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*At Home on This Movable Earth*

What I love is near at hand,  
Always, in earth and air.  
—Theodore Roethke, “The Far Field”

Most residents spend their lives—without ever being affected by a  
tornado—or ever observing one.  
—F. C. Bates, “Tornadoes in the Central United States”

Track crews lived along and maintained each of the six- to eight-  
mile sections into which the Santa Fe divided its line. The crew  
would spend most of its day reinforcing weak road-beds, tapping  
down loose pins, replacing worn ties, and clearing the right-of-way  
of weeds, grass, and debris. The foreman was also responsible for  
daily inspection of the entire section. . . . [He] had to be a man of  
some experience and common sense, but the track laborer needed  
little skill. . . .  
—James H. Ducker, *Men of the Steel Rails*

*Calf bucket.* Full to the brim with fresh, frothy milk, it’s what my  
grandfather permitted me to carry from the cream separator out  
of the porch and around the house and across the backyard to the  
barb-wire fence where under the lowest strand I would push it to  
feed the waiting calf. *Calf bucket.* It is also the rusty receptacle I  
found precisely where I had left it—near the lone stanchion in the  
barn near the alley, barn large enough to accommodate our one  
Jersey cow, barn with its weathered shingles and unpainted one-by-  
eights well on its way to oblivion.

We’ll need another bucket to put the dirt in, my father had said.  
We already had one bucket, a discarded lard container Father had  
brought home from the cafe. But we needed another container so  
that as I trudged up the earthen steps to empty one, my father said,  
he could be filling the other.

I could sense that something big, maybe even something gar-  
gantuan, was about to unfold, but I didn’t know exactly what that

something might be. Early evening it was, and a Sunday. Mother was holding things down at the cafe, but on this particular Sunday Father was not there to help her. Instead, he was here at home, sporting a faded pair of blue overalls and a likewise faded blue workshirt with the sleeves rolled up beyond the elbows. In his right hand, the one with two middle fingers missing, he held the family shovel. When he told me to fetch the calf bucket I could see in his grass-green eyes a peculiar if not ominous triad of determination, anger, and spite.

The calf bucket had been given to me by my grandfather, perhaps because I had been playing with it and had asked if I might take it home, perhaps also because its sides were battered and its bottom with half a dozen pinholes leaked milk somewhat on the order of a sieve. I had wanted it so desperately that once at home I had taken it to the barn where having placed it near the stanchion I promptly forgot why I had wanted it so desperately. But when I needed it there it was.

With the calf bucket in hand I followed my father into the screened-in porch at the southwest corner of the house, followed him over narrow tongue-in-groove boards to the door of our cave and storm shelter, door with its matching tongue-in-groove boards, door that lifted easily, thanks to a system of ropes and pulleys that the ten-year-old mind had, and to this day has, difficulty understanding. The earthen steps were dry and uneven; I took them one at a time, slowly, my father in front of me now balancing himself with the family shovel in his right hand and the lard can in the other.

Our cave was not a place conducive to a sense either of well-being or safety, in spite of the fact that we called it not only a cave, that word for us being synonymous with a *place for the storing of home-canned goods*, but likewise a storm shelter. Perhaps it somewhat fit Robert Frost's description of a home—that place where, when you have to go there, it has to take you in. Well, I cannot remember our ever having put our storm shelter to the test. I can remember many storms, thunder and hail and wind and sleet and snow, and I can remember hearing the intense and persistent whistle at the power plant telling us to take cover, but I cannot remember that we ever obeyed. For one thing, we were seldom all of us at home when the siren sounded. I and my younger brother and older sister might be in school, or busy separately with after-school activities, and more

than likely Mother and Father would be at the cafe taking orders and dishing up bacon and eggs or hot-beef sandwiches. For another, none of us, I believe, wanted to descend into the quaint fecundity of a dirt-walled, dirt-floored cave. You can the goods, yes, peaches and green beans and tomatoes and a varied assortment of jellies, and when you want a pint of this or a quart of something else you lift the cave door and feel your way down the uneven steps and with faith and doggedness and uplifted hands you locate the string that pulled will give you light, and because you forgot to bring a rag or a cloth you part the spider webs and dust off the jars with an open hand and make your selection; then, reversing the process, you retreat as quickly as possible.

