

THE LENT BOY

186 Winter dusk is particularly conducive to melancholy. At twelve, Aaron was perhaps young to know such things, to feel them as deeply as he did, but temperament and experience had created in him a specific type of precociousness. Thus, as he made his way to the Bergstroms' house, the normally pleasant sound of snow crunching beneath his sneakers nearly brought him to tears. In truth, it was not just the crunching or the day's steady retreat but so many things, all piling up inside of him like the mounds of snow that flanked the recently plowed streets, mounds that other children, not he, liked to climb upon as they walked home from school, pummeling one another to preserve their spots on top. There were no street lamps in this part of Morton, but all around him the houses were aglow, predictably, with Christmas lights and kitchen lights and the steady yellow beam from the porch, each anticipating a specific event: a holiday, a warm meal, a father's return. And so the lights discouraged him as well.

He could tell, almost to a house, who was having chicken that night and who, roast, the odors wafting from these well-lit kitchens into the street where he walked. His mother was back at the café, creating her own good smells as she cooked, but this thought only added to his mood, surrounded as he was by mothers making meals for their families, families whom they solely considered as they cooked, taking into account a child's dislike of onions or preparing to settle a dispute over the much-coveted drumsticks. Aaron could not remember the last time his mother had prepared something just for him, something that was not a leftover from the day's special or a kitchen mistake, an overcooked hamburger that became his supper.

He trudged along, dreading his visit to the Bergstroms, whom he had never met, for they rarely visited the café. Of course, he knew that Mrs. Bergstrom had taught fifth grade for many years, but he knew nothing of her, of her reputation among students that is, for she had taught all those years not in Morton but in a nearby town. Parents generally liked to keep their teachers close—in town, where they could keep an eye on them—which made her residence in Morton somewhat of an aberration. The Bergstroms had established themselves here, in Morton, because Mr. Bergstrom's livelihood had demanded it: he owned a tire shop, long closed because they were

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old, retired, and their son had no affinity for tires. Anyway, their son was dead now, had gone through the ice the winter before, though there was more to it than that. There usually is. This son was the reason that Aaron dreaded the visit, for people in town said that the Bergstroms had not recovered, that having a dead son had made them odd.

The Bergstroms' house was on the edge of town, near the skating rink, which Aaron looped around, knowing that the rink would be busy with his classmates at this time of day; still, he stopped and stood for a moment, one block over, listening to the sounds that carried in the winter air—girls shrieking and boys laughing, their voices giddy with the knowledge that they were expected home soon, that their fun was nearly over. He tried to put a word to the sounds that they made, a game that he often played with himself. What sprang to mind was "mirthful," but as he said the word aloud, it seemed to him ironic, as though it referred not to the experience of happiness itself, but to how it struck *his* ears, a boy alone, listening to other children play and thinking, "My, how mirthful they sound."

The Bergstroms had turned on their porch light for him. He stood outside on their front steps, watching them through the picture window, the two of them on their sofa together, an afghan tucked round their collective legs, rising partway up their chests. They were staring straight ahead, both of them focused on something that he could not see—the local news, he thought, for they had about them the look of people distracted by problems that were not their own. From outside, they did not look like two people with a dead son.

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He did not remember knocking, but he supposed he had because the Bergstroms looked toward him and beckoned him in, their two right hands floating up from under the afghan simultaneously. He opened their front door and stepped in, anticipating warmth, as one did in Minnesota in December, but the Bergstroms' house was cold, and when he said hello, his breath hung in the air. The room was silent, the television off, and he glanced across the room to see what they had been staring at, but there was nothing—just a painting of some trees that he imagined had been there forever.

"My mother sent me. She said that you needed help." His voice rose at the end of both sentences, turning them into questions, and he wished that he could start over, could reenter the house making declarations.

"Come here and let us take a look at you," said Mr. Bergstrom, extracting his hand again and gesturing vaguely toward the middle of the room. Aaron bent first to remove his sneakers, which were covered with snow, and Mrs.

Bergstrom said, "What a polite young man," to which Mr. Bergstrom replied, "That he is, Mother," and they both cackled, a cackle like the sound of logs burning in a fireplace, and Aaron could not help but feel that they were mocking him.

