hair, tearing clumps out like grass. He hit him on the back of the head. When Max slumped over, Carron kicked him. Max stopped moving. He turned around and found the giant looming over him.

“Ok, boy, you got your point across. But you gotta pay for what you did to Max there. I'm going to...” but before he could finish, Carron leaped on the huge man and sunk his teeth into the man's face. The giant howled in pain. The guards came in and pried Carron off, but not before he had bitten the man several times, leaving mouth sized craters on his face.

The incident earned Carron respect and fear. From then on he was given space. He was called “Chuey” by the Mexicans in prison and avoided by everyone else. Under normal circumstances, an assault of the caliber of Carron's would have tacked on several more months to a sentence, but Bucky Jones had intervened. Carron would have never known this, but the warden came and explained the situation to him.

“You got friends in high places,” the warden said. Carron was having a hard time imagining friends as he lay naked on the concrete of the solitary confinement cell.

Carron looked at the warden. He didn't know what to make of the man, but there seemed to be sincerity in his eyes. The warden tossed Carron's clothes into the small cell.

The house was finished. The color wasn't exactly right, but Odis went ahead with the unveiling. Josef had insisted upon a day of celebration for the house, and a team of women ranch guests

sewed old sheets together till they had a shroud big enough to cover a two story house. It took them over a week. The cover was a confusing gesture, most of the guests had helped build the house, and Odis had described in such great detail, repeatedly, for decades. But Josef insisted. On the day of the reveal, guests gathered together in front of the new building, and milled about, drinking weak punch and getting sunburned. The 231 stitched-together king-sized bedsheets draped over the house and ruffled slightly in a breeze that none of the guests could feel. Josef asked for everyone to quiet down and turned the floor over to Odis. Odis told his usual story about the house. Everyone had heard the story so many times it started to be easy to ignore it. Odis used the same phrases every time, and made it more infomercial than heartfelt. But when Odis addressed the new house, he didn't talk about God, he didn't talk about his own time in the desert, he talked about Carron.

“I suppose all this wouldn't be possible without Carron,” he said and paused for a moment. He started to say something else, but stopped himself. He finally said, “So thanks, Carron.” Odis looked up at the sky then out at his followers.

“So THANKS, Carron,” he said again, then “SO THANKS, CARRON!” Half of them chimed in along with Odis the next time the thanks came along. The other half caught on and boomed thanks to Carron for a house they had built after being terrorized by the boy they were offering thanks to. Odis insisted the chant keep going while he walked over and grabbed a corner of the sheet and began to pull. The sheet came swiftly from the new roof, but on the way down it got caught on a gutter nail. Odis pulled harder and harder till half the gutter tore off the front of the house and came crashing at their feet. The other half hung from the roof. The chant stopped.

Carron came back to Heaven Ranch seventeen months later. He was wearing the same clothes he had been wearing at court the day he was sent away. His clothes hung on his body like a deflated balloon. He looked the same way Josef and Ethel had looked their first summer at the ranch. Now, as Carron looked out, he didn't see the tight, skinny bodies of the people he had come to know during his childhood. He saw fat people, sweating and complaining. People wore the same gaudy colors of his father. The silk stuck to their sweaty bodies.

The ranch had changed. The house was different, there was a different feeling. Carron was changed. Shifty, edged. His head snapped back and forth, tracking the motions of the people around him. His fists were clenched. He noticed the guests of the ranch went about their tasks with a different beat in their step. They took their time. They didn't smile like he remembered.

Those eighteen months, they had turned him from a scared, confused boy into a dangerous, confused man. In the same eighteen months, Heaven Ranch had turned from a place of refuge to just a vacation location. This was the beginning of the end.

XII.

Before the end, guests were plentiful and Odis was paid handsomely. They paid Odis enough to open a horse stable near the airport in Phoenix. The new waves of guests flew in each season.

No longer did a caravan of dirty vehicles make it's way out west. A moveable community that gelled before it ever landed at Heaven Ranch was gone. The new guests introduced themselves and their children to one another at the ranch, sometimes taking weeks to meet everyone.

Numbers were partly at fault for the lack of intimacy, but the was changing. The new crop of guest didn't need Odis or the ranch, and he knew that once they realized that fact for themselves the party would be over. There were nicer places than Heaven Ranch. There were cheaper places. Odis knew that his allure, and the allure of the ranch itself was in their fulfillment of that rooted need, and if the need was dried up, so was the human response to that need. And for Odis, that response had increasingly come in the form of money.