And, finally, we did not resort to the storm shelter because my brother and I were eager to experience a tornado firsthand, to watch it and to feel its power to discern for ourselves whether it might be something more than hearsay or legend. When the siren sounded we would stop whatever we were doing and rush outside, if we weren't there already, and search the skies for anything remotely resembling a funnel. Often we saw one, or thought so, and we would study it until the eyes burned, until in spite of rain and an impressive wind the funnel or its illusion lifted to join a roiling of blue-black clouds.

For me, an opportunity to witness a bona fide tornado would not present itself until I had graduated from junior high and was about ready to enter high school. Because I was not a whiz at mathematics I often went to the Attica Recreation Parlor to learn the nuances of numbers by playing 8-ball. One late afternoon in late August I was deep into this learning process when the siren sounded. The sudden stridency did not altogether surprise me; all afternoon blue-black clouds had been forming to the southwest, and a stillness had hung in the air like a slow, silent, extended expectation. But inside the pool hall, though the door that faced the main street was open, both clouds and expectation were replaced by the sweet acidity of cigarette smoke and the downright lovely clicking of one pool ball against another. Was I shooting the stripes or the solids? In this competition do any of the numbers except the 8 on the black 8-ball matter? And was I winning the game?

Probably, because my opponent was Frankie Biberstein, who had trouble with both angle and distance because one of his eyes wan-

dered. Frankie would be a freshman, too, would be a junior if he had somewhere along the educational line applied himself.

Boy howdy, Frankie said. Must be a tornado.

So of course we racked our cues, paid our bill (ten cents per game, the winner receiving a five-cent redeemable chip for each victory), and hurried to Frankie's father's black and battered International pickup, which Frankie, using the eye that did not wander, drove like a madman west on Highway 160 to where the clouds appeared most threatening.

Frankie's father owned the pickup, but in all other respects it belonged to Frank. On weekdays he drove it to school from his farm three miles west of town (that same direction we were now headed), and on Saturday nights he patrolled the streets as if he had been deputized—from the elevators at the south edge of Main to the school at the far north end, from the cemetery at the west edge to the town park at the east. He'd put the International in low gear and creep the streets from sundown until, as they say, the last dog died, the radio dialed to a clear-channel station from somewhere in Texas intoning news and music and ads for everything from lugnuts to noodles. My favorite was a come-on for engagement and wedding rings, one of each for under five dollars. Cheap enough to throw away, the baritone voice told us, but nice enough to keep.

The first time we heard that one Frankie almost drove us into the ditch. We had been moving beyond the speed limit, the windows up to keep the sound of the muffler from competing with the radio, and we were on our way to Anthony, sixteen miles away, to buy a brand of nuts not available in any of the local stores—Tom's Toasted Peanuts. Frankie enjoyed that sort of thing, something, anything, to give him an excuse to drive somewhere out of town, especially if he had someone to share his eccentricity. Often I served as that someone. Frankie was not very social, and he absolutely did not drive the streets of Attica hoping to catch the eye of a female. He was not altogether a loner, but he wanted to keep his relationships both few and at a distance. As an only child he had perhaps been doted upon and at the same time been given opportunities and responsibilities peculiar to a youngster being raised on a farm. Who knows how young he had been when he soloed on the family's row-crop Farmall, or how old he had been when he first sat behind the wheel of the old pickup.

*Cheap enough to throw away, but nice enough to keep.* He's talking about my International, Frankie had said, and probably it was this connection that had so nearly caused my buddy to chortle himself, and me with him, into the ditch.

Raindrops against the windshield were large but not plentiful, and the wipers at the moment were working. The blue-black clouds were flecked with white; they seemed to be turning slowly, and moving toward us, and shortly after we had navigated an S two miles from town, and were again hauling our anxious little asses west, we saw the funnel.

Boy howdy, Frankie said, there she is!

