TERRANCE MANNING, JR.

Protecting the Pit

My brothers and I were at the top of the yard when we heard the sound of gravel and dirt crunching beneath the tires of some old, rusted-out pickup as it barreled down our driveway. It was mid-summer, mid-afternoon, and early enough that we knew it wasn't Dad, who worked late those summer evenings welding at the shop. Mom was inside sleeping, and since she never had visitors, we grabbed our spears—the tall, hand-carved sticks we'd sharpened with kitchen knives by the shed out back—and stampeded down the hill toward the strangers in the truck. We were naked, as always. And we were dirty, screaming "get the fuck off our property," as we charged, raising our spears above our heads and growling and flipping the finger.

It was 1990, and I was four. Chris and Jonny were five and three.

We beat on the side of the truck. "Leave, motherfuckers!"

The men peered through the windshield as if they'd accidentally driven to some strange corner of the earth where children became warriors and fought naked with sticks.

The driver rolled his window down a little. He had a thick, dark mustache like our dad, a mullet that disappeared into the back of his brown-and-yellow flannel. He smiled under his giant aviator sunglasses. "Where's your old man, little dudes?"

But we didn't answer; we assaulted his truck. We kicked and punched the doors. We wound our spears back like bats and smacked the hood.

The men only laughed. They didn't stop, either. Not even when the engine sputtered and clunked into reverse, and the truck roared backward down the drive. Or as we chased naked through a cloud of dust screaming "run, pussies" until they disappeared around the bend and reemerged a moment later across the Duquesne Bridge.

We were living on the southeast side of Pittsburgh, in McKeesport.

The city was a panoramic sprawl down the Youghiogheny and Monongahela Rivers, past the steel-mill sheds, the trolley tracks, and the open-faced boiler of the hospital. There were burned-out houses and abandoned mansions from the forties, when steel was king in the city. Empty shells of buildings, which were once the mighty National Tube, sat quietly along the riverbanks, as if waiting, always, to be great

Photographs courtesy of the author

again. And on summer days, the wind brought the smell of PAT-bus exhaust, Pizza Hut, and Clairton coking gas from upriver, blasting brick streets with it. But you couldn't beat the view, my dad always insisted, or the thundering sound of cars roaring up Fifth Avenue, the throttle of a Harley shifting into third across the Duquesne Bridge. Couldn't beat the way the moonlight turned Appalachian valley sides into silhouettes or river water into milky twilight mirrors that, on the right night, could make even a mill town feel infinite and mysterious, as if full of ancient secrets.

Highland Grove, where we lived, was a small, dead-end neighborhood atop a hill that overlooked Homestead and the rest of McKeesport. And our "property" was a separated patch off Oriole Street, where the pavement stopped, and a dirt road rolled out into our yard: the Monongahela River side of the hill.

We had two houses.

First, there was the "Brick House" (a kitchen/living room combo with a bedroom and a basement we weren't allowed to see), but we had to abandon the place, Dad said, when the foundation got weak, and the city came and boarded up the windows.

We moved across the yard into the "White House," which was smaller, but had a strong foundation and big potential. Dad had plans for it: a giant deck, a second story, a fallout shelter he'd dig directly into the hill. Though, that was spoiled too, he told us, when Mom stabbed a hundred-watt bulb in a forty-watt lamp and burned the house to the ground.

But before all that, before we left mid-winter having salvaged only a portion of our stuff from the fire, my brothers and I had a strict mission to protect the place with our lives.

Mom was tired from having three boys in a row. She needed rest. She told us so every day: that she was going to bed, and if we bothered her, or knocked on the door, she'd come out and smack our fucking teeth in. And Dad was busy working to pay for the house, while trying, in the meantime, to keep us fed, since my brothers and I were always hungry; we devoured all the food from the fridge, snapped back all the microwave rice and pancakes and ravioli. "Getting stronger," he told us, "every day." Becoming *badasses*. *Little warriors*. "Kicking so much ass," he said, "I need more fuel to feed the monsters."

So while he was making money for fuel, our job was to keep an eye on the house, to protect it from our enemies, like the city, or the cops, or the always-mysterious but foreboding IRS.

The night we chased off the men, Mom locked Dad out. "Let his drunk ass sleep in the cold," she said, spitting on the porch before she slammed the door.

Later, he just slipped through the kitchen window.

I could hear him coming in, busting a dish in the sink as he stumbled over the counter. I could hear Mom's footsteps, too, stomping as she shouted that she'd been "stuck with them all day," that she was "exhausted," and "sick," and, "One morning, I swear, I'll just be gone."

