

Bessie died in her sleep one spring morning in 1954. Gus did the same less than a year later. Zorrie was the only beneficiary named in his will. She took the proceeds from the sale of the house in Forest, made a donation to the church, then bought herself twenty acres of fallow land that Rupert Duff had put up for sale. She hired extra help and immediately put the field under cultivation. Two months after she had purchased it, bright green sprouts were pushing up through the black furrows.

As a general rule, Zorrie set to work before her help arrived and didn't stop until after they'd left. With Gus and Bessie no longer around to drop by and check up on her, she pushed even harder. More than once she fell asleep sitting on the tractor and woke later shivering and covered with mosquito bites. She grew so lean for a time that Ruby asked whenever she saw her if she was all right. Ruby had her own worries.

Virgil, always so eloquent, had fallen slowly into silence and was often found out wandering the woods and fields, unable to remember where he was. Ruby had tried putting reminder notes in his pockets, but it didn't help. She found them scattered throughout the house, across the yard, floating in the birdbath, under his pillow. If no one was watching him, he wandered off and didn't know the way home.

Zorrie saw him one day as she was plowing the back field. She had been daydreaming, not doing her best job, wondering what Lester would think of the mess she was making, when she spotted Virgil standing motionless by a maple stump near the ditch. She couldn't convince him to get on the tractor, so she climbed down, took him by the elbow, and led him home. Noah, who was trimming a hickory in his east woods, walked out across the field to meet them. He thanked Zorrie and then put his hand on Virgil's shoulder. Watching them walk away together, it struck Zorrie that the silence that rode the air between them was a comfortable one. For just a moment, she thought how nice it would be to walk in their company, or, better, to just float quietly between them, caught on a forward-tending gust of air. Then she turned around, went back to her tractor, and climbed on.

In the months after Harold's death, after Gus and Bessie had at her insistence moved back to Forest, when Harold seemed to be standing just around every corner she turned, and the repeated realization that he wasn't standing anywhere, not even on French, Dutch, or English soil, let alone somewhere on the farm, set her to pacing the hallways of the house for nights entire, she had thrown herself at the ever-present acreage around her with all the strength she could muster. She took to countering every thought of Harold's physical erasure with an

image, as quickly made actual, of her arms hefting a hoe, a bag of seed, a bale, a well-sharpened scythe. How the horseweed fell that first summer! She would speak about Harold if the subject was raised but would suffer for it afterward, and did her best never to bring the ongoing fact of his absence up to herself outside the formulas of nightly prayer. The crisply chiseled tale of time told by the clocks and watches she had once helped paint faces for came to seem complicit in the agonized unfolding of her grief, so that soon the farm and the surrounding fields and the endless ark of change that enclosed them were the only timepiece whose hour strokes she could abide. Small but sure of purpose within the great mechanism of the seasons, she became a pin on a barrel of wind, a screw in a dial of sunlight, a tooth on an escape wheel of rain. The crops went in, the crops were cared for, the crops came out. The earth rested in its right season, and she with it. If the ache of Harold's absence descended on her during the quiet months, she would take a rag to it with her mind and rub.

Over the years, this approach so drastically diminished the frequency with which Zorrie thought of Harold that she eventually worried there might be some fault in it, especially because now when he was mentioned by one of her neighbors or she chanced upon an undiscovered fishing lure or belt buckle she hadn't yet learned how not to notice, the burn that had always hit her at the back of the chest was gone. This lack of any painful reaction—a lack she had so longed for—struck her, now that it had arrived, as too complete. It made her feel she had taken it all too far. You came to terms with things, but not by carrying them out to the field and burying them under the beans. Mr. Thomas had long ago told her class that “the encumbering elements of our histories must be spoken

aloud, at least in the caverns of our brains, if we wish for them to take up wings.” Remembering this as she thumbed through a volume of Longfellow at Mary Thompson’s estate sale, it occurred to Zorrie that there might be some compromise available in thinking not of Harold’s death and absence, but of him.

