

THE ★ HOUR OF ★ LEAD

A NOVEL

BRUCE HOLBERT



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For Holly, Natalie, Luke, and Jackson

Caliban's nights are full of teeth

—JOHN WHALEN
Caliban

PART ONE

This is the hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

—EMILY DICKINSON,
from poem 372

PREFACE

NOVEMBER 1918

IN 1918, SPANISH INFLUENZA KILLED seventy-five million people worldwide, though not the Romanovs, who were instead murdered in their palace basement by Bolsheviks. The same year, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, World War I closed with the Treaty of Versailles. No one was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

In that year, for the only time in the century, America's population shrank. One hundred one people perished in Tennessee's Great Train Wreck. May 20 in Codell, Kansas, tornadoes leveled every building, just as they had on May 20, 1917 and May 20, 1916. In Boston, Babe Ruth pitched a shut-out for the Red Sox in the World Series, though he hit no home runs.

The Wobblies and AFL crippled the city of Seattle, Washington with a general strike adding fuel to fears of a Bolshevik insurgence. The state initiated prohibition with the Bone Dry Act, and the *Wenatchee World* published the first public mention of a concrete dam on the Columbia River at Grand Coulee.

Yet, east, past the mountains, in the Big Bend and the Basin, on the reservations and the Palouse and the fissured basalt paralleling the Columbia River's deep trough, among channeled scablands and the wheat country and orchards and cattle ranches and dairy farms, horses still powered crude machines not much improved from a hundred years before. Towns of no more than a hundred, many just a grain silo and half-dozen houses that served the railroad lines, scattered over the state's eastern and central portion. Most people resided far even from these skeletal communities, settling in draws with good water or meadows livestock might graze or beneath eyebrows so as not to waste arable acres or at the mouth of canyons that kept the herds.

Far from cities' competing glare and industrial haze the year appeared to pass this country like another cloud in another sky of another day. Its half-dozen papers delivered month-old world and national reports along with fair winners and local obituaries, though people received most of their news through tales added to and subtracted from a hundred times before reaching their ears. Most were good for nothing sensible, just wonder and doubt and the uncertainties attached to them. Nevertheless, alone, behind a plow or aboard an animal or pulling a saw handle or over a chicken boiling in a pot, the denizens chewed and swallowed and digested them until the stories turned as tangible as bone and muscle and tendon.

1

LINDA JEFFERSON WAS A CLICHÉ and she knew it. Twenty-four, both schoolteacher and widow, she tugged a sweater over her blouse then her husband's sheepskin-lined riding coat. His death the year previous had deposited her in a sad, inevitable season. She weathered it as a dumb animal scratches for summer's remnants beneath the snow, not understanding winter or seeking to, only enduring it. The absence was endless and reasonless; it seemed less a wound, which mourning would have mitigated and eventually closed, than a flaw in herself, requiring constant stitching to keep from bleeding through.

In this country, loneliness was unassailable law. A man weighed his heart by the number of sleepers under his roof when the lights went out and a woman by the number of eggs in the skillet mornings. The distance between souls, however, remained incalculable. Blood made them kin, yet a heart does not beat solace or joy. One must hunt that in others, and others remained few and far apart. Days she entertained a room full of children but a job was no remedy for an empty house.

In the schoolroom furnace, quartered pine ebbed to coal and ash and wind clattered the flue. The weather battered the cottonwood in the yard and clouds clotted and thinned the light. The storm was a relief. A hard wind could perform beautiful things to country, sweep it clean like a new room. Once it let up and the sky emptied to blue, the snow seemed a new start.

As she approached the twins, pressed into desks for which they had grown too large, they hitched themselves a little taller. Clad in a cotton shirt and grey trousers, Luke flipped his book closed with his forefinger. Clothes passed between the brothers and were never a reliable way to tell them apart; still, three minutes in a room, you knew Luke from his twin, Matt, who was bent across his spelling, crimped hand steering his pencil.