Dad only laughed. He told her, "Get the fuck off my nerves," before he came in the bedroom and yanked away our blanket. "Wake up. Let's go. Let's move, move, move."

He held a brown bag in his hands as he marched us into the living room and lined us up along the wall—the way he usually would when we were in trouble—and made us salute him.

"Couple boys drop by the house today?"

We pinned our eyes to the floor.

His boots were half-untied; he still wore his welding greens. I could smell him in the dark, the ground steel, the weld smoke and cigarettes mixed with that warm, humming scent of "Hard-ass Soda" he used to drink down at Bear's every night after work.

The men were his buddies from the shop. They'd come by for some day drinking, but found us instead. "Some maniac dudes," they'd told him. "Some killers."

They swore that they were stoned, that they'd envisioned us attacking—these children so surreal and brutal. They laughed about it. *How rad,* they chanted. How typical that Terry Manning would've raised a pack of wolves, since Terry was a wolf himself. Anyone who knew Dad knew he was quick to blow up or punch or wrestle a guy to the street. He never hesitated; he *freaked*. Which is how he used to describe himself: "I was a freak. A fucking animal." My uncles said he beat a guy's head in at the movie theater once, with an ax handle, just for picking on their cousins. *He shouldn't have fucked with the Freak*.

But that night, we weren't in trouble. Dad didn't freak. He opened his brown bag and revealed to us the clementines he bought on his way home. "For my boys," he told us, shelling them out to each of us. "Go on and eat." And he smiled. "Yinz did good today."

We'd held down the fort.

What if it had been some weirdos, or kidnappers? What if it hadn't been his friends? We'd shown that we were fearless the way Dad was fearless. So we bashed our teeth into the pungent surface of the clementines, destroying this reward he'd brought to honor us. We tore the skin off and gulped the sweet fruit from our sticky palms. Then Dad shook his boots off and opened an Iron City. "I'm proud," he said, watching us. "I didn't get suckers for kids." He took a long, thirsty drink before he leaned back on the couch to sleep. "God gave me fighters."

And what mattered more?

Fighter meant *tough*, and we looked to be tough in everything. In dares to punch the glass out of windows or jump from a tree branch to the ground, where we placed couch cushions and garbage bags to break our fall. We looked for it in "sissy tests," holding hot knives to our skin for as long as we could, or ramming our knuckles into brick until one of us relented. And on television, on those days Mom fell asleep watching soaps, and we'd flick on *Renegade* or *MacGyver*, savoring every punch or every ingenious invention MacGyver used to escape another impossible situation. All the toys we had and shows we watched were divided by the same simple binary: good versus evil. *RoboCop* and *Ghost Busters*, *Ninja Turtles*, *G.I. Joe*. For thirty straight minutes, I could disappear into every race to reverse Dr. Mindbender's nightmare schemes, or teleport to Cobra Mountain to destroy the MASS device before it blew up Earth.

Sometimes, I pretended my brothers and I were members of the American Heroes, and our property was our headquarters—code-named, "The Pit." Though, I constantly changed who was Grid Iron, or who got to be Mainframe, or Recondo, Dad was always Duke. And those nights he'd come home stinking like beer and cigarettes and waking us up banging shit around the kitchen or punching walls, I knew Cobra forces had captured him, put him under mind control, and that it wasn't Dad or even Duke tearing down the hall, but Serpentor, the Cobra King.

When Dad didn't come home one night, Mom sent us to Bear's to find him. "Let his fucking kids come and catch him," she said as we left.

But for me, we were marching on the mountain, an extraction mission to save him from the enemy lair, where they tortured him for info, or practiced manipulation and mind games to transform him.

For Mom, we pretended we didn't want to go, moaning "please, don't make us" and "let us sleep," though we got outside and jetted down the dirt road. Bear's was just a block away, and when we saw those neon lights hanging crookedly over the door, we sprinted. Because inside, it was always the same: Dad's buddies cheered, picked us up, and smacked our backs. They dumped dimes onto the bar for us to play the pinball and lotto-numbers machines. Dad hugged us and yelled for everyone to come and see his boys, sliding Pepsis across the bar, as he chugged his draft.

"Mummy sent us down," Chris told him. "Said to tell you: *get home*." And Dad and his buddies fell apart laughing.

"The other night, I wake up," Dad said, "and she's smacking me over the head with a frying pan." He was cracking up. "I took the thing and chased her ass around the house!"

