

rust.

It begins as it will end: with a rust-red pickup and the rolling wheat fields of Wyoming.

You arrived maybe a month ago, though it could be either less or more. It's been difficult to tell time recently. Summer in this seemingly barren place is suffocating, but the suffocation is the good kind. The kind that, as Jamie would say, isn't tainted by what sometimes feels like half a gallon of water stuffed up the Devil's asshole, along with every man, woman, child and animal residing in the Bible Belt—the place you call home. No, this suffocation is dry and dusty, scratching throats everywhere raw until the taste of blood is more prominent than the afterthought of lemonade on your tongue. What you're feeling now isn't tainted with what once was, but with what will be.

And damn, isn't that beautiful.

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The dart landed somewhere north of Nebraska, not quite crossing the state border but coming decently close to it. Jamie, your best friend since before you could remember, hopped off your bed and joined you in front of the map hanging on the wall. The coverlet she was sitting on exhales from the merciful lack of weight.

Minnesota it is, she declared, her volume lowered so she wouldn't attract the attention of your father. His gaze had begun lingering on her recently.

You shook your head, peering closer at the map. Something drew you to Wyoming—be it fate, or simply how it looked nestled among the other states, the precise amount of space it took up, all prominent edges, perpendicular to the space that you took up. You knew love was out there somewhere, and you just couldn't leave it be.

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In those days, sleeping was near impossible, so you constructed a safe space in your mind to ease yourself into a sense of peace. You would imagine yourself a bird—maybe a hawk, a kestrel, or a falcon. Something with sharp talons stained with a recent kill. A fearsome predator haunting the

sky, your battle cry tearing unbridled from your beak. You'd stretch your wings to their full span as you glide over the rustling golden fields, which glow bright in the late July sun.

Up here, the heat doesn't bother you. The clouds of dust kicked up by passing trucks don't even draw your gaze. You ignore that pit in your bird-stomach and inhale your bird-breath through your bird-nose as you relish your bird-freedom. Hidden in the crop cicadas hum, the sound drowned out by wind whistling past the openings of your ears just below your sharp eyes. Beady and quick, they dart from side to side as you scan the fields for easy pickings to snatch up. Once your quarry is spotted you angle your small, lithe body in for the kill.

Waking up with a start, you remember that you have never amounted to anything past prey.

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The house, so like yours in no way that matters, stands tall and proud at the center of the field. To you it seems like a beacon, a lodestone. A soft whisper calling you home, headed by the man who welcomed you with open arms. A graveyard of metal surrounds it, broken-down farm machinery and trucks older than him. Accidents waiting to happen. He takes more care than your father ever did to tell you to be careful around there every time you go outside.

Wouldn't want you gettin' tetanus or some shit. Nasty, it is. Impossible to get rid of.

As his rust-colored chariot creeps up the dirt road, the rumble of the engine alerting you to his arrival, you remember the first time you saw the house, pulling up in his truck. You wondered if the flaking paint at the front used to be blue or green. It was so faded, so ill-maintained, that you couldn't tell anymore. You asked him this on the first night, after he showed you to the attic. But he didn't know either.

It's been a while since you've left the attic, in any case. Maybe he repainted the house in the time you've been inside. He's always coming and going, footsteps sending tremors through the earth.

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Storms never scared you as a child. If anything, you would have said your mother was the one most afraid of storms, holding you to her chest like a child holding a stuffed animal for comfort. Your father would scoff from his chair at the display from your mother, but she ignored him. She would always gather you close as the sky flashed and rumbled, as the rain pelted the windows of your house so hard you thought the glass would shatter. But that kind of violence fascinated you, drawing you in.

Back then you were unfamiliar with comforting words and gestures to soothe her anxious mind. But on the night of the biggest storm, you swore you heard voices coming from the other side of your bedroom door. His voice was among them, the loudest of all. They whispered and taunted, coerced and teased; the image of dark and dripping tendrils squeezing under the crack of the door and slithering under your blanket and up your legs pulsed in your mind's eye until you could bear it no longer. The crook of your mother's arm never looked more inviting.

The morning after, your father discovered a leak in the roof. He decided to patch it up himself. In those early days, your parents didn't have the money to have someone else fix it for them, but your father's hubris was so great that he didn't care.

The house smelled like rot for weeks.

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Downstairs, the sun-stained walls are bare. The wood warps in on itself in places, and sometimes when you pass by, you think you smell the same rot that plagued you as a child. The house was overrun with the smell then, and when you smell it now, it burrows its way into your nostrils and climbs inside your mouth, clawing its way down your throat until you're reduced to a gasping, sweaty heap on the floor.

He finds you like that one day, curled up and sobbing. When he lays his hands on you, then you understand. He isn't your father, but violence comes in many forms. He takes you in his arms and carries you up to the attic, so similar to—yet worlds apart from—the night the storm rocked your childhood home. He lays you on the floor with the reverence one would give a corpse and makes love to you all night long. Your body sings praises in response to the words he carves into your skin with each action and all you will ever know is him.

You lay there, still—the bird with the plucked feathers. The pickup’s growling engine reverberates in your useless ears and you don’t know how long it’s been since he left this time. Rust drips from your fingers and streaks up and down your body, jagged like lightning. A fly lands on your index finger. More crawl over your face, your unseeing eyes. Through the window just above your head the first rays of sun peek through, illuminating the fields below. And everything is gold.