He came and stood in front of the sofa, in front of them, and they regarded him for a moment without speaking. Then, they turned and looked at each other, thoughtfully, as though Aaron were an appliance that they were considering buying, an appliance that offered some but not all of the features that they wanted in their appliance. The look that they gave each other seemed to acknowledge this, to say, "Well, shall we take him anyway? Can we make do?"

"How old are you, Aaron?" asked Mrs. Bergstrom.

"Twelve," he said quietly.

"On the brink of puberty," announced Mr. Bergstrom gaily, the way that Aaron's music teacher called out the title of the next Christmas carol to be sung.

188 They paused, as though expecting him to comment on his impending puberty—to describe his first whisker or the new muskiness beneath his arms—and when he did not, Mrs. Bergstrom asked, "What's the special tonight then?"

"Meatballs," he said. "Thursday is always meatballs." He was used to this question, for as he walked home from school, people often called to him from their houses or cars, wanting to know about this very thing, the Special. He did not understand their interest, nor could he understand why they had not memorized the specials already, for there were just seven of them, always in the same order, unchanged since his mother had taken over the café years earlier, which made people's ignorance seem almost intentional, akin to refusing to learn the very order of the days themselves.

"Meatballs?" said Mrs. Bergstrom skeptically. "Why not meatloaf? Meatloaf's easier."

"I know," he said. "But meatloaf is Friday."

Their café was called The Trout Café, not because his mother had an interest in fish but because she had seen no reason to change the name when she acquired the café from the former owner, who was an avid fisherman, so avid, in fact, that the balance between work and pleasure had begun to shift more and more toward the latter, the Closed sign appearing with increasing

frequency. This was not the sort of thing that was understood in Morton, a town of four hundred people, most of them Scandinavian, Protestants, who saw the erosion of one's work ethic as an erosion of one's moral rectitude. Where the former owner went, nobody seemed to know, but Aaron's mother made something of the fact that he, like them, was not from Morton.

Aaron and his mother had arrived in town when Aaron was five, behind them a story that seemed big enough, strange enough, to be myth: a father who had fallen from a parade float, dressed in his police uniform and waving one second, tumbling backwards and onto his head the next, dying instantly. Then, several weeks after the funeral, while Aaron and his mother shopped for school shoes, his mother laid her head on the counter as the salesclerk rang up the transaction and began to sob. She did not, or could not, stop, and so an ambulance was summoned. His mother spent two weeks in the hospital, requiring a cure of "peace and quiet," which Aaron understood the doctor to mean was something that he, Aaron, could not provide, and when she came home finally and walked through their house like a stranger, running her hands along the walls without locating light switches, bumping repeatedly and painfully against the edges of things—the sofa and the refrigerator and the sliding doors that led into the backyard—she announced at breakfast one morning, "Aaron, we're moving to Morton." And though he was a boy who disliked change, he actually felt relieved, for he saw that they could not remain in Fargo, where he had always lived but where his mother could no longer find her way around.

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Aaron's mother chose Morton because she and his father had spent a week there once, at a fishing resort run by a husband and wife who had probably purchased the place with high hopes, the way that people do, though by the time that his parents stayed there, the couple was far past the honeymoon phase of ownership. The cabin that his parents rented was a poorly lit, filthy box with a greasy kitchen, and though his mother had brought along food, planning to prepare their meals, she became queasy at the thought of eating off of the plates that she found stacked haphazardly in the kitchen's one cupboard; she had pictured other people using them, people who picked at themselves, gutted fish, and rarely bathed, and when she lifted the glasses to her mouth to drink, she was sure that she could smell sour milk and fish. Instead, they were forced to drive into Morton twice a day to eat at The Trout Café, an unexpected expense that so enraged his father that he ended their stay early, packing up the car in a huff and refusing to speak to

Aaron's mother during the drive home, even when she begged him to pull over so that she could vomit along the side of the road. They did not know it at the time, but she was pregnant, though just barely, and each time she told Aaron this story, she ended it the same way: "Later, I couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't you that made me so sick." She would sigh then, and he understood from her tone and the way she said "you" that she considered him responsible for all of it—not just the queasiness and vomiting, but his father's anger and their abrupt departure, precursors of the life that they would have as a family.