A fucking madman, his buddies sang. *A maniac*. All terms of endearment for Dad, the hero, it seemed, of Bear's dark, sticky-floored underworld. His buddies loved to tell my brothers and me stories: how Dad carried a holding tank on his shoulders once—clear across the shop—how Dad was a black belt in karate, *a second degree*, and at work, he'd jump kick the catwalk nearly ten feet above.

Dad had told them how, growing up, Pap—the three-tours-in-Vietnam hero—had raised him "military style." How his adolescence was defined by strict authority and closely observed rules and regulations. Every morning: *shit, shower, and shave*. Every night: *don't be late*. Show respect. Be strong—never weak. Rules by which Dad and his siblings, of course, had no problem abiding. Rules by which Dad raised us, too.

My brothers and I did push-ups every night. Sit-ups. We did pull-ups in the doorway. We marched in the kitchen and saluted Dad, always, when we finished. Though the marching only happened those nights he'd come home as Cobra King, deciding, suddenly, that we needed to be stronger faster. We needed to be tougher and punished. So we'd line up to get whooped for whatever it was Mom had said we'd done that day. Then, on other nights, we'd wake up to the sound of the radio blasting in the kitchen. Mellencamp's "China Girl" or Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark," and Dad would burst into our bedroom, smelling like Windsor and cigarettes. He'd pick us up to dance and tell us he loved us, and we were his blood, and he'd protect us with his life.

That night we left the bar, my brothers and I chased behind him as he stumbled laughing up the street. And I pretended we were heroes, too. We'd accomplished our mission: extracting Dad from Bear's. We'd saved him, and were bringing him home, now, where he'd sleep off the Cobra control, and be himself again tomorrow.

Some mornings, Mom was up before us making toast with peanut butter and jelly and pointing the remote toward the TV in the living room to search for cartoons. Then others, she'd be wearing that too-long, stretched-out tee with the kittens on the front, locking herself in her bedroom and only opening her door to demand a glass of water or a blanket from the cabinet.

I was five, and she was twenty-four, but I remember how young she looked then—how different from my brothers and me. She had jet-black hair and pale skin that, when the two met, could make her face look a ghostly white. Though she flushed easily—when she laughed or was pissed or overwhelmed—and her cheeks and forehead would burn with red. My brothers and I didn't have her look. She had a perfectly straight nose, soft cheeks, and blue eyes that were watery and bright like a sunny

sky, while we were the tripled image of Dad: little, hard-nosed, thin-cheeked, brown-eyed boys with olive complexions.

Mom used to call us his minions.

I was always standing with my foot perched on my knee—*like a pelican*, Mom would say—and if she walked by, she'd smack it down, telling me that Dad did the same thing, that he stood the same way, and the image made her sick.

If she didn't feel like talking, she'd lie on the couch watching commercials for hours. Or she'd stare out the window into our muddy yard. When we whined about waiting on her, she'd remind us of everything she did: the home-cooked dinners, the clean clothes, and warm baths. How it exhausted her. She'd call us *ungrateful brats*, and we'd say *sorry, sorry*, as we fetched her medicine and pillows because—we thought—it was our duty to repay her for raising us.

Besides, we could take care of ourselves. That was Mom's greatest gift: self-sufficiency. When she slept, we raided the pantry for chips; we made salami sandwiches; we nuked whatever frozen leftovers from the night before; we fed Pepsi, Mom's cat, and Buzz, Dad's dog, though the two were always chasing each other around the house and knocking shit off the shelves, and Mom would scream and make us throw them outside.

Then, we'd roam all day.

Our neighbors kept to themselves. If we were near the top of the yard, they'd wave. Maybe even smile. But they knew not to bother us, because we warred with the ones who did. Like Agnes, the old woman who stared at us from her window until we scribbled out a death threat in crayon and dumped it in her mailbox.

"Too many weirdos out there," Mom always said. "Looking to kill or steal." Unlike Dad, who loved his friends and family and his buddies at the bar, Mom didn't like people. She didn't trust them. She said everybody wanted something from somebody, that people were evil, and the trick was to figure them out before they figured you.

Though some still managed to infiltrate The Pit. Like Mom's great Aunt Linda, along with her thin, elderly husband, who walked slowly up our dirt road one sunny afternoon, as if they'd appeared from the dust. Mom's aunt pinched our cheeks and said our names wrong. *Terrance*, she kept calling me, but it sounded like *Tare-ons*, which made me and my brothers laugh our asses off and Chris stand behind her when she wasn't looking and hump the air to make us laugh again and my mother turn red and threaten to beat the shit out of us.