His focus hadn't always been money. It had once been a devotion to God, to what his calling had been, that's what he told said. He still told his guests that same thing, but his devotion was to the money he was making.

Even though it had been years, and he had been telling the same story forever, Odis kept telling the tale of the original house, Candybar, and God. He usually told the story, rocking in a chair on the porch of the house. This gave his production an air of mockery, as if a play about Odis' life was being acted out by Odis. Still, the story went on. Odis' guests began to question the story. Heaven Ranch was bare-bones. Work, heat, community and God. If you cut the last two factors out, all you had was the heat and the work. And nobody wanted either of those in the first place.

Odis had been saying the same thing for so many years that he hadn't stopped to see if it was still true. He was so busy at the beginning of his work that he hadn't fully investigated it's truth in the first place. He went on feel, and Odis had always felt like what he had been doing was exactly what he was supposed to do. Now, he didn't feel like he was doing wrong, he simply didn't feel anything at all.

Everyone at Heaven Ranch thought Odis slept in the new house. They thought he slept in the room that replicated where he met God. Rumors swirled about Odis and the room replica. Josef said that Odis was in there holding court with God on a nightly basis. A larger, growing group thought he was in there alone each night looking for God. Or Odis was just jerking them all around. But Odis didn't let anybody into the room. When the house was being built he insisted that the builders leave the room blank. While the bannister was being placed, the crown molding nailed, the back room sat, completed. The last time anybody but Odis saw it, the room was only drywall and joint compound. All the screw holes were covered, and the room was ready for painting. But Odis actually slept in the hallway, on the front porch, or in one of the rooms upstairs, but never in what everyone called "The God Room."

During the build, Josef had been barking orders at a young man from Connecticut that he had only just learned the name of.

"Son, son. You aren't going to be painting in that room. You know that room is to be left to Mr. Odis," said Josef.

“Why are we not doing anything to that room?” asked the young man. Josef took the opportunity to recount the story yet another time, even in his short time at Heaven Ranch the young man had heard the tale more than he had wanted to. He stopped Josef in the middle.

“Josef, sir, please. I do not have time for this today. If the man doesn't want the room finished, that's his business. But please, no more of this this story.” Josef was shocked.

“Son. What are you doing here?” asked Josef.

“I am trying to figure that out for myself,” said the young man.

“You don't really believe that story, do you Josef?” asked the young man. Josef started to speak but then stopped. He was silent for a while, formulating an answer. It was small, the young man's doubt. Such a small and insignificant thing to Josef's life. Yet Josef was well aware of how small, doubt had the tremendous potential to blossom like a field of wildfire over a whole city. How doubt turned to hate on the spin of a coin. The new guests of Heaven Ranch would not recognize the stakes that Josef did, because they had not seen what he had. He was an old fool that wanted everything to remain the same, even if he was defending something he knew was no longer true.

“Just don't paint the room. He doesn't want us to paint the room,” said Josef. He turned and walked from the young man.

The longer Odis sat in doubt, of himself, of his life, and of those guests of his that paid their money to him, the more used to the idea he got. He had not nestled up to anything that resembled strife or longing for so many years, that his reintroduction to doubt was like dating a stranger. Odis was courted, enticed, given the gifts that only doubt can bring: anxiety, fear, and sweet hope. It was exhilarating to him. He had no idea how it would all end. He did know that

it was going to end. The ranch, his guests, and him. All would end in the end. He had been going for so long on his own, in the name of God, that he had forgotten that part of the Lord's plan for humanity was an end. The end was never part of the tale he told. But there it was, distant on the horizon still, but visible. It was like he was charging toward something that he couldn't explain. It scared him. He liked being scared. It made him feel more alive than he had in twenty years.

Carron fired a rock through the picture window of Odis' house on his first day home from prison. Odis had been inside the house when the rock broke the glass. It scared the shit out of him.

Carron walked back to the sheriff's car after throwing the rock through his father's window. After picking him up from prison, Bucky drove Carron to the ranch thinking he wanted to stay there. Or that he had nowhere else to stay.