In an instant Frankie had reined in the pickup, half of it resting on black macadam, the other half on the highway's shoulder. In another instant we were standing in the pickup's bed, looking west over the cab at what was no longer a legend. It was a funnel, all right, made not of tin or metal but of swirling winds that enabled it to bend this way and that as it moved its extended snout through a windbreak of cedars and cottonwoods at the south edge of the highway. It was maybe half a mile away, serpentine slowly, heading rather directly toward Frankie's old black International.

It never occurred to us that we might be in mortal danger—danger, yes, but not *mortal* danger. We were much too young to be mortality's victims. Had we been fully aware of the danger we surely would have left the pickup running; but we hadn't. Frankie had turned her off, knowing that the pickup, chiefly because of temperamental carburetion, might not start quickly, or at all, should we decide to indulge what my Marine Corps handbook would call, as I learned many years later, a *retrograde movement*. Or maybe the scene had tricked us into believing that we were watching a movie, and that before long a cowboy wearing a wide-brimmed hat and riding a white horse—William Boyd, perhaps, as Hopalong Cassidy—would come into the picture at the last moment, lasso the funnel and take it to the ground and without losing his hat punch it silly. Or maybe we were improvising a version of chicken, Frankie and I equally unwilling to register fear, to back down or to holler uncle.

In any case, there we stood, occasional raindrops the size of quarters pelting our faces, thanks to wind gusts from the southwest, and we wiped them away with the backs of our hands and watched as the funnel moved through the trees, parting them and leaving

a swath wide enough, as later Frankie would put it, to drive half a dozen four-bottom plows through.

When suddenly the hum of the storm erupted into a terrific roar I looked quickly at Frankie, who had turned quickly to look at me. There was an intensity in his better eye that bespoke more satisfaction than fear. Is it possible that he wanted to experience the funnel more fully than I did? Yes, I believe so, though I managed a difficult grin, which Frankie returned. Then he said something, probably something on the order of Boy howdy, here she comes! but the words were lost in the godawful growl of the now not-so-distant maelstrom.

Only one other time in my life have I heard a sustained roaring to equal that of our approaching tornado. It came to me one summer when I was working as a gandydancer on the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe railroad, Panhandle Division. I and my co-workers were replacing the nuts and bolts that secured the steel splices that held the rails together, and it was my job to swab the sides of the adjoining rails with grease before the splices with their new nuts and bolts were affixed in place. To perform this task I would dip a wide soft-bristled brush into a large bucket of melted grease, then give each side of the rails a long black sticky lovely coat. It was not a difficult job, not an intellectually challenging job, not one that any of my courses thus far in college (I would be a sophomore in the fall) had bothered to prepare me for, especially Beginning French, and fortunately the railroad job required a minimum of prerequisites—and accessories. One bucket. One brush. One back strong enough to tote the bucket.

One foreman capable of exercising compassion.

Case in point: the day I greased the tops, no less than the sides, of the tracks.

It had been an unusually hot day in early August, and by noon our foreman, Wilson, was unusually fatigued, which meant that shortly after lunch our foreman under a maverick cottonwood lay flat on his back, snoring, maybe dreaming of what he would say when after waking he would assemble his crew in a circle, insofar as four subalterns can form a circle, to present his weekly homily on the importance of railroad safety. Because of this: Ray Wilson believed in following the rules, in taking every precaution known to human-

kind to prevent injury or death to anyone in his care, his job no doubt equal to any humanitarian impulse hanging in the balance.

So when I looked up to see a green board—that is, a green orb of light high on a steel silver pole—warning that a train, most likely a freight, was about to pass, I decided to grease the tops of two parallel rails for say ten to fifteen feet, then stand well back to watch and thus determine the effect of the grease on the fast-moving train. The inspiration for this act did not strike me like a bolt from the blue, though the August skies were indeed blue and cloudless, nor did it reach me via one of the muses. Several days earlier one of my colleagues, Gene, had suggested that I do it, said that if I didn't I had shit down my neck, and a day or so later the challenge was repeated, feces included, so that eventually the dare had become the forbidden fruit that reached its irresistible maturity as our foreman lay on his back under the disinterested cottonwood, snoring.

