



BRENDAN WOLFE

## STORIES FROM THE LOST NATION

My father grew up fatherless in nearby Delmar. But his father's grandfather—who landed in Lost Nation, Iowa, after leaving Kerry in 1848 and who became, according to his esteemed son the judge, “one of the largest landholders and most successful farmers” in the area—*his* spirit seemed to whistle through these fields. The Wolfes of Lost Nation. For a hundred years they spread like quackgrass across the township, raising farms, crowding the rolls of the Democratic Party, and marrying McGinn girls, and McAndrews. And in the summer, their boys would tumble down the hill to play ball, including my dad's cousin Dave.

“He and Rich always seemed to find a game,” Dad said, pointing toward St. Patrick's, which sat squat against a cornfield, looking bored. The diamond hid just behind.

We sat there in my rental car, and I imagined Dad trudging dusty miles into town, an infielder's glove tucked under his arm.

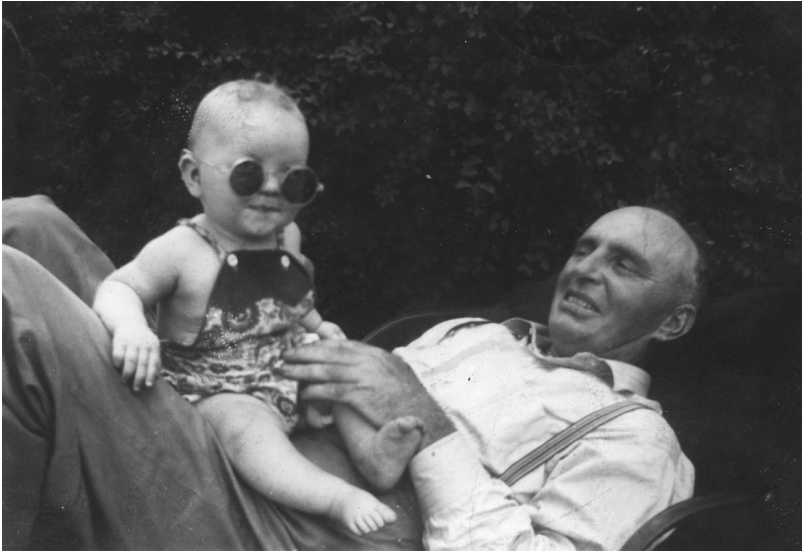
“It was easier for them,” he said, “Rich and Dave. There were already two of them, and if nobody was around, why, they could climb right back up the hill. I, on the other hand—”

And the precision of his English hung there in the car for a second, searching for something to cut. He flipped the shades down over his glasses.

His father died of colon cancer when my dad was nine months old. There's a snapshot of the two of them, just weeks before the end—Ray, in a dirty white button-down and farmer's suspenders, lying uncomfortably on his back, cradling tubby little Tommy against his knees, the baby sporting large, round sunglasses and a single shock of thin hair tufting up from his crown. Sixty-seven years later and Dad looks exactly the same, right down to the pinch of his lips. He was ironic even then.

Ray's death was appalling and slow, and when it was done, Gladys brought Pete Lassen in to work the farm, with occasional help from Dad's three older sisters. And when there wasn't work, there was ball.





Thomas Wolfe (left) and Ray Wolfe

“Swing the car around,” he said. “Dave’s farm isn’t far from here. He still owns it, you know.”

When the car left the paved road and hit gravel for the first time it felt, a little unpleasantly, like we were floating.

“Did we pass it?” he said. I slowed down, but it’s hard looking for something no longer there. The house was gone. The outbuildings were gone. The dumb cows and pissed off roosters and the foggy chunk of dry ice I remembered fearing as a kid—they were gone, too. There was a brown cornfield, and it covered everything.

“That’s the front gate there,” he said. “Now pull over, will you? I need to whizz.”

So I did, and he did. And I sat in the running car staring at my dad’s backside and his too-baggy blue jeans, a sadness coming off his slumping frame like the fog that came off that dry ice. How, I wondered, could I have once been so terrified of this man?

The welt from a belt buckle, I guess. He apologized and never did it again, and when I think of being terrified of my dad, this is not what I think of. I think of Uncle Dave.