"Carron, you can't..." Bucky started. But Carron could do whatever he damn well pleased to that ranch, to Odis. He had paid his dues to the community and was out ahead, much more than square. Carron had some debts to collect, Bucky thought. He had seen him at Florence. On paper he was the same as Odis had been at his age: a young, drunk, irresponsible, unpredictable man without his father's attention. The difference was Carron still had a living father. He was suffering. He needed help. He wasn't getting it from Odis. Carron was hard to love, but Hades did their best, and the best they could do was not lock him up each time he tore up Heaven Ranch.

He threw rocks through windows. He did it at night so that the guests woke up. When they came out of the bunkhouses he threw rocks at them. Odis hadn't fixed the picture window on his

house and the gutter hung at an awkward angle. It hadn't been tacked back up. Odis never came out during Carron's attacks. Even when Carron was firing rocks at them, the people at Heaven Ranch got the feeling the boy wanted to be throwing rocks at Odis.

Mike Hill wrote to Odis on December 14th, 1930. His letter said:

"Dear Odis,

Greetings and happy Christmas. I hope you are well and that your life in Arizona is going well.

I hope, as I have hoped for these many years, to hear from you. Someday it will happen. I am sure of that.

I was excited to hear that your very own state, Arizona, can boast the discovery of a new planet, Pluto. It was found in Flagstaff, Arizona, at the Lowell Observatory. Imagine that, a planet being "found." I can't see it and have to take these astronomers words for it. I suppose it's the same with anything. We have to trust, Odis. It is the most important thing we can do. The safest thing. Trust in God, Odis. He will make your paths straight. Listen for Him everyday and he will show Himself to you. That is the most important thing you can do, Odis, is to look for God everyday. He is there."

Carron hung out with drunks he met at the bar. He and these men got drunk together then went out to Heaven Ranch.

The vandalism varied from destruction of property to practical jokes. One night the men took toilet paper and wrapped the animals of Heaven Ranch like mummies. Nobody from the ranch would have noticed till the next day if the men hadn't been laughing so hard.

“Look at those goodman mummy horses!” one of the men screamed in delight. Even Carron laughed. The animals looked ridiculous. Cows and horses and chickens were covered head to toe in cheap toilet paper. Carron cracked up at a chicken he had personally wrapped in so much toilet paper that it looked like a walking snowball. It walked a few steps, then stopped. The little eyeless snowball of its body turned and looked in different directions. Carron roared.

Guests were up. They saw the animals and didn't take the same satisfaction that Carron and his friends did in the scene. The vandalism was gentle compared to what Carron had done other nights, but there was something about its innocence that made more terrifying to the guests. The practical jokes made Carron unpredictable. Unpredictability made the guests uneasy. Carron thought making the guests uneasy made Odis uneasy. The thought of making Odis uneasy made Carron feel better.

Josef Rose woke up to Carron laughing at a chicken. He had been staying in bed for most of the raids by Carron and his friends. He couldn't understand why people kept going outside to have rocks thrown at them. He figured that eventually Carron would get bored, or get over being mad at Odis and quit. But he was unable to sleep through the laughter.

“Why are you doing this!” he yelled at Carron. The young men around Carron laughed even harder. Carron wiped his eyes.

“Why, Carron Heathman?” Josef said to him. Carron hated when someone used his last name. It made him cringe..

“Shut up, old man,” one of Carron's friends called.

“Bring me that paper,” Carron said. “Bring all of it.”

Carron and his friends wrapped Josef Rose in toilet paper. Josef struggled, but the men were younger and stronger. He was a heap of old man wrapped in toilet paper. Carron asked for a hose.

“Turn it on,” he said. The guests of Heaven Ranch watched while Carron doused Josef. Josef made sounds like he was drowning, unable to get up from the paper stuck to his body. Ethel came out of the bunkhouse, Carron turned off the hose. He looked at her. She didn't look scared in the least.

The Boatman

I have been divorced twice. The first one, Kathy, left me because I was a drunk who didn't know shit from a hole in the ground. I grew up with her.

Kathy was wild. By high school she had most of the teachers in love with her and I am pretty sure that she slept with more than half of them. For most girls that would make you think they were slutty, but for Kathy, that just heightened her charm. She got a rodeo scholarship to the University of Wyoming. She rode horses long enough to get a degree and came rolling back through Hades. I remember the afternoon she got back and walked into the Wagon Wheel. She had on a belt buckle that was the size of a dinner plate and more make-up than I had ever seen.