190 His father had hated The Trout Café, his mother said, hated the way that everyone turned to inspect them when they entered and then later leaned toward their booth to ask, "So where are you folks from?" Each time his mother told the story, Aaron could imagine the townspeople's curiosity—the turning of heads, the murmuring, the questions, questions no doubt involving indiscriminately assigned prepositions ("Are you down from the Cities?" when the Cities were themselves *down*)—for a strange face in the café was akin to a strange face at one's supper table. One couldn't simply eat without speaking. What Aaron could not imagine, ever, was his father sitting there, sitting in the booths where he served food and did his homework, for in Aaron's mind The Trout Café existed only after his father's death, was, in fact, a by-product of his death, and so to place his father there was to negate everything that had followed, the life that he and his mother had built.

His mother said that people in Morton could not forgive them for being outsiders, using, always, the word "forgive," as though she would like nothing better than to make an apology and be done with it. Still, she had made a place for herself there, for she was good at what she did, at cooking and at serving people, activities that bred a certain familiarity but that she performed while keeping herself at a distance. More than anything, people seemed to appreciate the distance, the way that she came up behind them and leaned in to fill their coffee cups, placing her left hand on their shoulders to let them know that she was there but never allowing the hand to linger too long, to rest too heavily.

There were stumbles. In the beginning, she did not understand that people came to eat at the café largely to escape from routine, which meant that they did not wish to determine how well their hamburger should be cooked or what type of bun should be involved. For them, the pleasure in eating out

lay in the very freedom from having to make such mundane decisions, and once his mother understood this, life at the café became easier, though never entirely easy. This she blamed on their aforementioned status as outsiders, which kept her seesawing between two conflicting types of behavior: she worked hard to be accepted, yet she never truly attempted to make friends, claiming that everyone was either a customer or a potential customer and that it did not work to mix business and friendship.

It was the former impulse, this need to be accepted, that led his mother to begin lending him out. He thought of himself in this way, *lent*, as though he were a library book, briefly entering the homes of strangers, occupying a place there that spoke of intimacy. He was lent primarily to old people, his job to assist them with tasks that they could no longer manage—carrying boxes up and down steps, shopping for food, applying rubber pads to the bottoms of things—and in this way, he became privy to their vulnerabilities. The old people were always grateful for his help, grateful to his mother for lending him, and as he was leaving, they often tried to press something into his hand—a few coins, a Pop-Tart, an envelope bearing a stamp that was colorful and foreign—compensation for his services, which his mother required him to refuse. The old people always fussed then, telling him to zip his coat all the way up, to be careful walking home, not because there was anything to fear in Morton but because they wanted to give him something. He understood this, and he felt that his mother was wrong to deny them this small pleasure. Always, they commented on his mother’s kindness, breaking it down into its parts: the unexpectedness and generosity and selflessness of it, for there he was, assisting them, when she so obviously could use his help back at the café. But even as Aaron listened to the gratitude and awe in the old people’s voices, he knew that his mother had planned it this way, that she wanted this hour or two at dusk alone.

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She was unhappy, his mother, deeply so, though this had become clear to him just recently. Each Thursday night, James Evarold came into the café, stared at the menu as though assessing the options, and then chose the special, meatballs, waiting until his mother turned back toward the kitchen to add, “And a large milk. And some of those tater tots.” He seemed almost sheepish about his order, as though ashamed to be wanting tater tots when his wife was off at her weekly Weight Watchers meeting, discussing unnecessary calories and the hollowness of desire. They were a Jack Sprattian couple,

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she, large and cheerful, a wearer of smocks and other dowdy clothing, while he was a short, thin man, sartorially fastidious and shy.

Aaron's mother always turned back to him then and said, "That all, Jim?" in a tone that sounded to Aaron aggressive, almost bullying, and Jim Evarold pretended to consider the menu a bit longer as he cleared his throat and then made his usual plea: that the Thursday night special be changed to meatloaf.

"Meatloaf is Friday night," his mother snapped. "They're the same thing, Jim. Just different shapes. That's it."