She tapped a finger on Matt's paper to identify two words that remained misspelled. He nodded and opened his primer to correct the work. Matt was better suited for practical pursuits. Fall, the boys demonstrated a bent to arrive early and she'd assigned Matt the stove. Each morning, he retrieved the axe from the long covered porch and quartered a couple of aged tamarack rounds stacked at the porch's far end. After, he knocked loose some kindling and propped it across a handful of dried pine needles and a balled page of last week's news. He struck a match—one was all he'd allow—against the paper two or three places and coax the damper draft till the wood burned blue and smokeless. Not a wisp entered the room. All the while, she shot Luke new and difficult words to spell. She felt odd enjoying boys this age. Eighth grade, they recognized a woman differed from them and that they were meant to do

something about it. She thought of her husband once more, his broad, callused hands on her shoulder and waist while they danced at the Fort Saturdays, not pulling her, just steady and there. His nails, yellowed by cigarettes, the hair dark and wiry between his knuckles, the same hand that dangled from the sheet as the logging crew carted him from the forest. As his crew recalled, the tree turned on its stump and thrust a wooden blade through Vernon's throat and out one ear. The mortician could do nothing without removing the head entirely, so he appeared like an awestruck child in the casket, marveling at something overhead and slightly to the left.

Wind creaked the building trusses, but it was the winter's first storm and early, likely packing only a skiff of snow and freeze enough to finish the pumpkins and squash. Still the boys ought not to risk a chill.

"You two better get on," Linda Jefferson said.

She watched the boys button their jackets and tug their stocking caps past their ears. Outside, they patted their horse and each took a stirrup and mounted. It left them one-footed until they had purchase enough to reach the saddle horn. Neither asked nor offered the other assistance. Their mulishness struck her as comic and she laughed.

•

ED LAWSON NARROWED HIS EYELIDS and peered toward the horizon as the first strong gusts batted the shutterless window. Flakes no bigger than birdshot and nearly as hard followed. They whirled and rapped the crosshatched pane. He held no rancor against the season coming hard. After, he'd walk his property to scout coyotes or the few cougars left in the cliffs that might harass the livestock.

His wife, though, had been fussing at the window since the cattle had congregated at the feedbin despite half a day till the next feeding. They huddled at the barn door and lowed for Ed to admit them. Eventually he relented and, past them, she watched the horizon swell purple and pulse like blood through an opened vein that spilled across the sky. Winters in this place turned afternoon brief as a heartbeat, and night unraveled over day so thick sleepers dreamed themselves swimming through it to breathe. Day, when it arrived, was little relief. Breaths turned hurried, drawing in more cold than air and expelling a body's warmth until a person was left light-headed and pneumatic. The sun, shimmering behind the cumulous haze, looked as warm as it might to a fish at the bottom of a lake.

A half empty coffeepot perked in the center of the table. Ed Lawson rocked his cup below his mouth and enjoyed the vapors from the moonshine inside it.

"Probably stopped somewhere to throw a ball."

The front of her head disappeared in the glass reflection as she turned to him. "You know it's too cold for baseball."

Ed inhaled over the cup then drank. The window was nearly blank with frost. He fortified his coffee again and joined his wife looking out. Her head swung when she caught the liquor scent. He winked at her. Her face had slackened and too much sun had guttered her eyes. He recalled her profile from their first days, a crescent and white as the moon, and the thinness above her hips that tapered her. He felt no different about the woman now and considered that his greatest good fortune.

An oak crate tumbled past and splintered into the house wall. "Goddamner," Ed

said. "This one's got a bad humor."

His wife nodded, still at the window.

"Not supposed to blow like this till January," she said.

Lawson joined her and stared out the glass. "Maybe January in Alaska," he said. His wife turned and watched Ed lift his long duster from the chair back and tug his gloves from the pockets and test his fingers inside them.

"Boil some water. They're liable to be frosty when I find them," he said.

He screwed a hunting cap onto his head and opened the door; cold blasted through, a lamp shook, and light wavered in the kitchen. He waved to her and stepped toward the corral. The light in the doorway became a shadow then nothing, enveloped by the sideways storm.

•

WHEN HE AND MATT WERE left alone, Luke poured moonshine into fruit jars and let Matt dare him into sipping it. That woolly burning felt like Mrs. Jefferson next to him. Luke had tracked his teacher through autumn, hunting her insides under the breathy voice and slow windmill circles her hands spun as she recited poetry, like words were birds she could coax from nests. The best reader and speller in the class, Luke could not fathom where his teacher disappeared when she spoke those words. Each time he recognized her fragrance, he wished to know more.