At the beginning of each summer, Dad insisted I get a job, something on top of the paper route, something to insulate me

from the appearance of being lazy. So I would dutifully collect applications from nearby restaurants and grocery stores and then refuse to fill them out or return them.

“By the end of the week,” he’d say, “or so help me.”

And that was my cue to call Uncle Dave. He was always happy to subcontract a cornfield or two for detasseling. I hated detasseling—a task that involves tromping down mile-long rows in hundred-degree heat while reaching up and removing the plant’s soft, pollen-producing tassel, one stalk at a time. Still, I returned year after year.

On one particular afternoon, I dried up and fainted. Uncle Dave was a half-mile away at least, oblivious between his Walkman speakers while I sprawled face down in the dirt. I remember the dirt up my nostrils, and the crickets, and the rash-like cuts on my arms from the cornstalks’ sharpened leaves. And the sun. I remember the way it sucked the juice right out of me. What I remember most, though, is the smell: it was a dry, crackling smell I associate with bug-eaten leaves and clumps of sod in my hair. It’s a smell that dries out as the day wears on and the sun climbs higher. It dries out the way that the fields dry out, the way that my morale dried up, and then my body.

I remember thinking: *What the fuck am I doing?*

The answer was Uncle Dave. I would have followed him into the desert. Although he no longer worked his Lost Nation farm—instead, he taught algebra at the Catholic high school in Davenport—Uncle Dave still carted the farm around with him, its dirt lightly crusted over his entire personality. He was a big man, with blue eyes, lots of body hair, a competitive, tough-guy grip, and a bullhorn voice that always called me *honcho*. He wore Converse sneakers and denim cutoff shorts with loose white threads dangling in an uneven orbit around his legs. Like the beat-up, deep-throated Honda he drove, he gave the impression he might backfire and break down at any moment. He was tan, dirty, and constantly applying lip balm with the tip of his pinky finger. He was always sweating.

Where Dad was removed and opaque, Uncle Dave was aggressive. Uncle Dave was brutally sincere. Uncle Dave was an hour late to pick you up for your tenth straight day in the fields, and he was calling you *guy* and explaining between slurps of coffee that he had been stuck on the crapper. He was telling



you what he had for breakfast. And then he turns to your dad, towers over your dad, who's still wiping the sleep from his eyes, and only half jokes, "Tom, I've got a couple good acres for you. All you have to do is say the word."

And your dad—who's a few pounds overweight, who suffers from headaches and epilepsy and a bad back, who's in terrible shape—is forced to say, "No thanks."

Then one summer Uncle Dave was not around—busy with something else. So instead I boarded a rusted blue school bus each morning with high school boys who spit chew into Pepsi bottles. We worked the fields in teams of two, manning baskets attached to lumbering, diesel-powered tractors. We followed the same mile-long rows, only this time we didn't have to walk. Still, I hated it. I missed Uncle Dave. And while I zoned out to early R.E.M. on my headphones, the kid who shared my basket passed the time chucking freshly picked tassels at some other kid hanging from a tractor a few rows over. The sun rose. The sun sucked. And then our tractor abruptly stopped.

Our driver, a twenty-something dude who, inexplicably, wore an Italian bike racer's cap, marched down the row and commenced yelling at the kid in my basket.

"You're fired!" he screamed, citing some rule about not throwing tassels.

"You're a douchebag!" the kid screamed back, citing the bike racer's cap.

And the day ended with us talking tough in the parking lot.

First thing next morning, out of loyalty to the kid who had shared my basket but also out of disgust at the bike racer's cap, I picked a ripe, wet tassel and threw it, perfectly on target, at the driver's head.

I was fired on the spot.

No one was more surprised at this behavior than I. Generally speaking, I was terrified of authority, of belt buckles and accusations of laziness. I did what I was told, if only mostly. The principal of my elementary school, who happened to be supervising a crew in the next field over, must have sensed this, because he offered me a job with his boys, effective immediately. I imagined myself deliberately, almost thoughtfully spitting chew into a Pepsi bottle, after which I told him I could start day after tomorrow.





The next morning, then, there was no rusted blue school bus. There was just me in my PJs sitting in front of the TV when Dad finally came down the stairs and wondered what, exactly, I was doing.

Mom was at work. My sisters Bridget and Sara were off and occupied with lives of their own. It was just me and him, and you could hear the clock on the wall tick.