Jim Evarold would look down at his hands or touch the napkin dispenser before answering. "Yes, but meatloaf doesn't jump all over the plate when I cut it," he'd mumble, and that would be the end of it, but Aaron could not help but feel that something more was involved, something beyond the relative manageability of meatloaf. He could not imagine what that *something* was, but when he looked at Jim Evarold's face, the word that came to him was "bereft," and so he asked his mother, "Why can't you switch the specials?"

"Let his wife change her meetings," his mother replied, her voice sour from a day of tending to other people's needs.

192 One night, after Jim Evarold had cleaned his plate of the unwieldy meatballs and the ignominious tater tots, Aaron picked it up and found a bit of tinfoil resting on the rim. Jim Evarold did not mention the tinfoil, which was about the size of his thumbnail, but Aaron suspected that it had come from his food, and he blew it to the floor, not wanting his mother to see it and feel ashamed. Over the next several weeks, however, other strange bits began to appear, detritus washed up on the shores of otherwise empty plates: a snippet of string, a scrap of wax paper. Aaron dispensed with each surreptitiously, and so they became larger: rubber bands, twist ties, a bottle top. He said nothing of them to his mother.

Then, one morning he picked up Emma Fjoslien's empty plate and found, teetering on its edge, a bristle as delicate as a fish bone. It was too small, of course, to have come from any of the brushes that his mother used in the kitchen, to clean the grill or scrub potatoes, and he held it on the tip of his finger, studying it, wanting to make a wish and breathe it away like an eyelash. Instead, he brought it to his mother, who stared at it as though it were an object that had been missing for many years, something that she had learned to live without so well that its reappearance now seemed a burden. "Must be from the vegetable scrubber," she said at last, turning to butter toast so that they would not have to look at each other.

Aaron knew what it was from. Later, as his mother sat in a booth taking her morning break, he went upstairs to their apartment and into the bathroom, where their toothbrushes hung from a rack. He picked up his mother's, which was nearly new because his mother went through toothbrushes quickly, the bristles flattening like tall grass in the wind after just a few weeks. It was a perfect match, and he thought about what this meant: that his mother had extracted the bristle from her toothbrush and taken it downstairs with her, had cooked Emma Fjoslien's omelet with the bristle inside. She had done this intentionally, and when he pictured her doing it, the whole sequence of events, he was afraid.

He wondered whether there had been other clues over the years, clues waiting for him to become mature enough to note, or whether something had shifted in his mother's world recently, something that intensified her unhappiness and created in her this need to mark the world. His first thought, naturally, was to look around for something to blame, but their tiny town seemed the same, as did the café, and he decided then that "unhappy" was what his mother *was*, a trait that she possessed like dry skin and a good sense of humor.

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"Well," said Mrs. Bergstrom. "It's time for the news, so why don't we let Father watch while we work on our letter." She extricated herself from the afghan, and Aaron saw that she had on snow pants, as though she had just come in from an afternoon of sledding. She wiggled herself to the front of the sofa and concentrated, staring ahead, before she pushed off, hoisting herself to her feet with a small grunt that embarrassed Aaron.

"Please turn the television on, Aaron," she said, and Aaron went over and crouched in front of it. He pulled the "on" button and then, startled by the sudden loudness of the newscaster's voice, toppled backward. This, too, made the Bergstroms laugh.

"Let's settle ourselves in the den," Mrs. Bergstrom said, and he followed her down the hallway—her snow pants making a *phit, phit* sound as she walked—and into the den, the door of which she shut and then locked behind them, bringing to Aaron's mind the expression "for good measure." The room smelled of cedar, which he liked, and wet cardboard, which he did not, and on the wall above the sofa were photos of their son Tim, their dead son, one from each year of school, lined up chronologically. He was smiling in all of them, and the gap between his front teeth seemed bigger than it had

in person. There were no photos of Tim as an adult, of the man that Aaron remembered from the café, a sad-looking man who always took a cloth from his pocket and cleaned the cutlery before using it. He had never ordered anything but water to drink, which Aaron's mother said had to do with the fact that he rarely kept a job for long and so could not afford to drink pop, and he always had a bacon cheeseburger, from which he would not take a bite until he had uncrossed the two strips of bacon that Aaron's mother arranged in an X over the cheese because he had preferred his bacon parallel.