Yet, this was when Mom had been "studying" with Jehovah's Witnesses. And some days, when we were cussing and punching at each

other, she didn't threaten. She tilted her head, instead, and laughed. "They're so energetic," she'd say.

I'm unsure, even now, if my mother was always religious, if she grew up going to church or identifying with some denomination. But as far as I remember, she's at least always been curious. Maybe some inclination toward the afterlife, or God. I'm not even sure when the witnesses started coming, or why. But I know that the sight of them in their suits as they stumbled down our dirt yard those Saturday mornings, wiping their shoes off on the porch, had become a familiar one. My brothers and I would watch from a tree, or the broken-out window of the abandoned house on the edge of our property, yelling "Fah-Q!" as loud as we could, before ducking out of sight. Or we'd drop our pants and run naked past them, singing "Butt naked is…the way to. Go. Oh," to the rhythm of Jonny Cougar's "Cherry Bomb," praying Mom was too embarrassed to chase us around the yard with her giant wooden spoon.

Sometimes, we'd hide in the bed of Dad's broken-down, '49 Chevy dump truck in the backyard. It's where we went when we'd stolen Dad's cigarettes, or rolled cinderblocks down the hill toward cars on the highway. Where Pete, Chris's best friend, who was a giant compared to us, used to bring us toy guns and *Playboy*s from his dad's dresser drawer. Chris would run off with Pete to the Highland Grove Deli, where they stole candy and cans of Pepsi, and they'd bring it all back to the truck gloating and offering Jonny and me small sips of Pepsi from their palms.

One day, behind the dump truck, T.J. Watson (another kid from the neighborhood), whipped Jonny in the eye with an ivy stick. Sliced the skin beneath the brow, and Jonny bled so much I thought he'd lost his eye.

Dad was furious. "The fuck'd yinz let him go for?" he asked later. He said the next time we saw T.J. to catch him by the throat. "And don't stop hitting, either."

Mom disagreed. She called Dad *violent* and a *maniac*—which he liked. "You're damn right, I'm a maniac," he said.

But Mom was voting for "structure."

She said that we were idle, and idle boys grew up to be lowlifes. "Is that what you want?" she asked. "To grow up and be lowlifes?"

"No, ma'am," we whined.

She told us that her "study" with the witnesses had given her meaning. A feeling that she mattered. "And you boys need meaningfulness," she said. She was sure of that. "You boys need religion."

So she slapped chicken nuggets, ketchup, and a half gallon of Turner's on the coffee table those Saturdays and made us listen to her conversations: Armageddon, being saved, how Dad's "habit" of smoking and drinking was a disgusting one.

It always seemed to turn to Dad. How she hated when he drank or when he'd come home buzzed and mean. And she never stuck up for him. She'd just agree. She'd say she hated the smell of cigarettes. She hated the sound of his music. If she hadn't demanded our silence, or threatened our teeth, I would've defended him. I would've said that he was busy making money to build a bigger house, and that while they were walking around in nice suits and nice shoes, drinking people's milk, Dad was wearing weld-burned jeans and rusty shirts, so he could spend his money for fuel to feed the monsters.

Used to make me sick.

Especially those times they'd ask, "Are all their clothes this ratty?" or "They always this dirty?" Or this smelly. This "melancholy," which I thought was Mellencamp, and took, instead, as a compliment—as if we were always looking so "Mellencamp" during conversations. Though my memory of the witnesses could be distorted; it's hard to tell now. An insulting line or two recorded by a self-conscious kid mixed with my dad's retelling, the way he repeated *their clothes, their clothes*, with such a condescending, horrible tone: there's a possibility that I've made them worse. It might've been my mother doing most of the talking and condescending. It's hard to trust the memory of feeling, of doubt, or anger, or shame. I can only trust my memory of how it ended. It's as clear to me as that morning in May: Dad in the garden; Mom mixing powder milk in the kitchen; she and the witnesses talking about the house, how small it was, how "unfit for children"; the sudden image of Dad running past the window.

He burst into the kitchen screaming, "Get the fuck out."

Stunned, the witnesses didn't move. They stared. So Dad smacked the counter. "Get. The fuck. Out." Then he flipped the table.