I nervously mentioned the first tassel, and the angry bike racer's cap, and then I mentioned the second tassel, which, in my telling, was something like a mighty blow struck for justice. I also mentioned the principal of my elementary school, who just happened to need someone to fill a spot on his crew—starting tomorrow.

Dad sighed. Dad swore. And Dad demanded I find a job until then.

“By the end of the day,” he said, “or so help me.”

“You're a douchebag!” I screamed, and burst out the front door in my pajamas and bare feet. I landed a few blocks away in Duck Creek Park, in a grove of black oak trees, seething with fear and anger and something else that had to do with the whole unseemly spectacle of it all: humiliation. The trees seemed friendly, though, and I hid out among them for the rest of the day. Eventually the sun started to droop, and what I remember most about that day is not my dad, but the absence of my dad.

When I finally came home, I made sure not to let the screen door slam.

We crunched the gravel of Route 136 east and I noticed, as I always do, the rolling, Grant Wood-ness of Clinton County. “Saying a place is flat,” writes Patricia Hampl, “is another way of pretending it's simpler than it is.” People who say that Iowa is flat are people just driving through or just visiting, people whose attention is focused on spotting 1-80 speed traps or maybe getting a writing degree. For them, it is flat in the way that maps are flat—static and one-dimensional, outside of history. With only a map, they aren't in a position to see the hills like I do. They aren't in a position to notice the exaggerated way in which they bubble up from the earth like the Indian mounds I visited as a kid on the Mississippi, or like the ancient tumuli



that pimple the Irish countryside: “The mound like a round / of earth pregnant / with fragments, bones,” writes the Welsh poet Mike Jenkins.

“There,” Dad said, pointing in the direction of a tidy, white farmhouse. We had just crossed Highway 61. “Pat fell off that silo there.”

“Jesus.”

Pat Farrell was Dad’s best friend growing up. The image of his body diving helplessly toward the earth—that’s been terrorizing me since I was little.

“Wasn’t his father—”

“Eaten by sows. That’s right,” Dad said. “He was walking through the pen and he slipped.” Then, employing that skeptical, history-teacher tone he spent thirty-five years in the classroom perfecting, he added: “Impossible to say if that’s how he died. Who knows, he might have had a heart attack. Might have been dead before he hit the mud.”

“Jesus.”

Dad had clippers on his keychain and, as was his habit when he was nervous, he began snipping away at his nails. I slowed down in front of the Farrell place.

“Mom and I were once chased by a tornado down this road,” he said. “It wasn’t too big, really, but boy it was scary, and she was taking that old Ford about as fast as she could go.”

*Snip snip.*

“Anyhow, we sped by the Farrells here, and I remember catching a glimpse of Pat standing in the front door. His face—the look on his face was confused.”

Chuckle, then *snip*.

“So?” I said.

“Oh,” he said, “we made it home just fine. And after it passed, I went looking for damage. Couldn’t find any, except for one narrow section of fence. It was like the twister had just tiptoed through.”

*Snip snip.*

“Unbelievable,” he said, with a hint of fear in his voice.

I grew up in Davenport, Iowa—a city, not a town, an honest-to-god city where cars honk and police sirens wail, where houses are robbed (although Mom says only Republicans lock their doors), and where, when I was a kid, a local chiropractor



murdered his wife with a billiard ball, chainsawed her body into pieces, and threw the lot into the Mississippi River. I read about it in the papers I delivered, and yet Dr. James Klindt never struck me as unbelievable. What was unbelievable was the clammy outside twister-fueled emptiness of my dad's Clinton County.

That was real.

When I was six or seven, Dad moved out of his and Mom's bedroom and down the hall into mine. I, in turn, moved downstairs into the cold, wood-paneled, only partially finished basement, sleeping for months on the spiny fold-out couch next to the grumbling dehumidifier. I was scared of everything down there. I was especially scared of thunderstorms, which sounded to me like Soviet tanks rolling into Gomorrah. (Combine in a kid's head the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, the Cold War, and frequent television images of nuclear annihilation, and I suppose that these are the sorts of metaphors you'll get.) On one particularly cloud-crossed night, Dad unhappily slipped on a pair of shorts and marched me back downstairs, out the back door, and into the back yard. We were both instantly bone-soaked, and the sky flared up like we were being bombed.