He always came in alone, carrying a book, which he read while he waited to order and while he waited for his order to arrive and even while he ate, the last of these impressing Aaron most, for he had never seen anyone read while eating, not in public. Actually, Aaron had wanted to bring a book to the table on more than one occasion, especially as the meals that he and his mother shared became increasingly silent affairs, but his mother would not hear of such a thing; she said that reading at the table suggested that the company of those around you was inferior to the pleasures offered by a book. In fact, as his mother's unhappiness grew, her dislike of books seemed also to grow, and only later did Aaron understand that this had to do not with the books themselves but with her increasing inability to regard anything in her life with the passion that he brought to reading.

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The morning after Tim fell through the ice and died, the café was exceptionally busy. Aaron came down late, so he did not know what had happened, only that something had, for the tables and booths were filled with people talking, the room buzzing with the sound of it, and every twenty minutes or so, people stood and shifted to other tables like bees pollinating plants.

"Something happened," his mother told him later, after the café had quieted down. She went on, explaining haltingly that this *something* involved the Bergstroms, who had called the police the night before because Tim had stopped by to visit them and was acting strange.

"Strange how?" Aaron asked.

"He kept telling them that he loved them," his mother said.

Aaron considered this, considered the fact that the Bergstroms had called the police because their son would not stop saying that he loved them. "They called the police because he wouldn't stop?" he said at last.

"Well," his mother said. "There was more to it than that."

What surprised Aaron even more was that the police had come, had pulled up in front of the Bergstroms' house just as Tim was driving away.

They flashed their lights, but he did not stop, and like a parade of two, he and the police car drove slowly through Morton and out of town. When Tim turned onto the dirt road that led to Big Chip, the lake where most people in Morton went to swim, the police became nervous and began running their siren and speaking to him over the loudspeaker, but he drove straight onto the frozen lake. Big Chip had been tricky that year, with soft spots everywhere, which meant that even people who knew it well were staying off of it, and so the police watched from the shore as Tim continued out toward the middle alone. Eventually, his headlights lurched upwards, which meant that the back end of his car had fallen through, and within minutes he was gone.

"You understand what I'm telling you, Aaron?" his mother said. She was asking whether he understood that Tim had intended to disappear beneath the surface.

"Yes," he said.

She was silent for a moment. "They can't get to the car," she explained. "It's too dangerous." She tore open a packet of sugar and let it dissolve into her coffee. "Imagine how cold it must have been."

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He and Mrs. Bergstrom sat down at a card table, atop of which was a half-completed puzzle that was being assembled with the picture facing downward. He studied the gray backside of the puzzle for a moment, wanting to say, "This puzzle puzzles me," but he was not the sort of boy who engaged in silliness with others. He used to say such things to his mother, who had been sincere in her reactions, laughing only when she truly found something funny, but he had stopped a couple of years earlier for reasons that seemed to him general rather than specific: that is, it struck him one day that his mother had come to consider his comments unnecessary.

"Why are you putting the puzzle together upside down?" he asked instead. "Wouldn't it be easier if you could see the picture?"

"Why must everything be easy, young man?" She pushed the puzzle aside and drew toward her a box, which she opened to reveal stationery and pens.

"How's your penmanship?" she asked, and he said that his penmanship was fine.

"Good," she said. "I'm not interested in faulty penmanship. And your spelling?"

"I have the best spelling in my class," he reported.

"Well," said Mrs. Bergstrom, "that only means something if your class is not made up of imbeciles."

She removed the top sheet of stationery from the box and placed it in front of him. "I assume that your mother told you that I required help with my correspondence."

"Yes," he said. He glanced at her hands, which looked capable of holding a pen.

"The date first. I prefer Roman numerals," she said.

"I don't think I remember the Roman numerals," he told her, but she did not reply, so he wrote the date, which was the fifteenth of December, in regular Arabic numbers at the top of the page.

"Dear," she began, and then stopped as though she could not recall to whom she had planned to write. "Just leave it blank for now," she instructed him before resuming her dictation, enunciating the first line: "Winter has arrived in Morton."