I still remember fear in their faces, the way they cowered away as they would from a growling, rabid dog. They must've thought they were about to be beaten to death. My brothers and I started laughing. We couldn't help it. Something like vindication, I guess, that had made us laugh. Or the drunken feeling of power in rage. Or maybe it was the way they looked shrunken on our kitchen floor. But the more we laughed, the more it frightened them, and the more they feared, the more invigorated we became—even Dad, who let us chase the witnesses up the yard beside him. And like that, we were running after them in the sun, screaming "You pieces of shit," and "Get off our property!" as Mom hurried behind, spanking at our backs, and crying.

Later, Mom sent us to bed early.

Normally, Dad let us stay up late and watch TV: *Wings*, *Twin Peaks*. Even *Unsolved Mysteries*, our favorite—the hypnotic sound of Robert Stack's smoky voice whispering about a missing girl, or some sighting of a UFO in a small town in the middle of nowhere. Some nights, I'd have nightmares. Or I wouldn't sleep—every noise a ghost, every glimmering light an alien coming after me. I never admitted it to my brothers, though. I only laughed when Chris made noises in the dark, pretending to be a spirit. I'd disguise my voice and growl "I'm the bloody-face monster! I'm here to eat your brains," to make him laugh, too.

Other nights, we'd pretend to sleep. But the walls were thin. We heard Mom and Dad's voices with uncanny precision. So we'd stuff our hands in our armpits, making fart noises until one of us broke. Or we'd take turns playing dance roulette in the middle of the bedroom, fully aware that if Mom or Dad walked in and busted one of us dancing, they'd drag us across the room and whip our asses red with the belt.

The night Dad freaked on the witnesses, though, my brothers and I danced in the green glow of our night-light anyway, doing the mountain climb and lawnmower as Dad's voice boomed down the hall. "I'll knock him off the horse he rode in on." Fading in and out between rooms. And Mom: "Oh, Mr. Tough Guy. Always beating people up."

Chris stopped dancing to listen. Then he turned around and pretended to be Dad. *Yeah, I fucking am,* he mouthed with Dad's voice, while doing the robot, *Give a shit if you like it or not*, which made Jonny and me dive for our pillows laughing.

Jonny peeled his shirt off and tied it around his head, flicking it over his shoulder as if it were Mom's hair. And though not as precise as Chris's, he mimicked, too: *Don't disrespect me, Terry*, while doing some dance that resembled a donkey hobbling across the room. Chris and I lay on the floor holding our stomachs as Mom's voice soared: "You had to take this from me, too? This thing? You had to steal it?" And though I understand that better now, back then, my brothers and I could only translate sounds: the heavy footsteps storming down the hall as the three of us hopped back into bed. The toilet flushing. Footsteps rattling toward the kitchen. Dad's broken sentence: "—ever fucking steal from you?"

He'd really taken the stealing thing to heart. Maybe, I'd thought, because he was such a hard worker. Earned what he had. Never stole. And he repeated, "I stole from you?" Again and again as Mom restated—"You did. You did."—to the point where it wasn't fun to mimic anymore. And Dad started smashing plates and punching walls and screaming "fucking cunt" so loud it shook the house. Then he slammed the door, and we were quiet, listening to the sound of his boots crunching as he walked down the driveway.

Sometimes, that quiet that followed was enough to hear the wind rolling in the valley, or the train along the river, some plane buzz across the sky, and I'd fall asleep. But that night, once the silence set in, and we were waiting to hear our mother crying, Jonny whispered, "Cunt."

And all of us started laughing.

No matter how late Dad stayed out, he was up for work by five. I'd hear him in the kitchen brushing his teeth, coughing. He'd hawker and spit in the sink. He'd blow his nose, zip his jacket, and a minute later, I'd smell his morning cigarette float down the hall.

On our birthdays, though, he stayed home. His thing: three days a year, he took off to spend with each of us.

So every May 24, the two of us would stop up at the beer distributor in North Versailles, where he used to work, and I'd get Wild Bill's snuff and a Turner's Tea, and we'd go to the duck pond in Renzi to feed the ducks.

On my sixth birthday, we sat on a bench by the water—Dad smoking, me stuffing jerky beneath my lips until they hurt.

Dad listened to my stories about cartoons and games, and I listened to his about Mom, how smart she was—*a straight-A student*. How sure he was that we'd grow up and have her brains. And just for me—on my birthday, he said—he'd tell me secrets. Like how his Uncle Frank (who had just died from cancer) was his best friend. That Dad talked to him about anything, whether politics or girls or money, because Uncle Frank always knew the right thing, the right advice to give. How he never lied to Uncle Frank, and Uncle Frank never lied to him. And I remembered how, after Uncle Frank died, Dad went crazy for weeks, staying out later, coming home madder, even crying, once, in front of us—as if he'd lost his own father. So I nodded when he talked about Uncle Frank. I threw food out to the ducks.