"See?" he said. "Nothing to be afraid of."

I might have started to cry.

Once inside again, he sat me down at the kitchen table to drip-dry. He grabbed a beer out of the fridge and started some hot chocolate. This had been what he referred to as "the Navy Way" of teaching, a term he insisted on using despite never having been in the Navy. His father had joined, only to end up scrubbing decks Stateside during the Great War. Dad, on the other hand, because of his epilepsy, had been 4-F during Vietnam. Regardless, he knowingly termed any total-immersion, sink-or-swim method as the Navy Way, and more than once he threatened to use it in order to teach me how to swim.

On this night, though, the Navy Way had accomplished little more than guaranteeing me a cold and a nervous tic. Dad, meanwhile, punched a hole in his can of Pabst and began telling stories about the farm. His stories were, to me, slightly menacing, like the bleating sheep at Uncle Dave's. They were full of chores and being outside. He once told about how, on an evening when the rest of the family was out, his older sister Mary





K threw open the front door, spread some fake blood around, and pretended she had been hacked to death.

“You shouldn’t have left the door unlocked,” she protested to her trembling mother.

This is the sort of Capote-like vision I carried around of life on the farm.

On this night he told me another story, this one about a thunderstorm. He described the wind and the way it swept over the county like the back of God’s hand. “Nothing to stop it,” he said.

Because his own father had died, it was Dad’s job, come morning, to check on the downed power lines. “I picked up just the one,” he said.

And here—after a meaningful silence punctuated by a long slurp of his beer—Dad delivered up the first piece of advice I can ever recall receiving. He said: “Never test a wire with your palm.”

And that was it.

He had picked up that wire and been savagely electrocuted. He had picked it up palm down, so that the surging current forced his fingers into a tight fist he couldn’t for the life of him release. He was forced to wait until Mary K noticed him missing, shut down the power, and called for a doctor.

I sat there wet and wild-eyed, Dad’s fist glowing in my brain like a mushroom cloud. The doctors speculated that this incident might have been the cause of his epilepsy, and for the first time I began to understand why he carried a pill case in his shirt pocket. I remember the familiar noise it made when he walked and the expert way his thick hands pried it open—the way he regularly popped several tablets at a time into his puckered mouth, sans water.

These, of course, are just stories. There’s a whole subset of stories about Uncle Dave—not surprisingly, they’re known in the family as “Uncle Dave stories”—my favorite of which has him visiting his in-laws in Pasadena, California. A combination of boredom and alarm over his wife’s credit card use drives Uncle Dave through the doors of a local temp agency and he ends up working a factory job for the balance of his trip. That’s Uncle Dave. My dad, on the other hand, is more difficult to







pin down. This is how he prefers it, I think. One of his favorite phrases is “none of your business,” although there’s more to it than that. To have a conversation with him is like playing tennis with someone who, instead of volleying the ball back to you, catches it, turns it around in his hand, and then stuffs it in his pocket.

You stand there flummoxed.

“I just finished a book you’d like,” you might say. “It’s about Sherman’s March.”

A short silence. Then: “I’ve been leafleting for a friend of mine who’s running for state senate. She’s a nice enough lady, but over the weekend she attacked her opponent, which is bad enough. I *detest* negative advertising. But this attack was personal. Really beyond the pale. So I rounded up all the literature she had given me to distribute, even took my yard sign down, and I drove it all straight down to her headquarters. Then I wrote a letter to the paper telling her that her strategy stinks and may very well backfire, and if it does, she would richly deserve it.”

To which you might respond: “Wow.”

“I haven’t heard anything from her since.”

“Are you still going to vote for her?”

“None of your business.”

I never know quite where I stand in stories such as these. There is always something missing. In an earlier draft of this essay, I wrote that “I imagined the ghost of my dad trudging dusty miles” into Lost Nation, but for obvious reasons, that didn’t make sense. I wasn’t imagining a ghost; I was imagining my dad. Maybe, though, there has always been something of the ghost about him, the way he eludes me.

Which is why I turn to stories in the first place.