The horse halted, a three-year-old Appaloosa mare, Mule, named for such moments. The sun, only a smear of white without warmth in the short days, turned memory aside from the shallow, long light lining the horizon. The wind pitched itself into the riders and the horse. Luke stood in the stirrup, dismounted, and twisted the reins, the rawhide frosted white to the bridle where it thawed with the mare's breaths. An ice layer clung to her neck and under her belly, and tongues of snow spiraled around them, sometimes moving up instead of down, or remaining halfway, scouring the boys' exposed skin.

A week later, the papers would report a seventy-five-degree temperature drop in fifty-seven minutes. Four feet of snow, light as down, piled onto the hardening earth in the next three hours, and double that the six that followed, all so far past the almanac records as to render the whole book inadequate. Seventy-year-old farmers from Norway and the Russian North, usually quick to reduce the New World's winters to minor annoyances, when asked about the storm of '18 remained mute and just shook their grey heads. At the river's bank, sheep huddled near the steaming water and eventually waded into it, since it was warmer. Dozens would pock the steely surface as the ice stilled even the fastest waters. Gusts spun the windvanes until the spindles stripped their couplings and the blades and ribbing spun from barn tops to be discovered months later and miles away.

The boys cursed the horse, separate and together. They quirted her face with the reins. The snow piled against their torsos and welled in the lee sides as if they were trees or hills. Wind snapped Luke's hat from his head and it vanished across the road. In his brows the ice thickened. It clotted his hair. Matt pulled the reins hard and Mule lunged forward. She accepted their weight when they mounted, swayed in the wind, and tried another step. The wind shoved the boys' heads into their shoulders and

blistered their hands and faces. Luke couldn't clench his fingers over the reins. The twins gazed at the snow, eyes tearing, tears freezing to their skin. The muscles in Mule's chest bunched when she stepped, the hole her hoof punched obliterated before she could attempt the next. They traveled half a mile. Frost reached the mare's chest, ascending past the stirrups. After each step she rested before attempting another. Her breath pressed out in short, dutiful gasps and she ran a half dozen uneven strides until her weight tipped.

Matt expected Luke to act, but when he didn't Matt kicked one foot from the stirrup and hauled Luke clear of the horse's falling weight. Together, they disappeared in the high snow. Matt shook Luke and he rose. In the slanting snow, they watched the mare paw and roll and regain all fours and back away, steam coming from her nostrils.

Matt pushed Luke's shoulder. "Which way?"

"Out of the snow."

"Don't seem likely."

"Give me your hat."

Matt set his gloved hand atop the wool cap. "I got ears to warm, too," he said. Luke nodded.

"Can you drown in snow?" Matt asked.

"I don't want to find out," Luke said. He shoved Matt in the direction of an elm skeleton.

•

LINDA JEFFERSON COAXED THE FURNACE fire. Some coals pinked but most had fallen to grey ash. A hard chill buffeted the room. Heat from the open stove barely pierced it and only for a few feet. She alternated between facing the flames and warming her back with them. The snow and the biting wind had frosted inside the window glass. Outside, the road passing the school and leading to her small house had become indistinguishable half an hour before, like everything else, just drifts and swells of white. Wind hammered the north side of the building. The storm was unlike any she had witnessed or read of. She checked the latch on the window and wondered how simple pine and glass could restrain such weather.

Though no friend of cold, she enjoyed the snap and aroma of burning wood. Winters, the log camp abandoned the woods and Vernon, when he wasn't hired out as a handyman, assigned himself the cooking. She would be treated to apple and berry cobblers and read a book or her students' work, while next to her he tinkered at songs from memory on an old mandolin like temptation itself. Occasionally, she'd turn and kiss his shoulder as he played. If the number of pecks passed three, he was allowed to lead her off to the heavy-quilted bed. Sometimes he cheated, bumping into her lips without her conceding. They would argue until she'd kissed him honestly and ended the squabble. Later, the shepherd dog would climb to the bed foot. It slept with her still. She spoke with the dog often, and at times thought she might be daft, but allowed that being alone granted a person privileges not permitted others.

She approached the window in her reverie and permitted the snow to sketch the steely air, flakes spinning a familiar image then destroying it before she could attach it to a name. She imagined a story the wind was attempting to recount, wondering if it

might be prophecy she was seeing. She wanted to prepare. A darkened shape appeared, at first she thought it a shadow, but the ebbing light was too unclear to cast it. The form dangled just outside her comprehension but did not vanish like the others. She squinted to study it. Shoulders and the thick neck of a horse began to appear.