196 She paused and waited for him to finish, and then she picked up the paper and examined what he had written. "You must work on your uppercase letters," she told him severely, pointing to the "W" specifically. "The bottoms should be sharp, like two elbows resting on the line. You see how rounded yours are? You've made knees of them, as though they are kneeling. I do not approve of kneeling," she said, adding, "we are not Catholics in this house." She laughed as though this were funny.

"Should I fix it?" he asked.

"That would just make it unsightly," she said, "and the first line should not be unsightly. No, we'll leave it, but it's something to bear in mind."

He held the pen above the paper, waiting for her to continue, but she did not. "You seem like a perspicacious young man," she said after a moment, her tongue darting into the corners of her mouth as she studied him, slyly, wanting to know whether he would ask what "perspicacious" meant, wanting to know, that is, whether he was a curious child, whether his curiosity trumped his timidity. He knew that she saw him this way, as a timid boy who would put up with being bullied by an old lady in her den.

Aaron knew what "perspicacious" meant, but he did not know how to convey this to her, whether she would make too much of his doing so. The moment passed, and after it had, he regretted not speaking up, and so he said in a rush, "I know what 'perspicacious' means."

She chuckled. "I want to show you something."

They stood, and she unlocked the door and opened it slowly. The television was loud, but still she held a finger to her lips as they tiptoed farther down the hallway to the next room, which was very dark. Aaron felt Mrs. Bergstrom's hand on his arm, pushing him inside, into the darkness; he sensed her beside him, heard the door shutting, then locking, her hand fluttering against the wall like a moth, and then the light came on.

They were in the bathroom. He did not know what to say, nor could he look at Mrs. Bergstrom, not with the toilet there, close enough to touch, calling to mind all sorts of activities that embarrassed him greatly. She took a flashlight from a cupboard and said, "Come," and she crouched beside the toilet and looked up at him sternly, making it clear that she expected him to join her there on the floor beside it, and so he did.

"Do you see it?" she asked, shining the flashlight on the floor around the toilet's base, even though the overhead light was bright enough to make the flashlight redundant. He studied the floor, taking in dirt and small bits of toilet paper and a few tightly coiled gray hairs that he knew were pubic hairs. The sight of them made his throat constrict, made him gasp for air, but Mrs. Bergstrom heard this as the gasp of discovery. "Do you see it?" she asked again in an excited whisper.

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He felt thoroughly miserable. "See what?"

"The urine," Mrs. Bergstrom replied, her voice low and urgent, like that of a mother disclosing the name of her favorite child. "Every time Father comes in here, I find it all over the floor. I have to come in right after him and clean."

"Maybe he can't help it," Aaron said.

"I don't mind cleaning it up," said Mrs. Bergstrom angrily. Then, after a moment, she added, "It's the way he acts when I do—telling me that I'm crazy, that I'm imaging things."

She leaned forward then, dropping to all fours, her face hovering above the toilet bowl as though she were about to drink from it or bob for apples, and Aaron looked away, studying instead the pattern that the linoleum made, trying to make sense of where the lines ended and began.

"Yes," he said finally. "I see it."

Mrs. Bergstrom gave a low, growling laugh. "Help me up," she said, extending her arm as though inviting him to admire a new watch, and Aaron stood, took her arm, and supported her as she struggled to her feet. He wanted desperately to wash his hands, but he thought that doing so, even asking permission to do so, would be regarded, somehow, as impolite.

"My mother needs me," he said instead, and Mrs. Bergstrom unlocked the door, and they went back down the hallway and into the living room, where Mr. Bergstrom still sat beneath the afghan watching the news.

"Were you any help?" he asked Aaron, shouting over the television.

"Not much," said Mrs. Bergstrom, answering for him, and the Bergstroms chuckled while he bent to put on his shoes.

"Goodnight then," Aaron said.

"Yes," said the Bergstroms. Aaron switched off their porch light, which had been on all this time, and stepped out into the darkness, closing their door behind him. As when he arrived, he paused to peer through the picture window at the Bergstroms, who sat huddled beneath the afghan again, collapsing in on each other like melting snowmen. He tried to assign a word to what he saw, to what he felt, but he did not know the word to describe the way that the Bergstroms sat on their sofa, an afghan and a dead son between them, or the dull ache of his heart.