Stories are like maps. They are the opposite of flat. They are like the hills of Clinton County, to be climbed in your shiny blue rental car on a rare trip home, so that you can see for miles, across a brownish-yellow quilt of corn and the silhouettes of silos. These people who say that Iowa is flat—*How could you have lived in a place without any hills?*—they must be thinking of Nebraska. Iowa isn’t flat, it’s open. What makes it seem flat, though, is the way you can drive and feel the openness surround you, wrap around you, almost crowd you. I always feel more



comfortable once we climb the hill. From above I can see where things go.

Up here, I know where I stand.

Take that story about detasseling. Not until I started writing did I realize that it was a story about courage and cowardice. When I was a kid, my parents sometimes babysat my cousins Kate and John. They were hellions, those two. They ran around grass-stained and barefoot and paid zero attention to my dad's rules. My dad yelled and yelled and they just laughed and laughed. Not until many years later, as my mom dragged on a Marlboro and remembered those days like a dirty joke, did it occur to me how such behavior placed in stark relief my own absolute compliance. Put another way: I hit that dude with a ripe wet tassel. I did it on purpose, and in my world that was an act of courage. Of course, the story ends in cowardice, with me—fifteen years old, for crying out loud—hiding in the woods. I may have been barefoot, but I was no Kate or John.

And how did my dad spend that day? He could have come looking, I suppose, or he could have turned on the Cubs. Rick Sutcliffe might have been starting that afternoon, with Jody Davis behind the plate. Sutcliffe was so deliberate on the mound, you honestly could get up and grab another beer from the fridge between his pitches. Is that what Dad did? I don't know. The story doesn't say.

Like a good map, though, it does begin to connect the dots: Fear is everywhere, but it doesn't just separate us. It binds us, like in the biblical story.

Fist, wire. Father, son.

Not all of it's true, obviously. Or at least it's obvious to me. No story can be all true, and few stories, for that matter, are all lies.

I never called my dad a douchebag. No doubt I *wanted* to call him a douchebag, but I'm not sure that I've ever actually sworn around him, let alone at him. The reverse, I'm pretty sure, is also true. When annoyed, he might go so far as to say "fiddlesticks."

But maybe this kind of lie serves a different kind of truth—a story-truth where courage and cowardice strike together and



cast a spark. It seemed true for a moment, and it helped to feed the ghost.

So what *did* I say to him?  
None of your business.

In his 1998 collection of essays, *The Lie of the Land*, the Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole directs his readers to *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (1982), a complex and theoretical work in which the Polish-French-American mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot asks a seemingly simple question: "How long is the coast of Britain?" The closer one investigates this question, however, the less simple it becomes. "The coast is obviously not smooth and regular," O'Toole writes.

It goes in and out in bays and estuaries and promontories and capes. If you measure it at one hundred miles to an inch, all of these irregularities appear. But if you measure it at twenty miles to an inch, new bays open up on the coastlines of promontories and new promontories jut out from the sides of bays. When you measure these as well, the coastline gets longer. At a mile to an inch it is even longer . . . and so on, until you crawl around on your hands and knees measuring the bumps on the side of each rock that makes up the coast. The more accurately you measure it, the more uncertain it becomes.

The truth of my family is different when I coast down off the hill. The bumps begin to add up. This is country where it is easy to get lost, even for my dad and my aunts, for people who grew up here and whose people once settled here. I once rode in the car with Dad and Mary K on a trip back—this was just a couple years before Mary K died, and her hair was white and Einsteinish and her grin typically elvish; nobody could ever giggle with more high-pitched ambiguity than Mary K—and they spent the entire fifty-minute ride debating the efficacy of various routes to and fro, although "debate" is the wrong word. They weren't arguing; this was more a ritual, a mapping out of Clinton County in conversation the way that Joyce is said to have mapped out Dublin in *Ulysses*.



“You always took the Such-and-Such Road, didn’t you?”

“Oh no”—and that voice of hers would dance up two or three octaves—“goodness no. Now Tom, the only way to get to So-and-So’s was to take That Other Road.”

“But didn’t That Other Road go west?”

“Did it?”

And so on, with rhetorical stops in DeWitt, Delmar, and Maquoketa. In Toronto and Lost Nation, Petersville, and Charlotte—pronounced shar-LOT. When Dad turned off 61 to find the “old homestead,” as he likes to put it, there was the obligatory mention of Mr. McClimon, that cigar-chomping Irish farmer who, back in 1926 or thereabouts, refused to sell his land to the government, which was trying to extend the highway. The line on the map was forced to loop around him.