A pair of her husband's wool pants hung in the closet. She tugged them over her pantaloons and under her skirt. Outside, her arms swam in the white air, and flying ice beat her face. The horse belonged to the twins. The frozen saddle was taut against its chest. She touched its jaw, which was rigid as rod iron. The animal's glassy eye did not close. Snow had drifted to its withers.

•

ED LAWSON REGRETTED THE SNOWSHOES in the barn he'd decided against. For half an hour he'd hiked what he thought was the road from the creek wash, but now he'd slogged into a stand of birch he recognized as west of that road. Ed's gloved hand raked the snow from his face. He tipped himself against the leeside of a tree. He could taste his stomach stir: this afternoon's coffee and shine, a couple of eggs from breakfast. He belched once and the pain eased. The pint bottle clanked inside his jacket and he worked off a glove and twisted the cork. His fingers branched over the bottle and the glass seemed to join his flesh. His numb hand raised it a second time. The glove dropped from his arm's crook and skittered away like mice before a plow. Ed acknowledged it as punishment for tarrying and a harbinger to head on. He finished the bottle and wished for the warmth of a cigarette.

•

THE FENCE THAT LINED THE road to the creek was Linda Jefferson's only prospect for locating the boys. The barbed wire pulled her wool gloves apart and the air stung her hands and the cold spread, numbing her arms and shoulders. Snow rose like water rippling for fence posts and trees in its rising current. Like many in similar straits, she only now realized that country could kill a person dead as Jesse James and just as quickly.

•

ED STOOD. HE'D SURRENDERED HIS footing twice, cratering the snow with shapes that seemed unlike his own. He hoped the boys had reached the house. It would be a relief to Helen. She would fret his absence, but less than she did theirs, which is as it should be. He would manage. The time had arrived to do just that and join them at the stove for something hot. He bore straight north. A mile, no more, and he would be thawing his numb feet till they were pink as pigs. The storm shoved at his shoulders and chest, and he tilted his body against it. He busted through a drift. His hips led the way for his legs. Blowing snow pelted his eyes. He angled his gaze down and forward, then, following three steps aided by gravity, floated into the air. His arms circled and the breath in his chest filled him. He thought he would see his ranch soon, the river's wide bend at Gifford Ferry, the Fort, the arc of the earth itself.

LINDA SPOTTED THE BOYS BALLED like porcupines midway up the birch tree. They floundered toward the schoolhouse in a chain, Linda breaking the snow, Matt between them squeezing her gloved hand and Luke's. Luke toppled twice. Linda feared they would be required to pack him, but after they changed order and towed him by both arms, he stumbled onward.

Matt spied the schoolhouse shape first. Snow in the doorway had heaped past the knob. He and Mrs. Jefferson clawed at the powder. Luke lay behind them and shut his eyes. Closing them was a relief; they still functioned. His brother and his teacher bent like the humped hills a few feet away. The snow they shoveled floated over him like cottonwood seeds in the wind. Through it, he recognized Mrs. Jefferson's gold hair, dull with ice. He wanted to lift himself and help but couldn't find his hands.

Linda grunted and the snow gave a little to the door. Matt burrowed on until they gained the few inches needed to wedge through. When he turned, Luke's arm raised from under the snow like a grave marker. Matt swatted the snow and found his nose and mouth. Linda pressed her face to Luke's, but through the wind could not make out a breath.

Inside the schoolhouse, they lay him on the floor. Mrs. Jefferson's fingers fumbled to untie his frozen shoelaces, then unscrewed his socks. Luke's yellow, bloodless feet shone in the faint window light.

"Get blankets from the closet," she said. She unsnapped Luke's pants while Matt found the blankets and laid one on the floor. Luke's pants were off. Matt stared at his white undershorts. He looked at the furnace, but felt no heat.

"The matches are in the top drawer," Mrs. Jefferson told him.

Matt watched her roll Luke onto the blanket and use it to drag his brother toward the stove.

The wood crib was empty.

The shape of her face in the light trembled. "Books," she said. "Tear the pages out."

He found math books stacked behind the desk. "You sure?"

"Yes."

He ripped the multiplication chapters from their binding and stacked them inside the stove. His hands wouldn't pinch onto the match. He closed his fist, jammed the stick between two knuckles, and struck the sulfur head against the stove's iron lid. The match flared. He set it to the pages. They lit and curled above the cold ash. He doubled the pile and watched while letters, numbers, whole equations unraveled. The hatchet was in the closet and he hacked the desks, separating the legs and the seat ribbing to kindle the blaze. The flames snuffled the varnished wood, then took. He added a top and seat back and left the door open to give them light.