Well, I was young then, and to some extent fearless; I was the baby of our five-member crew, and to be honest I knew, down deep in my heart, that Ray liked me more than he should. He had one child, a daughter, and surely he loved her. But he wanted a son, too, or so I believed, because occasionally, if the context were appropriate, he would say to me, Now, if I had a son like you, I'd . . . . And he would go on to tell me, and those others who might be nearby, what he'd do, and all the while he'd be looking at me as if I were in fact his son. He was a balding, large-chested man with amazingly short legs. Always he wore tan workpants and a blue cotton shirt. Always black low-topped boots. Always a growth of whiskers that somehow, unlike the forbidden fruit, never reached full maturity. And always, unless asleep, snoring, he wore a straw hat with an impressively wide brim.

I began and continued the job as quietly and as swiftly as I could. One bucket of grease. One soft-bristled brush. One back strong enough to tote the bucket. Were my co-laborers watching, most importantly the one who had tossed out, then repeated, the dare? This would be Gene, who helped Mr. Shaw manipulate the machine that removed then replaced the nuts and the bolts. Or would the oldest member of the crew, Joseph Mora, our welder who beaded the worn-down ends of the rails, take notice? He was a dark, quiet, bright-eyed man who chuckled at almost everything, maybe

because he did not speak our English very well, but who seldom laughed outright.

I did not bother to notice or to care whether anyone might be watching. I was coating the tops of the tracks with black sticky lovely goo. I was light as cottonwood seed on water as I moved over the ties and the chat, swabbing. Heat ascended in discernible waves from the rails. Not much of a breeze. A rivulet of warm moisture under my T-shirt teased the spine. The green eye continued to offer its warning.

I finished in less time than it takes here to tell it, and when looking west I saw the light on the engine moving starboard and port, searching the right-of-ways, and heard the rumbling, I wondered if indeed I had done something destined now to destroy us all, including the engineer and his misbegotten helper. In a flash I imagined the huge front wheels of the locomotive hitting the grease and spinning suddenly more rapidly than tongue might tell or pen inscribe, imagined sparks flying as the engine jumped the tracks, countless cars huge as ogres following suit, imagined one of those massive ogres hurtling toward me, toward Gene, toward Mr. Shaw, toward Joseph, toward our snoring foreman, imagined . . .

You must understand that the approaching train was an old-fashioned study in raw power and motion, a coal-fed, steam-powered behemoth with “ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods,” as Walt Whitman phrases it in “To a Locomotive in Winter,” a “Fierce-throated beauty” belching smoke thick as clouds from its smoke-stack, the “pulse of the continent,” according to Whitman, and certainly I did not disagree because, for one thing, I had not yet read Walt Whitman and, for another, Whitman knew what he was talking about.

Now the rumbling swelled in a mighty crescendo as the freight, relentless and black as midnight, lurched menacingly toward us. O sweet, sweet Jesus! I have sinned and have fallen hellishly short of God’s glory. On the other hand, I have not backed away from my co-worker’s challenge. Dead or alive, damned or saved, I do not have shit down my neck.

Roar and heft: Both were upon us as the engineer, smiling broadly, waved a gloved hand toward us as if he were a gleeful Pontiff in overalls offering a blessing. With the exception of our foreman, who remained asleep, we smiled and waved back.

You must understand also that the time that elapsed between the waving and the contact of the huge front wheels with the black sticky lovely grease was less than a millisecond, which means that the change on the countenance of the engineer from gladness to abject fright was too rapid to have been recorded by any contraption less sensitive than the naked eye. In a twinkling this convivial Pontiff went from paradise to the lowest reaches of perdition, and with the naked eye I observed the change and was impressed. The locomotive's huge wheels spun in place for only the smallest fraction of a moment, and sparks flew, but neither the engine nor any of the countless boxcars jumped the tracks. In another twinkling the wheels found their familiar because goo-less purchases and the freight rumbled safely on, its clickety-clacking like music to the ears, its engineer no doubt trying to remember which of his forgotten transgressions could have provoked the skipping of such an otherwise regular heartbeat.