And the conversation also began to loop, confusing even Dad and Mary K. It was as if the geography of Clinton County refused to sit still for them. On another trip back, a few years earlier, we actually did get lost, hopelessly lost. We were headed for a McGinn family reunion at the home of Father Ed Botkin, another of Dad’s cousins, and we ended up stopping at a Casey’s for gas and advice. My aunt and uncle and two cars full of cousins happened to pull in at the same time, retreating from the opposite direction. We hadn’t planned it, but we became a caravan and were all lost together.

Stories are like maps. They are the opposite of simple. As Mandelbrot suggested, the more carefully you study them—zooming in on perfectly straight lines until they begin to waver and then finally to squiggle—the less they’re able to perform their original function. They don’t answer questions; they only ask them.

Here, for instance, is a story from thirty thousand feet: Ray Wolfe, a Lost Nation farmer, finds himself smitten with young, black-haired Gladys McGinn. He is so smitten, in fact, that in his hurry to ride over to see her, he’s willing, literally, to cut through his neighbors’ wire fences.

Now here’s the same story, only how my dad the history teacher tells it:

My parents first met, I believe, at a dance in DeWitt.  
According to my Uncle Dan McGinn, one of Mom’s



older brothers and a man who loved to talk but was not above embellishing a story if it pleased him, Dad would ride his horse to Petersville to see Mom, sometimes taking shortcuts through fields by cutting the fence wires (a detail I really find hard to accept). In those days, it wasn't all that easy to get around. Henry Ford's Model T was popular, but the roads were terrible, a family would have only one car, and the car would often be jacked up with the tires removed during the long winter months. That's why Dad probably did ride his horse to see her, but I don't know about that wire cutting story.

That was from a letter Dad wrote to my cousin Mary Katherine sometime after her mother, Mary K, died. She had asked him for some stories, and he e-mailed his response to all fourteen of us first cousins. "I've been meaning to respond to your note for a long time now," he began, "but I've found it hard to do—largely, I think, because it's hard to write about Mom, and I never knew Dad. I'll give it a try though." And he does, and it's poignant in a way that is poignant for someone who has of his dad only stories—not even stories, but skeletons of stories—to then interrogate them until they crumble at his feet.

What has he now?

Anyway, it's not clear what about the wire-cutting story Dad doesn't accept. He explains why it's plausible for Ray to have visited Gladys on horseback, and in the process he gives us mud-slogged winter roads and jacked-up Model Ts. (Those cars are so much more vivid here than Ray.) But as for what makes the wire cutting implausible, he doesn't say. Perhaps he has heard other stories that contradict the notion of his father as a petty vandal or an overly enthusiastic suitor. Or, as he seems to suggest, perhaps he's reacting not to his father but to Uncle Dan, an Irish-born bullshitter and well-to-do farmer who paid for my dad's college education. I imagine Uncle Dan was something of a father figure to Dad, and he may have been disappointed when Dad didn't return from St. Ambrose to take over the farm. (I know that some of Dad's other uncles felt that way and perhaps Uncle Dan did, too.) And now maybe Dad is disappointed—or even angry; I don't think I'm crazy to sense anger here—that Uncle Dan is playing the bullshitter again.



*Quit telling stories, I imagine my dad saying.  
Fiddlesticks.  
Snip snip.*

So it is with my family. In 1911, my great-great uncle Patrick B. Wolfe, a politician and district court judge and the first Wolfe born in America, published two thick, solemn-looking volumes titled *Wolfe's History of Clinton County*. In 1975, my dad carefully typed up and photocopied his own twelve-page treatise, "Origin of the Species, or Whatever Happened to Old What's-His-Name?" Both documents, as far as I can tell, are heavily larded with lies, half-truths, and humorous untruths. In introducing his older brother, for instance, Judge Wolfe goes on about the "Emerald Isle, far-famed in song and story," while my dad quips that one ought to "picture a choir of angels with trumpets blaring" when reading such prose. Dad then goes on to suggest that Judge Wolfe's father was a horse thief and that Dad's own grandfather was a Marxist who "attended his agrarian pursuits in spurts which he called 'five year plans.' His favorite tools were the hammer and sickle."