Luke lay naked on the blanket. "Undress," Mrs. Jefferson said. She unbuttoned her own jacket and wrenched off her gloves. More blankets lay next to Luke's clothes. Matt's underwear stuck to his skin and hissed when he shucked it from his legs. He covered himself with his hands.

"Get on the blanket," Mrs. Jefferson said. He watched her lift her blouse. Her hair hooked to the collar, then fell to her shoulders. Through the burning, he could smell

her clothes. She bent at the waist and her skirt dropped, then her pants and pantaloons. Her eyes shut. She reached behind herself with both hands and undid her camisole, then curled her knickers past her ankles. She put herself between the two to warm them both.

Luke awoke to her next to him. She extended her arm across him for another blanket and her thick nipple brushed his chest. Her hair curved, a half crescent to the bottom of her neck. It shone like polished metal, and with her over him, the paper ash fluttering in the apricot light like warm snow, he felt vaguely content.

Linda saw the boy's breathing stop. She tapped at his sternum and set her cheek beneath his nose. The fire's watery heat washed over her spine and ribs and muscles and skin. Matt watched as she opened her mouth and placed it on top of Luke's. He envied his brother the kiss. Air passed from her into Luke. His throat fluttered then quit. She blew into him twice more and then drew back and waited. Luke's tongue lolled in his mouth.

With her thumb and forefinger she closed Luke's eyes. The flesh felt cool and damp, like her own. She was afraid suddenly that she couldn't separate the living from the dead. The wool blanket raked the skin of her shoulders when she turned toward the living boy, who lay on his side, facing the opposite wall. He tensed his legs and buttocks against her cool skin, but as the warmth built between them, his muscles relaxed. He twisted his hips into the space she had left for them. Her breasts parted. He rose to peer past her shoulder, but she halted him with her hand against his chest.

"Let him sleep," she said. She shifted to slide one arm beneath Matt's spindly ribs, then drew the other around to meet it. The boy's breath warmed and dampened her wrists. She could smell his musty hair. She turned one palm and traced his chest. The muscle of his heart opened and closed. His diaphragm dragged in the warm air. His whole body worked. She rubbed his stomach for the friction that would warm him and in doing so, touched his adolescent pubic hair, recognizing the stirring in the flesh it covered below. She felt his heart beat again, when, by some sort of natural knowing, he turned and guided himself into her.

•

DAWN SPLINTERED THE NEXT MORNING. It brightened the west wall of the schoolhouse blue and pink and orange. Matt awoke and gazed at the pure light. His legs ached and semen clung to the thin hair on his thighs. The stove fire had taken all the math and reading books. All that was left were a few encyclopedia volumes scattered in front of their low shelves. He had chopped six more desks during the night. Mrs. Jefferson lay with her arms and legs extended to where he'd slept like a cat. He could smell her, them. Luke didn't move. Matt bent to affirm what he already knew. Luke's skin was cold and tight as animal hide.

Outside the window glass, the sky had blued and cleared and turned so deep he could see the peaks of the Okanogans and Kettles farther, the rock slides where snow couldn't hold and the blue-green sprinkling of pine blown clean by the wind. Steam rose from the river in long columns that danced above the water, and the earth in front of him was all one thing, simple, colorless, and impossible to know.

2

FROM ABOVE, THE COLUMBIA RIVER'S Lincoln County shoreline appears as if a giant child has dragged a hoe through the land. The steep banks collapse from the U-shaped bluffs, narrow and less vertical where the bays and streambeds, fed with spring rains, carve the rock to gravel each year. The river itself, a half-mile wide, hurried faster than a horse galloped: the boys had thrown in sticks and raced them with their ponies for proof. They knew no one who had navigated to the other side without ending up in Keller or drowned. It was not unusual to row a boat to the current's fringes and anchor it with two or three large stones, but even the goofiest of the homesteaders had little inclination to cross.