And I told Dad secrets, too.

Like how, on those days Mom slept late, my brothers and I would sneak off over the hillside toward the Mon where we watched the smoke dump from Edgar Thompson's stacks, and we'd say, "Check it out. Check the clouds out!" Or at night, when the mill lights lit the sky, I imagined it was a secret city beside the river. I'd imagine that if I made it to the heart of the city, there might be a treasure waiting there, or a place that was better than where we lived. And in the summer, I convinced Jonny to come with me, wading deer beds and barge peers just to find it, though we never did, because we were afraid to cross the tracks, so we popped out of the brush instead and mooned every car

along the highway, laughing and pinching at each other's naked asses as we ran away.

And though Dad spit his drink out laughing, I was telling him the truth, a way of saying that I didn't lie to him either. That I was incapable of it.

Though, that was a lie.

Because when we left the duck pond, we ended up at Olympia shopping center, where they held a flea market in the back lot. I raced from booth to booth, looking for the two-dollar, three-and-a-half-inch G.I. Joes with the gum band in the gut.

"For being good," Dad said before he bought me one.

And I thought, that year alone, I'd thrown a brick at Jonny's face. I smashed a lightbulb with a broom and cut my cheek, needed stitches. Jonny shit on the floor to make us laugh. Chris jumped his bike off the garage, split his head open on a nail. We stabbed at each other with knives. We fist fought and wrestled. And just that spring, when Mom was asleep, the three of us found a six-pack in the fridge, some Marlboros, and a box of matches and decided to hide up in the attic drinking and smoking.

Dad had come home and found the hatch open. He crawled up the ladder, and there we were: passed out on the insulation beside half-drunk cans of beer and a shoebox with dead matches and cigarette butts inside.

So at the flea market, I gave him a look, almost asking if I'd really been "good," or if, like lying, I was incapable of that, too. But Dad didn't let me. Or I didn't let me.

"Well," he said. "I haven't found you drunk in a while." And he shoved me, laughing, as he pulled some dollar bills from his pocket and paid the vendor.

It was the middle of summer when Chris came up with the idea to build an outpost. "Any great fort has a lookout," he told Jonny and me. "So why shouldn't The Pit?"

We had rooftops, abandoned houses, but nowhere to see people coming. If we had a place that was high, a place protected, our line of sight would be illuminated. Chris's solution: put the foot-deep, plastic baby pool in a tree.

We all agreed—it was genius.

We dragged it to the top of the yard, picked a lanky tree on the edge of the property, and climbed. First, we wedged it between branches, kicking the bottom with our feet to make it fit, but when we piled inside, the pool slipped and tilted, and we were laughing as we tumbled out.

"Needs nails," Chris said.

So we raided Dad's workbench in the basement, dumping roofing nails, sixteen-pennies, and screws into a cup. We brought duct tape, rope. We hammered every branch, wrapped the trunk with tape, and hung rope for a contractible ladder. When we finished, we brought up a radio, some blankets, and pillows. Chris even lugged his BB gun on his shoulder. Our mission: stake out the property. Wait for T.J. Watson to come walking from his school bus, and shoot him.

But T.J. never showed.

Instead, our neighbor, Joey Graziani, a young Italian guy whose backyard butted against ours, came outside and yelled, "Cut that trash from my tree."

"Fuck you, wop," Chris said. We were Italian—on Dad's side. We had giant dinners with our giant family where everybody was always smoking and swearing and calling each other dago and wop, so for Chris, it rolled off the tongue. But Graziani was infuriated.

"I'll rip your friggin' heads off," he screamed.

"Get bent," we told him. "Go suck dick." We flipped him the finger. Pulled our asses out and mooned him.

"Bunch of friggin' pigs," he said. "All of you. Lowlifes. Making the neighborhood look like shit." Then he spit at us. So I spit, too, a hawker that landed squarely on his bare, sweaty chest. He ran at the tree, trying to climb, but Chris grabbed the BB gun, pumped it up, and started snapping shots off.

Graziani ran away so fast, you'd have thought there were bullets in the gun. We climbed down laughing, ran into the house, and shook Mom awake. "He's trying to beat us up!"

"Who?"

"He called us lowlifes."