About Ray he writes:

He joined the Navy in World War I. He caught no Germans, but he did catch the flu. In 1925 he caught Gladys McGinn of Petersville. (She was only twenty-two at the time, but that didn't stop her from continually telling her own children that no one with a grain of sense marries under thirty. To gently remind her of her own age in 1925 only brought about a foot stomping and the response, "That was different.")

On a recent Saturday, I spent about an hour digging through cardboard boxes to find a copy of this piece, which I've always loved and about which my dad, who typed it up for a family reunion, now feels embarrassed. "It was too flip," he says. "I was reading a lot of Richard Armour back then. I don't think everyone got the joke." What I found instead was an old black-and-white family portrait of Gladys and Ray with her parents, John and Kathrine, and her innumerable siblings, in-laws, nieces, and nephews, all assembled on the front porch of the McGinn family home in Petersville. Snot-nosed Mary K is right up front, picking her teeth, while Gladys stands just to the right



The McGinn family

of her mother—mischievous-looking and pencil-shaped, with a V-neck dress and a severe part in her hair. Ray, meanwhile, is mostly hidden. He's behind and to the right, his face round, his head mostly bald. I can see just enough of him to see my father. Any more, I think, and the resemblance would be lost.

Scratch that. Dad wasn't angry at Uncle Dan for playing the bullshitter again. After all, he could have accepted that story *prima facie*. He could have accepted it as a gift in the way he accepted, for instance, his college tuition. But he didn't. (Just as he didn't—and I don't think it's crazy to sense a parallel here—accept his uncles' invitation to return to the farm.) I think that perhaps there was something too frightening about the opportunity to know his dad, even a little bit. Perhaps he just couldn't bear to imagine Ray elbowing his way out of the back of that black-and-white crowd of in-laws and down the porch steps, past Mary K in her Sunday best—his wire clippers firmly in hand.

*Tommy!* he might say, and look his son square in the eye.

*But here's another problem: this isn't really my dirt and it's not my land.*

I wrote that line during graduate school, as part of an essay titled "Lost in Clinton County." It was well received—the essay,

I mean—in County Cork of all places, but the reaction back home was more ambiguous. At a very writerly soirée she was hosting, a classmate of mine put her hand on my shoulder and, with an exaggerated smile, told me she loved it.

Just *loved* it.

As this was the sort of gathering where we nibbled on *Bûche de Chèvre* and spoke admiringly of Barthes, I assumed she was making fun of me. What I had meant to say in the essay was that my father and the landscape had conflated: I knew them both, and I absolutely didn't know them. It's possible, I suppose, that she understood this, even appreciated it. But my advisor had just e-mailed to say that my ambitious, book-length expansion of "Lost" was dead on arrival. "You don't have a thesis here, in my view," she wrote. "There's no development of thought or feeling that I can perceive." In the meantime, someone also had accused me (briefly) of lifting the bit about detasseling.

I was insecure, in other words.

Can I claim the land? *I can't even claim my own stories!*

It had been four years since my dad left a note on the kitchen table for Mom to find the next morning. It contained his new address and phone number and that was all.

Earlier that summer, Mom had driven to Iowa City. It was the summer of the Great Flood, of storms that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

"He's been drinking again," she whispered. "Really going at it this time." She pulled another cigarette from her purse.

"You're going to have to talk to him."

"Oh, I got him good just a couple of days ago." She took a full drag, and I could hear the soft burn of the tobacco. "He didn't come home until past one-thirty. And when he tried to stumble through the dining room, he broke one of my antique lamps. Can you believe that man? I just screamed at him."

Inhale.

"Oh, I got him good. I took all of his liquor from the cabinet and put it on the counter next to a note that said, 'Here, really go to it this time.'"

Exhale.

For weeks after he left, his friends—colleagues he saw every day at school—continued to call the house and ask for him.

"He's not here," she would say. But it was in vain. It was as



if he *were* still there, lounging in his favorite living-room chair. Grading papers. Watching the Cubs.

When they kept calling, she just hung up on them.

Then, four years later, just before Christmas and a few months after that writerly *soirée*, Dad suffered a massive heart attack while running to make a connection in the St. Louis airport. It was perfect in a way: he was neither here nor there. Instead, he was entubed and oxygenated and surrounded by various blinking, beeping machines, deep inside the awful nowhere-ness of some local hospital. When my sister Bridget and I first arrived, he was white and his eyes were closed. Bridget was an army officer and a nurse not far removed from duty in Bosnia; her default was alpha. She immediately began ordering people around and consulting with the ICU doctors about the possibility of delirium tremens. They talked about another surgery. And I stood in the corner watching.