Apparently my fellow workers had not seen me greasing the tracks, because when our foreman regained consciousness and found his legs and asked us what the hell was going on (the skipping of the heartbeat must have roused him, must have given him a hint), we said, I believe collectively, damned if we knew. It's nothing to lose any sleep over, we said, I believe ironically, just another freight with maybe a novice engineer at the controls, or more likely one of the wheels was going flat.

Our foreman tilted and shook his head as if he had water in one ear, and when the water was gone he put on his straw hat and closed his lunchbucket and told us to sit down here under this goddamned cottonwood in a goddamned circle and listen up. Said he knew we didn't much care to hear him talk again about railroad safety, but rules are rules, he said, and I believe in following the goddamned rules, and that includes rules on railroad safety, he said, and I could tell from the way he said it, soft-spoken and intense with his eyes aimed at me, that I was the only son he'd ever have, and that goddamn it he loved me, and that meant he had to forgive me for whatever it was I might have done or one day in the sweet bye-and-bye might better not, by God, by Jesus H. Christ, ever think of doing.

We call the moon the moon, John Donne wrote, and I write that we call human nature human nature because it's what we don't stop doing—so it must be in our nature to do it, then do it again, advice and caution and dictates to the contrary notwithstanding. When you see a green board, Ray Wilson says each time we huddle to hear his speech, and we hear it weekly, you shout *Green board!* then you drop whatever you're doing and help pissant the motor car off the tracks, assuming it ain't already off. I don't want anybody's injury or death on my record, or on my conscience, either. And in unison we nod *yes*, we nod *yesyesyes*, and after a prolonged silence, intended to permit our foreman's words to sink deeply in, we break huddle and return to work.

There are many ways to injure or destroy oneself while working on the railroad. A lining bar, for example, might slip and fracture a bone in the ankle. The business end of a sledgehammer might miss the spike and shatter the tibia. Ray Wilson once spoke of a man who was killed when the head of a sledgehammer came loose and flew a good twenty-five feet and struck an unwary victim squarely between the eyes and killed him more or less instantly. Our foreman was not present when this happened, he said, but he said he had it on good authority. And of course there was always the possibility of being struck by a motor car. And you don't look directly at Joe Mora's welder when he is laying a bead. Keep your eyes and your ears open, Wilson tells us, and you'll not be injured or killed and I'll not get my ass fired or find myself sitting around feeling guilty.

Even so, we call the moon the moon. And human nature is human nature, which translated means that none of us, not even Wilson, was keeping his eyes and ears open that late afternoon when a freight train materialized so suddenly that by Mr. Shaw's estimate, given not long after we survived, we had six point five seconds to remove our machines and tools and ourselves from the tracks to avoid total annihilation.

We reacted instinctively, instinct augmented by our foreman's many lectures on railroad safety. Gene and Mr. Shaw removed their machine from the tracks in a single inclusive motion. Joseph threw both torch and mask into the adjoining county and jumped perhaps fifty feet to safety. I threw my bucket with its brush into the stratosphere and duplicated Joseph's leap.

These movements—of Mr. Shaw and Gene, of Joseph and myself—took approximately three seconds, during which time Ray was racing to the motor car, leaving him three point five seconds to wrestle it off the rails and heave it far enough onto the right-of-way to keep it from being sideswiped and maybe snagged by one of the freight's appendages and dragged all the way to Alva, Oklahoma.

History abounds with stories of heroes, often mythical and god-related, performing feats of incredible physical prowess. Homer's Odysseus, for all his brawn and brain, could not have cleaned house so thoroughly without Athena beside him, whispering encouragement into his mortal ear. And surely Aeneas' conquest of Italy by way of Turnus and his henchmen would have been delayed, nay prevented, without the ongoing intervention of his goddess mother, Venus. These figures were burly to start with, and when they had the favor of a god or goddess they were impervious to damn near everything. So one might reasonably expect them to slay whatever form of dragon that blocked their paths.

But what does one expect of the average individual, the person on the street as common as dirt? Not Odysseus or Aeneas, not even Davy Crockett or his multitudinous equivalents. I am thinking instead of the one without badge or reputation, the one who when the chips are down does whatever must be done to prevail.