"Who?" But before we could say Graziani, he was in the yard again—still shirtless, but red-faced with a bat in his hand.

Mom blew out the kitchen door. "What's the matter with you?" she screamed, running to the edge of the yard. "What wimp fights children? What wimp brings a bat?"

I could tell Joey's pride was wrecked, because he dropped the bat like hot metal, yelling at my mother that he'd called the police, that we'd shot him with a gun. "Bunch of trash," he was screaming. "You're all a bunch of trash."

When the police came, Mom was fired up. We watched her from the deck, where we lay on our bellies, hiding.

"Go arrest his ass," she said. "He held a bat to me. He came after my children." And though we couldn't hear what the police were saying,

Mom's face grew redder and redder as she demanded that they quit giving her *attitude*. "I don't deserve to be treated this way," she kept saying, her teeth nearly biting at them the way they did when she was angry. "I'm a citizen. I have rights." Then she was shoving them. And they were yanking her arms behind her back, cuffing her, and pushing her against the squad car.

Chris ran into the house and grabbed the gun.

"Don't," I said. I'm not even sure why. Maybe instinct. Maybe fear. Maybe even a six year old can see the difference between firing BBs at the neighbor or at the cops. Maybe, despite whatever games I imagined, or how hard I thought I was, I could always see reality. Chris ignored me anyway, as he would always ignore me in times like these, because he was the oldest. He was our leader. And, even then, he was capricious. He made split-second, emotional decisions. He was unswayable. Unmovable. He pumped the gun up, and started shooting the police.

Luckily, it was a BB gun. Luckily, we were too far away. It didn't even reach. And after some time in the back of the car, they let Mom go. They said that they only wanted to contain her. They wanted to calm her down. And issuing a warning, they said the next time someone would be arrested.

That night, Dad lined us up in the kitchen and beat us with a three-foot stick of one-by-four left over from one of his unfinished construction projects.

"Can't go fucking shooting people," he said, whacking. He sent us to the bedroom, where he grounded us. Then he went next door to talk to Graziani, who "smart-mouthed" the entire time, until Dad choked him out on his porch, promising that if he spit at us, or grabbed a bat and threatened us, he'd come back and rack his head in with a crowbar.

At home, we cheered for that. We cheered for the *Freak*. Because that's what we'd wanted to do. That was power. To bring a guy to his knees. To threaten.

And Dad was right—we couldn't go shooting people.

Instead, in the weeks that followed, we decided to have Pete knock on T.J.'s door and ask him to come outside. When he did, we'd ambush him.

T.J. was tall, but as he came out his back door, Chris flung up from his knees and blasted him, half earshot, half head, and T.J. jetted sideways off the porch, stumbling for the street.

Jonny and I were waiting. We had the longest, thickest ivy sticks we could find. On the way there, we'd sliced the air in front of us with vicious precision, fueled by the whizzing, bee-hive sound it made from

side to side. On the porch, we crouched behind Chris, prepared—after Chris sucker punched T.J.—to slash the kid across the face the way he'd done to Jonny.

But after that first hit, T.J. was off. He was in the street. He knew what was happening, and he was scared, which alone was enough to make me feel strong. But still, we chased, yelling for him to stop, as if he might actually do that.

Pete splintered off quick, keeling over after the first block. Then, even Jonny stopped, the need for revenge not enough to power him forward. So Chris and I pushed, side by side, gaining on T.J., who looked back occasionally to find us coming closer.

I was cutting and hacking at the air with the stick as I ran, hoping that T.J. could hear it, hoping he could nearly feel it, the way you feel someone following you up the steps in the dark and run for the top. I wanted so badly to reach him and to hurt him, that I pulled ahead of even Chris. I came so close I could feel it in my fingertips, and in my teeth, the feeling of hitting, of bringing him to his knees, welting his skin, breaking it. Something inside of me said that it was for Jonny, and all that was intrinsic in me whispered to protect, to fight, because if I couldn't then, I never would—a fear that bred anger that bred speed. But I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't catch him. And we spent whatever energy we had left running back to The Pit, where, it seemed, I was always running back to.

It was the week before Christmas '93 when the house burned down. By then, we were already almost gone. Dad had gathered up some money, the rest of what he'd had from when he wrecked his cousin's El Camino—when he tore his leg up and nearly lost it. We didn't even know it, but he'd put a payment on a new house in a new neighborhood. He had plans to move. And as for The Pit, he'd given up.