I was drunk. I was in love immediately. Kathy and I drank that night and woke in each other's arms the next morning. We got married. We hated each other for things we assumed, and knew even less about one another than we assumed. We were married two years before I caught her with some rodeo cowboy in the bed in my great grandma's house. Damn place was shaking like they were trying to knock the walls down. I didn't care. I lost my temper and did a foolish thing, which was pick a fight with a man who wrestled hooved animals for a living. I took a beating I didn't remember, and Kathy watched the whole time. I didn't forget that. Hated her a long time for just looking while that asshole beat me to smithereens in my own front yard. She left with him and that was that. I had to send off to some address and get a letter back saying we were divorced. She left Hades and I stayed.

My second wife was a sweet woman named Maggie who had the audacity to only want the best for me. She wanted me to feel safe and loved and live a real life. She detested my drinking and my friends. And she hated the way I hated Odis. She was a pain in the ass. I feel like I was her project more than her husband. I did love her, though. And she loved me fierce. I suppose she

needed to do some saving. Salvation was out of the question, and so was giving up booze. But more than the two of those things, there was no changing how I felt about Odis. I got it straightened out later, and I wish Maggie had been around to see that.

Years later, the spirit of what she was trying to say was said to me by Marty Hanson and it clicked. Maggie told me for seven years and it didn't even ripple the water. Marty said the same thing once and my world was in tatters. Go figure. I sobered up when Marty told me. I punched her in the face when Maggie told me. Maggie could put up with a lot, but being struck by a drunk who hates the world and himself was where she drew the line. She was a stand-by-your-man kinda girl, but she wanted a man. And in Maggie's world, a man doesn't hit a woman.

Whatever I was, man or not, stayed in Hades, and Maggie died in a plane crash over some ocean near somewhere in Mexico. Body never recovered.

All the good left Hades. Or died elsewhere and stayed there. That's enough to make you think that God has cursed a place. But now, now that I'm still here, and I'm not quite convinced that I'm all bad, I wonder. I wonder if God does things in ways that make Him look like a real asshole. I wonder if He wants to keep us here. I wonder if God just wants all us cast-offs to be here in Hades so He knows where to find us easy when He's ready to talk.

XIII.

Ethel woke up and came out out of the bunkhouse casually, as she had each time Carron and his pals had showed up. Carron stared at her. Ethel looked at her husband, soaking wet with dozens of rolls of toilet paper turning to mush on his body. She was so casual, Carron had an urge to say hello and ask how she was doing. The hose was off and Carron had it in his hand at his hip, like a TV gunslinger. Ethel looked in his eyes and he dropped the hose like a kid caught doing something he wasn't supposed to. He didn't know what he was doing. He was drunk, but the sobering effect Ethel had on him took the edge off his intoxication, and he was left in the sickly between time that wasn't drunk and wasn't hung over. He was in pain. He wasn't doing any of this because he was angry, just hurt, and he wanted to hurt back. Only, Ethel wasn't hurt by what he was doing. He could tell by the look on her face. When he saw that he was trying to hurt someone that couldn't be hurt, he felt like a bully. He didn't want to be a bully. It made him feel like shit.

Ethel looked at the Jews in pajamas, drunk boys thinking they were men, and Josef, the melting snowman. His eyes poked out from wads of paper and he tried to say something that came out muffled. Ethel started laughing. The harder Josef tried to say whatever it was he was trying to say, the more Ethel laughed. She laughed so sweet that a few of the other guests laughed too. Soon everyone, including Josef and Carron, were howling. Josef shed globs of wet paper with every laughing shake. A dog that looked like a cotton ball with legs and a tail ran up. When it wagged its tail the crowd erupted in laughter again. Carron felt better than he had in years.

Maybe in his entire life. His confused friends got into their vehicles and waited for Carron. He didn't want whatever had just happened to stop. Ethel felt a change in the air. She felt something leave her. The crowd shuffled back into the bunkhouse, Ethel waved goodbye to

Carron. As he and his acquaintances drove away from Heaven Ranch for the last time he waved back to her.

The next day, Ethel said, "Josef, maybe it's time we moved on."