She dug one of his watches out of a drawer, wound and set it, wore it loose and lightly ticking as she went about her chores. She turned her mind actively to remembering in the evenings. Occasionally she would hold his picture in front of her, or let her eyes glide over one of his letters, or pick up his fishing hat or coffee mug, but usually she just sat there and eventually saw him, with a clarity that relieved her, walking across the barn lot, or standing, shoulders slumped, hands plunged deep in his pockets, head thrown back, or striding through the clover with a tire iron in his hand, or running the tractor across the open field, or slinging the rifle over his shoulder and heading for the woods. It was not uncommon in these moments that other images—some directly related, others related only in that they belonged to Zorrie’s past—interposed themselves: the towheaded Kelly twins working a cat’s cradle in the school yard, Zorrie’s aunt frowning as she canned peaches, Gus getting angry over cards, a young couple at a long-ago Fourth of July picnic looking hungrily into each other’s eyes, Mr. Thomas walking through the woods, pointing at leaves with the same ruler he used in the classroom, Janie’s hand reaching for the powder-filmed bowl of red hots next to her basket of dials, Noah biting into an apple or reading aloud from one of Opal’s letters or staring out across the fields. Sounds, smells, and tastes came and attached

themselves to the pictures she saw: old leaves rustling as she and Harold moved through the underbrush in search of a picnic spot, the big smell of Mrs. Thomas and her cohort on a blazing August afternoon, the mineral-sweet taste of warm blackberries picked off the vines along the back fence. During daylight hours, when she was bent over the spinach or feeding the chickens or going over some point of business with Lester, she called herself foolish or self-indulgent for dwelling on the past. But more and more, as the air grew cooler, evening came on, and the night, with Harold's watch wound to neatly mark it, stretched ahead, she became aware that the past, what her aunt had called "nothing but a tinker's circus of two-bit shadows," and what she had worked so long to forget, was where she felt most at ease.

One night, though, after she had spent hours revisiting the first days of her courtship with Harold, when she had been meant to look over equipment prospectuses, she woke with a start from a half sleep and saw Harold leaning in the doorway, looking at her. She shut her eyes, and when she opened them he was gone, but then the air beside her ear grew cold and she shivered and she heard Harold say, "I'm hungry, Zorrie. It's been years since I ate anything. You've got to give me some food."

That was a dream, Zorrie thought. I wasn't awake yet. But her ear still felt like it had spent time in the icebox, and there was a damp smell to the air. Harold's watch had stopped, but instead of rewinding it, she yanked it off her wrist and, all but gasping, tossed it back in the drawer. Later, after she had gotten her breathing back to normal, and her mind had set the door of her world more or less back on its

hinges, it struck her that, worse than getting carried away, she was losing control. Complicating matters was the fact that she couldn't decide if the prospect felt agreeable or unpleasant or both.

She thought about it for days. She was short with Lester and sent Earl off in search of a set of scales she told him was in the barn but that, in fact, she had taken to the dump years before. She saw Lloyd Duff at the bank and didn't recognize him at first because the wrinkled and crook-shouldered figure who stood endorsing a check on the other side of the lobby looked almost nothing like the image of the younger man she had seen chuckling in a group with Harold during one of her recent reveries. When he looked up and said, "Well, there's our farming gal, Zorrie," it was a long moment before she was able to answer, and on her way out she stumbled on the lintel, flailed her arms for balance, and almost fell into a hedge. "You're not decrepit yet, so quit acting like it," she said aloud to herself.

But the next day she forgot to feed the chickens, burned her breakfast, made another mess of plowing, and dreamed that night about flightless jays and silences and floating through the air. She woke disoriented and sweating in an early light laced by dream residue and thought of Virgil and Noah. The next morning, shivering as she walked along the fencerows and negotiated jagged bean stubble, she went to look for them. She found Noah, saw in hand, in the branches of the same hickory he had been trimming the day before. Virgil, wrapped in a bright blue scarf and a winter coat, sat on a low stool under an enormous black oak.

"You're getting this tree into shape," she said.

“It’s either that or lose it,” said Noah.