When I ask my dad about the white house, about how it caught on fire, it's always that same story: Mom stuck a hundred-watt bulb in a forty-watt lamp and burned it down. But she, of course, denies it. She blames evil forces. "The Devil did it." Or "demons." Even good forces: "It was God's will." Promising always, "He brings fire on the sinners."

My family often jokes that it was a neighbor, or one of the many people who hated us, one of the many people we'd fought or terrorized. That it could've been anyone with a gas can and a grudge. Could've been Graziani trying to burn out the infestation he believed us to be. Or Agnes's kids, after we'd threatened her with crayon. Or T.J., who Chris caught at the end of the summer in the alley behind Connelly's Towing. T.J. was walking home from school. Chris and Pete cornered him. Chris

stabbed him in the leg with a screwdriver. It only cut him, though, and Chris was so young, he didn't get in trouble. The police seemed less angry and more concerned he'd turn out to be a psychopath. They gave him the opportunity to write a letter of apology to T.J. So Chris sat down at the kitchen table that night and wrote *Fuck you, Pussy* over and over, even as Mom began to cry, and Dad whooped his ass and sent him to bed. Chris wouldn't give in. He wouldn't say sorry.

Back then, I used to envy that kind of hate.

Back then, I used to think that to hate that hard meant to fight hard. I used to think that what made me strong was hate. So I carefully protected it—for the neighbors we warred with, for anyone who called us dirty or pigs, for T.J. and Graziani, even for my mom, when she slept or chased us around beating the hell out of us. Or for Dad, the Cobra King. I let it open, inflating as a breath before you scream.

My last memory in that house is from the winter that it burned, when Buzz, the dog, accidentally broke Pepsi's neck.

We came inside and found Buzz lying in the corner, shoving Pepsi around with his nose, only lightly, as if she was pretending to sleep and might actually wake up and run from him again.

Dad buried the cat in the yard, and Mom wouldn't stop crying. Even when Dad left for Bear's. Or when he came home again before dusk already drunk. She cried. She told Dad that it was his fault. She called it *his* dog. She said he was a violent, evil man. And so was *his* dog. So were *his* sons. And we listened, this time, as he hit her. We didn't mimic or dance. We didn't laugh. On those nights, we knew to lie quietly, pretending to sleep. I knew to pretend I couldn't hear it: Mom throwing shit; Mom screaming; Dad breaking whatever he could reach; the muffled, thumping sound of human hitting human.

I remember Chris shushing Jonny and me with his finger, stealing us away. "Let's go," he said. "Let's go to the lookout." Where we'd be safe and protected as we watched from the highest point in the yard for our enemies.

We dragged blankets through the bedroom window, sneaking off so slowly it was like we'd floated there. I lifted myself over the side of the swimming pool and covered up next to my brothers. From there, our view was illuminated: The Pit before dark. The frozen dirt driveway. The backhoe Dad had borrowed to finish his addition. The dump truck. The house against the purple horizon. Edgar Thomson, my secret city alive with light across the Mon, where the train shuttled in and out and smoke rose from the mill stacks like clouds running desperately for the sky.

I read somewhere once that the more polluted the air is in a city, the more beautiful its sunsets. The rays of light are distorted in the invis-

ible, toxic fog, causing it to change colors—red, purple, orange, and pink, all watery like a kaleidoscope.

I love that: the idea that in ugliness, you might find beauty. Though maybe it's the other way around—and all beautiful things are built from ugliness. But I like to think we can choose which way we experience it.

When my brothers and I were defending The Pit, we'd never lived anywhere else. We thought that we'd been given a gift: a house, a dirt yard. And we protected that property as we would the buried, unreachable parts of ourselves.

We were great defenders of dust.

Part of me wonders now if it was Dad who started the fire, maybe to burn away the proof that had been The Pit, all its ugly face and ugly memories.

Part of me doesn't give a shit.

Because when I think of it now, I don't think of that empty lot that scars the Highland Grove hillside today. I think of it that evening from the swimming pool in the tree, where we couldn't hear my mother smacking at Dad with a frying pan, or him taking it from her and chasing her around the house.

There's only the sound of the train horn roaring from McKeesport. The smell of the Monongahela River in that cold, winter air. And the image of our house, a silhouette, but with a thin, sunny glow around its edges—as if I could already see it burning. As if, like fire, it was lifting toward the sun. And with it, an uncertainty, a question of who or what we were protecting in the first place. And an answer: that it didn't matter. Not then, not yet. Because soon, it would be dark again, and soon, we'd see nothing, even from a lookout.