"Maybe so," Josef said.

They threw their belongings into their car without organizing them. Josef sat in the passenger seat. Before leaving, Ethel went to the house. She walked inside and straight back to the door of Odis' room. She knocked. Nobody had ever knocked on the door of the bedroom. Nobody but Odis had been inside of the room since the house was finished. Ethel knocked again.

"Odis?" she said. "Are you in there?" She turned the knob and opened the door.

The pain of their previous lives was gone. Whether it was magic, time, or distraction, the Roses couldn't say. Ethel and Josef saw God again. Ethel had been shown how free she was when she looked at Carron. The boy was trying so hard to hurt them, all of them, and he was failing. Not because he couldn't, he could physically harm any of the guests at the ranch he wanted to, but Ethel felt safe from a deeper hurt, one that drove her to Heaven Ranch in the first place. She had spent twenty years looking to see if she was ok, and the previous night had proven to her that she was.

When Ethel pushed open the door to Odis' room there was nothing inside. The walls were unpainted. There was no furniture. A layer of dust covered the floor that showed Ethel's footprints when she walked. Ethel took a deep breath. She was glad Odis wasn't there. She wasn't mad at him, but she didn't know what she planned to say to him if he had been there.

They were leaving? Thanks for the past twenty years? She wasn't sure. She thought of what Odis said had taken place in this room. She had heard him say it so many times. God had been there. In the original house. It stirred something in her. She said out loud, "We are going home now. We have everything we need. We aren't scared. Josef and I found something here. Josef found you here. We are so grateful. Thank you, Odis. God, take care of Odis. Take care of Carron."

Odis was sitting in the dirt below the window of his room. He heard the prayer of Ethel Rose. Odis stood and walked over to the bunkhouse. With no fanfare he gathered the guests together and said to them, "It's finished. Heaven Ranch is closed."

Odis moved from Heaven Ranch back to Hades. He spent the rest of his life in his grandmother's house.

Odis walked into The Spur on a sunny morning a week after he sent the guests home. Wick was in the corner with his crowd. They stopped talking when the bells on the door jingled and they saw Odis. He chose a small table by the window that faced Main Street and ordered eggs.

"You want bacon with that?" the waitress asked. Odis laughed. The men at the big table glanced at Odis when they thought he wasn't looking. Marty Hanson was with them. They were old men, like Odis. Marty half listened to the conversation at his table and stared at Odis. After ten minutes he got up and went to Odis.

"Mind if I sit here, Odis?"

"Free country."

Marty laughed and sat down. He spoke to Odis and the two men ate breakfast. They didn't talk about Heaven Ranch, or Odis' Jews. They didn't talk about Carron. Before long, Marty stopped and realized he was enjoying sitting with Odis. There was something fresh about it. He had thought of Odis often over the years, and for a long time Odis had been more of a legend than a person, and now that he was sitting with him he liked the *real* Odis. He wondered if he would have liked Odis twenty years before if he had given it a chance. Soon the two men ate breakfast together every weekday at The Spur, with Wick and the gang a table over.

Carron and Odis didn't talk when they crossed paths in town. Carron never went to Odis' house, and he stopped going out to the ranch. He avoided any place he thought his father might be.

When Odis passed out on Main Street and someone ran to the Wagon Wheel and told Carron he didn't get off his barstool. When Odis' skin yellowed and stretched tight across his face and body, Carron didn't go to his house and visit. When Odis lost so much weight that his shirt hung on him like a deflated balloon, Carron didn't show up. When Odis Heathman died and was buried, Carron was not at the funeral. Marty Hanson gave the eulogy. Odis' mailbox had to be emptied every day. A new stack of sympathy cards arrived from the east coast each afternoon. . They were Carron's to open, but went unopened.

Carron received all of Odis' assets. He sold Heaven Ranch to the State of Arizona for the highway expansion at a massive premium. The contractor asked if he wanted to salvage any of the structures on the property. He said he didn't care what they did with any of them. Carron wasn't there to witness the buildings get bulldozed, but a group of Hades residents packed lunches and went to the site to watch. None reported back to Carron.

Carron took a drive on the expanded Highway 81 after it opened. He drove past the site of Heaven Ranch and saw nothing that would indicate anything had ever taken place there.