Certainly, Ray Wilson was such a man. When collectively we heard the train's whistle, and in unison looked up from our respective involvements, the freight was upon us, and it was our foreman, Ray Wilson, who without benefit of god or goddess performed his Herculean duty. In an instant his amazingly short legs became pistons to deliver him to the motorcar. In another instant he pulled the set-off handles from their slots at one end of the car, lifted that near end off the rails and dropped it on the crushed rocks that provided a bed for the ties. Earlier, I admitted that I have never been much of a mathematician, though in the pool hall playing rotation I practiced the difficult art of simple addition. What I am saying is that I do not know how many instants make a second; I know only that our foreman, having lifted one end of the motor car off the rails, proceeded in another instant to move to the other end of the car, which now rested on ties and chat between the rails, then lifted the vehicle's dead squat weight and pushed it like a Brobdingnagian wheelbarrow down the mound of chat and onto the right-of-way,

the locomotive as it passed him not missing the timetable in his right rear pocket by more than a whisker. I know this because as we sat in a circle to indulge a debriefing Mr. Shaw said so.

Missed your assend by a whisker, Ray, said Mr. Shaw.

Wilson did not respond. He sat with his amazingly short legs crossed, his back straight as a rakehandle, his round cherubic face white as flour. He resembled an ancient Oriental god scared, as someone later noted, shitless. The debriefing had been his idea, yet thus far he had said nothing.

Mr. Shaw did most of the talking. He was the crew clockwatcher, having told us that the entire episode lasted six point five seconds. Mr. Shaw went on to say that each of us was to blame equally, that hereafter we should be more vigilant, that he simply could not understand why one of us did not see the green board or hear the whistle, if the freight had blown one, or why the engineer hadn't applied the brakes, or how during those frantic six point five seconds our foreman's straw hat had managed to remain on our foreman's head, or . . . .

During all of this Joe Mora sat smiling, off and on, or softly giggling; with his welder's mask removed he looked younger than probably he was.

I joined Gene in saying nothing. Mr. Shaw had pretty much taken over, his spontaneous verbal leadership perhaps providing another form of heroism.

After a long, long string of instants Ray reached a hand behind him and from a hip pocket brought forth his dog-eared timetable, which for another interminable string of instants he studied as we studied him. Then: She was right on time, he said. It was my fault. I should have checked the timetable earlier.

No one responded, because we knew that Ray was being flat out honest; we did in fact often depend upon him to advise us of an impending train. He took enormous satisfaction in studying his timetable, almost as much satisfaction in the timetable as in the motorcar. As foreman he read the schedule as if decoding messages from a band of secret agents. As foreman he alone started the motorcar and manipulated the upright handle that tightened the belt that put the car in motion. He therefore as the keeper of both timetable and motorcar was finally responsible for the safety of his

crew, though of course each crew member was advised and encouraged to keep an eye out for the green board.

But we call the moon the moon, don't we, and we call human nature human nature because it's what we don't stop doing—so it must be in our nature to do it, then do it again, warnings and so forth be damned.

We did not return to work. We located our equipment and machines, examined then covered them with a tarp, returned the motorcar to the tracks and with our foreman at the helm navigated the tracks west and then south to Alva, where we were living in boxcars too hot to get much sleep in, it being early August in Oklahoma—and in Kansas also, that pitiful state where I was born and where I couldn't wait to get back to.

As the funnel came slowly nearer, the decibels of its roaring increasing steadily, Frankie and I stood on our toes in the bed of his International, not wanting to miss anything. I suppose that by now we had reached a point of no return, that without saying it we had determined to live or die watching the tornado.

Frankie had stopped the International at the top of a small rise, a place from which we had a panoramic view of the proceedings, a spectacular view made an inch or two more spectacular because, as I noted, we were standing on our toes. The rain had slacked off as the wind increased, and the growl in the throat of the tornado was becoming downright personal. The business end of the funnel was moving through the windbreak with an appalling absence of mercy, reducing cottonwood and cedar to fiddlesticks and stumps. The scene was much too unreal to have been believed, and maybe that is why Frankie and I did not retreat. Like voyeurs, or certifiable idiots, we stood on tiptoes, our hands palms-down on the cab of the pickup, our hearts beating like tom-toms in our throats.