The river bottom constantly changed with the season's rainfall and drought. Spring runoff, a thousand uprooted trees might pass in a week, their starry roots bobbing on the current; some trees, halved by winds and rot, slowly drowned, needles and all, creating pools too acidic for fish or fowl. Others spun in the current or sunk separately and made homes for trout that harbored in the river's slow spots. Still more hung up in the cataracts where they idled for years, unraveling under the constant beating of water and rock like obscure sagas absent a necessary listener, occasionally providing deadheads, hazards for the four ferries that shuttled soldiers and Indians and farmers from one bank to its opposite. Each spring, snowmelt lifted the waterline. The fortified current pressed the winter's silt from the graveled bottom, readying it for the Coho, Sockeye, Steelhead, and Chinook spawn, when the river shallows would teem and boil with red salmon, days from expiring. Their tails and dorsal fins puckered the water's surface in the river's bays and inlets. Like the old Greek said, you could never step in the same river twice, but anyone in this country recognized the long view, that the river's change was its constancy, like the turning Earth itself.

Above, the basalt gorge appeared to have stood since the primordial epochs, sharp bluffs and talus slides exposed and last disturbed by ice age floods. Though sagebrush and ponderosa pine and birch and larch pocketed the river banks and descending grades, in the rich loess beyond the cliffs stretched wheat and barley by the square mile, not native to this country but graceful enough, whether whiskering the plowrows spring or early summer or rocking in the midsummer winds, cresting and falling like the river's surface, and even when threshed and gleaned to stubbled loops, it smelled like wet dough in the evening dew.

Summers, the sky, held in place by the high barometric pressure, looked an azure sheet for weeks at a time, deeper than any lake or sea, muddied only by the occasional plow's dust plume or a wildfire's ashy billow. Falls began gently with cirrus clouds and corduroy skies that filtered the sunlight to cool and colorless. Later blustery;

nimbus and cumulus clouds blossomed in the thinned light and delivered rain then winter full on, which alternated between clear and cold freezes where a man could hear a footstep five miles off, and blizzards that stacked snow upon the river country until the spring, which delivered more blue and less grey, and the occasional mile high thunderheads, shattering the quiet with thunder and the sky with brutal electric streaks that split trees to the trunk and occasionally exploded houses and outbuildings and twice farmers who were late finding cover.

Here, Eugene Lawson, Ed's father and Matt's grandfather, took over an abandoned half section, then bought another five good crops later, then turned to beeves, accumulated a thousand acres of scrub grass to graze them, and here Ed Lawson was reared and never entertained residing elsewhere. Indeed it was here he had finished his earthly turn, though his son remained not inclined to accept it. The hours that took his father and his brother and delivered Matt to an adult woman before his time—and, it appeared to his conscience, the former a punishment for the latter, and his brother and father and mother casual innocents of a wrathful god's broad blow—loomed over him like a six-month arctic night. Yet Matt found no fault in the country from which his tragedies sprung.

Like anything in nature, a child's notion of the ordinary depends upon the ground in which he was sown. Born in dirt crannies, trees split basalt cliffs and the heartwood and cambium and protective bark reach for sun and rain in all sorts of unnatural geometry, knowing nothing of vertical and horizontal.

Ed inherited the place entirely. His twin brother, Willy, offered no argument. Willy possessed less interest in raising crops than he did space flight, and Ed lived for it—not because he worshipped the work and not because he loved sacrifice. From a distance a farm appeared rote, a season to plant, another to cultivate, a third for harvest and the last for prayer. But inside that ordered hoop each day differed so that every minute inside required attention, and it was this that made him a farmer.

•

CARDS ARRIVED AS WORD OF their tragedy swelled throughout the county. Mrs. Lawson had contracted pneumonia in her grief. Entire days she inclined over a steaming water kettle. Matt boiled her clothes each night and warmed canned vegetables and applesauce for their meals. Days, he battled the weather to keep the cows and pigs in fodder.

Between Sundays, the church's women's group delivered groceries the congregation donated. The women never talked of Matt's brother—stowed in the barn as the ground was too frozen to shovel—or his father, still not recovered, and Matt's mother did not press them for news from the Lord on their fates.

When her fever broke, she asked Matt to harness the team and deliver her to church. The preacher perched them in the front pew. They were his accomplishment: a family whom in their grief he'd returned to the Lord. Yet, Matt's mother dismissed the words, not standing or sitting or singing with the congregation. The choir's voices swam to her like song snips from her school days, tuneful, but meaning nothing save the stir of memory, which was as reasonless as weather passing.

Matt's mother closed her eyes the entire service and Matt squashed his shut, too.