The Boatman

You know that saying, “the straw that broke the camel’s back?” Have you ever seen a camel with a broken back before? All the camels I have seen are sporting those kingly humps and looking bored. Also, I have never seen a picture of a camel loaded with straw before. The saying could be the watermelon that broke the camel’s back just as easily. But the point is, think about how finite the tipping point is. Here you have a camel that is carrying a shit-ton of straw, to the point that one more flimsy piece of straw is going to snap that animal’s bones in half. Or, if there isn’t that piece of straw, the animal will be fine. We are to assume. One little piece of straw as being the difference between being a camel with proud humps, or, I’d have to assume, a dead camel. Is the margin of error for life really that thin?

We had a guy here in town that had originally come from Minnesota. He’s talk all the time about, “Oh yeah, back in Minnesota.” We wished he’d go back to Minnesota. He’d lost a brother. Back in Minnesota. Drowned. Guy was out ice fishing and fell through the ice. Froze and drowned at the same time. Fish ate him. Poor bastard. I asked him if he just splashed through the ice, if it gave way at a certain point, all at once? Did his brother tip the scale just enough that it was too much and the whole thing crumbled?

“It doesn’t exactly work that way. The ice will break a little at a time. Cracks splinter out in every direction, and it is cracking underneath you all the time, no matter how much you weigh. If enough cracks happen, then the pieces are going to fall apart from one another and eventually you are going to fall in. At least that’s how it is back in Minnesota,” he explained.

People thought that Odis and I had that one major falling out, where I went to prison and Odis ended up dead, like that one thing was the final act, the straw on the camel’s back. But the truth is, we were like the ice. We had been cracking since the day I was born. And Odis, God love

him, played out on thin ice. He didn't have a lot of room for error. And ultimately, our pieces drifted apart and someone got plunged into the frosty water. The problem is, I can't decide if it's Odis or me that's in the water. Or are both of us?

Parts of me have been dying my whole life. That fact plays itself out pretty clearly in my marital relationships, when I have them. I am incapable of trust. I can't be content. I lack reason. I think all of these things are born into people, and in their life it's the duty of first their parents, then themselves, then their own families to keep them alive. When these traits get murdered when someone is a child, you get what you have in me. A person who is walking around with dead parts. The body and brain will compensate, but too often the parts that remain living in a person, the strong things, aren't the nicest of qualities when the good ones have been killed. If trust gets killed, fear grows. If compassion is destroyed, wrath wins out. And the longer your good qualities remain dead and gone, the bigger your bad ones become. And the harder they are to defeat. I'm in that battle now. I lack the tools to mount a proper defense against my negative qualities. For a long time I thought I was all bad. Sitting in that cell in Florence, even though I wasn't supposed to be there, I felt like I belonged there. Taking up space at the Wagon Wheel. I knew I belonged there. And I fed the bad and starved whatever little good I had. I thought Odis had done in all the things that could help me be a good person. I thought for a long time that Odis had left me with nothing to fight with. Then, after I was just about at the bottom I found this crude little weapon he had hidden in me. I'm not sure if he knew he had put it there, but it's what I am fighting the demons with.

XIV.

Carron became rich after the death of his father. The land on which Heaven Ranch once sat was straight in the path of the growing highway that linked Las Vegas to the rural communities of Nevada and Arizona. Carron, sole heir to the land and assets of Odis Heathman, sold the ranch at a staggering price, and lumped that money in with the tidy bundle Odis had accumulated over the years of taking the hard earned cash of east coast Jews. Carron had an attorney present for the sale of the property. The same that had defended him years before.

“Carron, this land is a gold mine,” Jed Waltham told him, as they discussed the state’s offer of more money than Carron could fathom. “You could get them to give you twice that amount.

“You really think so?” asked Carron.

“I really do. They are in a bind here, they need this land and you know they do. Need it to run a freeway through it. And they think it doesn't mean anything to you, that they can come in here and steal it away for a dollar.”

“You think they are offering me this money because they think this land doesn't mean anything to me?”

“I do.”

Carron signed the offer immediately. He paid Jed his cut and turned his back on the ranch.

Carron never went to Las Vegas.

Carron continued to drink himself stupid, and the influx of cash into his life did nothing to deter the steady stream of drunkenness. He drank through his father’s money. He gave it away. He fell in love, or thought he fell in love with several different women. He married two of them.