So much came rushing into my mind right then, all of it beginning to take order. The tassel and the trees. So help me. The belt buckle. And I remembered how a year earlier, Aunt Sara, my dad's oldest sister, had invited us to Christmas dinner. She was always willing to take him in when no one else would, and we spent that evening drinking whiskey and beer and wine and carving through her famous prime rib.

"Tell me about your dad," I said, and my cousin Kate, this time wearing shoes, kicked me under the table. But Sara, who by now was drunk, began to talk. She was fourteen when he began to die, and eventually they put him up in the attic.

"He smelled like rotting fish," she said.

One day they came and pulled her out of school. It must have been a highly dramatic moment, leaving the building like that in the middle of the day, all of her friends watching. Fifty-six years later and there were still tears.

Now, here was *my* dramatic moment. As I stood in the corner watching, as no-nonsense Bridget walked through the survival percentages with men in blue scrubs, I was tempted to mourn. I was tempted—but I didn't. Instead, I began to read this scene as though it were in the pages of my writing. It was a habit I had cultivated over the years—living my life through the filter of my words.

Here is my dad, I thought. And here are the tubes.

This was the development my thesis required.

I imagined two equally plausible storylines unfolding. Dad lives, and we bundle him into the car and drive him home to his one-bedroom with its library books, pizza boxes, and laminated “Poblacht Na hÉireann” poster taped to the wall. Uncle Dave calls regularly and I run to the store on weekends. Or, alternatively, Dad dies, and we bundle him into the car and drive him to Clinton County, where Father Ed Botkin intones “the Lamb of God” so that his breath hangs in the air, frozen. Kate pours me another glass of Jameson’s and Uncle Dave, in a dark suit, grips my hand.

Of course, something’s always missing in stories like these. You don’t know where you stand. You hear only the faint bleeps of machines coming from far out of nowhere. But here’s another problem: this isn’t really my life and it’s not my story. What’s missing is me.

And my dad.

Now here’s a true story:

After passing the Farrells’, we continued on to Delmar, population 520. We passed the tiny jail of rough-hewn stone and bars on the door, and we passed the infamous front-lawn tree stump that must be four to five feet in diameter. Then, after doubling back on 136, we arrived at St. Patrick’s, the town’s Catholic cemetery. Dad takes me here every time I’m home; it’s part of what Bridget calls the Cemetery Tour.

As in, “Oh Christ. The cemeteries again. Brendan, our family is obsessed with death.”

Which is true. When Dad and Mary K weren’t mapping out the roads of Clinton County, they were discussing who had died, or who was about to. They were either going to a funeral or coming from one. They were planning the next tour. At my wedding reception, the cousins huddled around a cell phone and called Mary K, who was too sick to attend. Kate, dressed in black, took a gulp of her beer and shouted, “Mary K, I’m wearing the dress I bought for your funeral!”

Mary K giggled.

A few weeks later, she was lying in bed reading the obituary page when she called out to Uncle John. She had found a photo of a woman whose hair was also Einstein-ish, whose grin was also elvish.



Wolfe

“I’m already dead!” she said, and days later it was true.

I turned left and onto the dirt path that wended through St. Patrick’s. Dad grabbed his jacket from the backseat and set off at an amble, into a field of names.

*Foley Flatley Dolan Shea Costello Quinlan Lassen Schrader Hanrahan Strutzel O’Meara McMullen Goodall Grandick McMeel Reilly McMahan Norton McAuley Fitzpatrick Rotzpatrick McClimon Donahue Burke Callahan Farrell—*

“Over here,” Dad said.

—McGinn Wolfe.

In an elegant row stood the headstones of his people: grandparents John and Kathrine, parents Ray and Gladys, sister Sara. And there, just in front of the stones, was an additional, rectangular marker, low to the ground; it read “Thomas A. Wolfe.”

Dad knelt down to brush some leaves off of it and struggled to regain his feet.

“Help me back up, will you?” he said, and I grabbed his arm.

For a moment he felt real.