Where the windbreak ended is precisely where the funnel turned slowly northward and began to lift. The scenario was exactly the way Frankie and I would have planned it, had we been the one, or One, in charge. The funnel, rising, crossed the highway beyond and below us and continued north, rising and rising, until it dissipated and joined the blue-blackness that now began to drop its rain on Frankie and me in buckets.

We sat then in the pickup, which had surprised us by starting, until the rain let up, and because the wipers worked Frankie suggested we drive west all the way to Sharon, nine miles, to rubber-neck the damage. So we did. But there was nothing much to see beyond the shredding of the windbreak, unless you happened to own the hangar or its blue-and-white piper cub near the south-side city limits. The top of the hangar was lying crumpled on the runway, and the piper cub lay upside-down in a field of stubble that was waiting to be plowed.

We drove the main street and several side streets, the rain steady but slackening, the radio on, static and country western, and when we started home and drove past the unfortunate piper cub Frankie said, Cheap enough to throw away, but nice enough to keep. On the radio Texas Jim Robertson was singing "Land, Sky, and Water": *You may like your buildings tall, but I like where there's none at all—just give me land, sky, and water. You may like those crowded places, but I like where there's open spaces—just give me land, sky, and water.*

We had all three, did Frankie and I. Boy howdy. In addition, we had first-hand information about a tornado that folks back home in the pool hall would be anxious to hear—you know, those folks who had not seen the devastation with their own eyes, those weak-kneed pismires who might live the rest of their lives without ever knowing the sound of a bona fide tornado in their ears.

When finally I asked my father what he was about to do, he seemed surprised that I didn't already know.

Install a floor furnace, he said, and apparently he assumed that no further explanation was necessary. I had trailed him down the earthen steps to the earthen floor of our cave, our storm shelter, had hesitated while he found the dangling string and with the family shovel in his right hand pulled the string; light from the lone bulb was barely adequate, giving everything—the jars of canned goods, the glints of mica—a faintly yellowish, almost sickly, hue. And the smell—it was decidedly that of a place not very often used, dry and stale with now and then the suggestion of something putrid, potatoes, probably, gone bad, but the funny thing is that it never took me very long to adjust to these unpleasant odors. Over time, over the days and weeks that it took my father

and me to complete our project, I adjusted to the scents so completely that I came to enjoy them.

Meanwhile, observe the scene: A man wearing faded blue overalls and a blue, ragbag cotton shirt is standing, facing the earthen center of the south wall. In his right hand he holds a short-handled shovel. At his right, on the earthen floor, sits a calf bucket, its sides replete with dents, its bottom a punchboard of pinholes. Behind the bucket stands a boy of ten or so, waiting for something that he does not yet fully understand to begin.

It begins when his father strikes the earthen side of the cave with the blade of his shovel. One blow, then another, and the boy counts the blows until he loses track, and he loses track when the father, having filled the calf bucket with dry dirt, tells him to carry the load upstairs and dump it on that patch of bunchgrass just east of the outhouse, then bring the calf bucket back and trade it for the lard can, which, if it isn't full by the time he returns, will be full pretty damned shortly thereafter.

Not full, as it turns out, not ever completely full, but half full, because the lard can is too large for the boy to negotiate unless he drags it, and dragging would wear down the earthen steps; so half full, or thereabouts, is the extent to which the father fills the lard can, and the boy carries it up the earthen steps and out of the porch to dump it on that patch of bunchgrass just east of the outhouse, returns then to await the filling of another container.

It takes the boy a long time to realize that this is the way it is going to be, that one small load at a time he will carry earth up the earthen steps to dump it near the outhouse, that he will return to the cave to watch his father chip away at the south wall of the cave, that his father by Christ will not relent, that his father's green eyes are indeed a triad of determination, anger, and spite, that if after an impossible stretch of days and weeks you carry calf bucket and lard can up and down the earthen steps so many times that not even your younger brother, who loves math, he says, could count them you notice that the pile of dirt near the outhouse is beginning to resemble first a mound, then a hill, then a mountain—you come to the conclusion that, yes, you and your father, come hell or high water, are indeed going to install a floor furnace.