He had no children of his own. He became Carron Heathman of Hades, Arizona--local

loudmouth drunk and overall disappointment to most, and annoyance to all. It didn't take Carron too many years to achieve this feat. He was rich, young, and fatherless. And before long, he was property-less and friendless.

A few years into his decline Carron was walking down main street. He was hungover. It was a Tuesday. He ran into Marty Hanson, who was an old man. Carron tried to get out of his way, but stumbled and nearly fell. He did more to block Marty than he did to remove himself from his path. Marty would have just as well liked to move past Carron Heathman and not said a word, but the prolonged presence of the drunk man, doing his circus attempt at moving out of the way, forced Marty to speak up.

“You doing alright, Carron?” asked Marty.

“Yes, of course, Hanson. I am doing just fine.”

“You look like shit.” Carron didn't say anything.

“Well...” said Carron. He was getting annoyed at being spoken to. He was not in the mood.

Marty turned to leave, but stopped.

“You know, Carron, I had a conversation with your father, right here,” he pointed to the sidewalk. “It was a long time ago.”

“That’s a nice story, Hanson,” Carron said. The thing Carron wanted to do least in the world was talk about his father.

“It wasn't a nice story. I basically told your father that he was a liar and not worth a shit, right here on this street. And it was a belief I held for many many years. But I can't say that I believe that now. Now that he’s gone.” Carron listened. He didn't say anything. “You see, we lived for so many years with your old man out there on that ranch. We all thought he was crazy as a

peach orchard boar. And then all those people came to see him. Year after year they all came out here. Tons of them. They loved your father and thought he had something for them. He had something out there. And what he made can't be taken away just because you are angry. Now you're going to listen to me Carron Heathman. I didn't love your father. I called him a liar more times than you have thought it. But I can't argue with the fact that he carved himself a place inside me that I can't vacate. I learned that too late. I spent too many years hating Odis Heathman, and not enough learning who he was. Hearing him out. He is the one person in this world I can't get out of my head. When I think of him I think about a man who didn't give a shit what people thought of him. I've never met anybody that believed like Odis did. And now, I don't care that what he believed in all that wacky shit. I just believe in his belief. Now, I don't know what it is, but I know it's there. And I know it's there for you too." Carron was about to cry. Marty's words hit him hard. He broke.

"Do you think my father was telling the truth? About God?" he asked.

"I don't know. I went up there with him. I forced him to go up to that bluff. There wasn't any house there. But now, I don't know. I don't know if your dad was telling the truth or not and I don't care."

Carron cleaned himself up, got sober. He had cleaned out his bank account in his years of debacle. He had sold the airport stable. Sold his great-grandmother's house. That money was gone. He had nothing. He let Marty Hanson's words sink in. He kept his ears open. He heard more sentiment about his father that sounded just like what Marty had told him. He found out people needed Odis. He left a void when he died. Carron could identify with that. He listened to stories about his father. Over time he got to where he longed to hear Odis talked about.

Carron was homeless after the money was gone. He wasn't trying not to be. He had lost everything through years of drinking and bad deals. Investments that never paid off. He had enough money to occupy a stool at the Wagon Wheel, but not enough for a house. He took a tent to the banks of Lake Dolor and lived there. The dirty lake was going through a rejuvenation process, and had become the playground of blue-collar party animals. The types of clientele who buy \$25,000 boats and then throw the cans from their discount beer into the lake. Carron lived a content life snorkeling the shallow edges of Lake Dolor. He collected cans into a big garbage bag, then rode the cans into town on his father's old bike. The money was enough for food, and after he got sober, food and the occasional soda at the Wagon Wheel where he sat for hours prompting people to tell Odis stories to him. Then the house showed up at Lake Dolor.

On the morning that the house appeared, Carron had been in the water, collecting his day's haul. The day was already hot and the small rays from the sun broke over the dark waters of the lake. Carron surfaced and unstuck the mask from his face. He walked to the shore and straight toward a Victorian house that stood in the place where he pitched his tent. It looked like it had been there since God had decided to create the lake. Carron couldn't tell fully through his tears, but it looked as if there were a perfect green hedge on either side of the front porch that had been watered that morning. The sun broke on a new day, and Carron didn't know what was real or not, but he turned the knob on the front door of the house and stepped inside.