“You need any help hauling branches?”

“Just going to pile them up and light a match.”

“I could help pile.”

“I bet you got your own work.”

“I do.”

Noah leaned into the tree, his wrinkled brown coveralls blending in with the trunk’s dark crenellations. He looked down at her, then closed his eyes, lifted a gloved hand to his mouth, caught his breath a little, pulled a gulp of air into his lungs, and sneezed.

“Bless you,” said Zorrie.

“Virgil never liked that,” said Noah. “He says that blessing a sneeze is like taking up a shotgun to attend to a fly. He’s got a German word he likes to say when there’s a sneeze. Well, when he was saying things.”

Zorrie looked at Virgil, who appeared to be dozing.

“He’s not asleep,” Noah said.

Zorrie nodded.

“He hears us. He’s hearing me right now. I just don’t know where my voice goes when it gets in past his ear. Maybe all the words fall and just keep falling.”

Zorrie said maybe that was so.

“I wonder what it’s like to have words falling through your head.”

“Pleasant, I hope.”

Noah looked over at Virgil, shook his head, said he wasn’t sure. He said he thought maybe it was words that tripped a person up in the first place. Words in free fall couldn’t be a good thing, especially if, as in Virgil’s case, they were falling

through so much quiet, when before there'd been so much talk.

Zorrie didn't say anything. A heavy truck went by on the road. Small mechanical sounds drifted across the fields. Noah coughed and asked Zorrie if she would like him to climb down from the tree.

Yes, I would, Zorrie thought. That is exactly what I would like. She thought of everything she'd planned to say as she walked around the house, waiting for the birds to start up: that the past seemed to have sprung itself on her just when she thought she was clear of it; that all she'd wanted was to think about Harold a little, bring him back to her, and then the whole old ugly clockworks had come crashing down on her in a jumble of gears and springs; that she wanted to plop herself onto the cold, crumpled grass near the two of them and just sit there and not move; that there were dark roses and pigs and dead husbands and throat-torn fish in her whirlwind of a head.

She sighed. "No," she said. "I should get back. Thank you. I was just out taking a turn."

As she walked away, she stepped on a wet branch hidden under a gathering of oak leaves. The surprisingly loud snap made her start and sent a pair of nuthatches flicking off through the gray air around the black oak. Virgil didn't seem to notice.

"Next I'll step in a well," she said, waving over her shoulder and hurrying off.

"Don't do that, Zorrie Underwood," Noah said.

Her aunt had disparaged the concept of hope with such caustic efficiency that Zorrie had naturally learned to discount what had ever been an important part of her nature. If she had done her best to seal up the spring during those early years

and then again after Harold's death, hope had nonetheless often found a way to seep out and surprise her, bow graciously, extend its hand, and ask her to dance. It had done so when she had knocked on the door in Jefferson and found Mr. Thomas with his plums and iced tea and albums standing before her, and it had done so when Gus had decided he liked the way she whistled, and spoke to Bessie about their spare room. Hope had also, certainly, flapped its feathery wings for her when a man with a sandwich to share had told her about jobs to be had in Ottawa. She had occasion to think of this later that day when she opened her mailbox and saw that a postcard had been set to lean in the shadows against its rusty wall. It took her a moment to recognize the picture, which showed a train car on what looked like an iron bridge. On the back was printed "Chicago's Famous 'L.'" There was a hole at the top where the tack had held it to the wall. The tack had been brass-colored. Zorrie could remember touching at its smooth head with her finger more than a few times. As she read and reread the note scrawled in Janie's riotously looping hand, she understood that she was holding one of those rare objects brought into being by a hope you didn't know you still had.

*Took me a while but I finally got up there. How about you,
Ghost Girl? You take a ride on your own L yet?*

Zorrie planned it out early the next morning—she would drive herself north to the great city, where she could walk along Michigan Avenue and gaze upon the giant buildings and look in the shop windows and step into Marshall Field's and ride a screaming train through the sky. Then she would head down to Ottawa and see Janie and Marie and tell them