

The Spring

Home is the place where, when you have to go
there,
They have to take you in.

—Robert Frost

Joshua Kirk pulled his workgloves off and held them in his hands; not much else needed to be done. Already the stalks had been cut, gathered and bound—the bundles tied, the fields plowed to a deep, rich brown, the beans frozen, the berries canned. Then the three of them, he and his two sons, had mended the fences, going carefully along the perimeters of the fields, straightening posts and stringing wire, digging postholes and generally setting the land to rights—until they stood together in a hollow and watched a caterpillar spin her silk amid the twigs of a broken milkweed. Such were the rites of Autumn.

Josh watched the thinness of morning hint across the sky to the east. "Here, Boss-boss-boss!" he called as he opened the gate and let the cattle out of the pen. Then he climbed, grunting, onto the top of the fence, removed his coat, cap and glasses, and set them, along with his gloves, on the post to his right. He placed his hands on the upper-most rail and snuck the heels of his boots through the lower slats of the fence. "Go on, yuh old bovine," he muttered to one of the cows. "Go git yuhself fat."

He let his eyes wander to the farmhouse, then back again to his seat by the barn. He steadied himself on the rail and looked again at the house.

At this time of year, for what little good it would do him, regret was almost like a game to him. He counted over and over in his mind, in regulated disappointment, the fourteen eggs he'd found cracked and spoiled in the chicken coop the day before, considered the paucity of the year's soybean crop,

the scant weight of a new calf, then weighed the possibility of rain. The land, tilled, drear and naked as it was, would be particularly susceptible to erosion, he felt. Maybe they shouldn't have cleared it so early; maybe they should've waited a few weeks. But the dog days of August had been so hot and dry, so windless and aromatic, that the corn had grown faster than he'd ever seen it—so fast you could hear it creak and moan at night, recovering. So they'd cut it early and let it sit at that.

"Go git on!" he called to the cattle. He grabbed his cap and glasses, leaving his jacket and workgloves there on the post behind him, and slid his spectacles onto the bridge of his nose. He brushed his hair back with his left hand, pulled his cap forward with his right, and tugged the bill across his brow, then watched the headlights of a pickup pass along the road.

Sixty years.

He rubbed his chin and traced the lights of the pickup until they vanished behind some willows.

Was he really sixty years old?

Somewhere in the dark a freight passed. Josh walked across the barnyard, crossing at the edge of the lawn, and saw his wife and sons sitting at the kitchen table. Suddenly the horn of the freight sounded long and low, filling the air with a sonorous, plaintive cry; then, as quickly as it had come, it faded and was gone. "Git on, Boss—git on!" Josh cried, this time striking the rump of a nearby bull. The bull snorted and sprang into a trot, and Josh returned to the barn as the last of the kine plodded from the pen; he shut the gate and bolted it securely behind them.

On the far side of the field dawn poked its nose like a mole amid the clumps of hoarfrost weeds. Josh gazed over the trees and located in the distance the shadows of the steelmill smokestacks. It wasn't as if he minded steelmills, he told himself, he just wished they weren't so close to his farm. But they were, and there wasn't much else he could say about it.

He leaned against the gate and ran his fingers over the corrugated aluminum.

Gazing down the cattlepath, past the silos and the empty propane tanks and the rusted harrows, he thought of the

spring. He could almost see himself kneeling in the leaves before the pool, could almost taste the water, the way it ran down his chin, how cool it felt on his lips. It'd been a long time since he drank there, and suddenly he was very thirsty. The water would be sparking and pellucid, flowing up through ferns and clay and granite, and when he leant over to drink the blood would rush to his face and his toes would curl in his boots. The water would startle him, for it stung with an unaccustomed abruptness (it was quite cold), and the excess would dribble down his chin and onto the front of his shirt.

Opening his eyes, Josh found himself standing on the ground beside the pen. Gradually the sun had drawn away the curtain of night so that now the land, though still ill-defined and disproportionate, had begun to realize itself through the initial etchings of dawn. The stars had dissipated somewhat, while the moon, sinking, had grown more and more yellow.

Josh scuffed the toe of his boot through some straw and glanced at the farmhouse.

"Oh, hell, there's scarce a sliver 'a light in the sky," he said; "they'll be in there a quarter of an hour if a minute . . ."

He stepped across the yard, past the fenceposts and the gate, and in the half-light found the trail. The cowbells sounded in the shadows as he followed their tolling. First light teased the horizon, while squirrels and chipmunks, their feet moving swifter than their hearts, scurried ahead to hide themselves amid fallen leaves or behind rocks. Josh felt his feet compress the ground; he watched the last stars flare out briefly, then dissolve. Over to his left a stream murmured in its unquiet bed. He stepped through a pile of leaves, crackling them, snapping a branch beneath his foot, and looking down to see the dew gathering on the tips of his boots, noted that with the motion of his walking the moisture would bead and fall away. Before him, wavering dimly, the shadows of the cattle trudged outward in a line. He passed one or two of them, whacking their rumps as he went by.

Off to the east daylight further began to invade the dark. The trees set themselves against the sky like crowds of great, bent tooth-picks. Josh noted the latticework of oak, sycamore

and bramble, the fine line of earth and sky, the furrowed and stilled cornfields, the rows of barbed wire fences, the few distant, flickering porchlamps. The factory smoke would rise from the stacks in a matter of minutes, there where if you were lucky the wind would blow it back to the city, there where it was all smoke anyway.

The path widened to a road after a time and ran beside a row of elms until it came to an aluminum gate marked, NO TRESPASSING! Josh unlocked the lock here, slipped the rope over the top of the post (he had to secure his land to keep the millworkers from hunting on it), shoved the gate with his body, slid in and walked it back into position. He fastened the gate with the rope and kicked it once for good measure.

"If I ever catch one of those bastards on my land again," he muttered, "I'll kill 'um and use 'um for fertilizer."

He crossed the field, his feet tracing minutely the stiff furrows, the uneven roll of the land, where there was no path now and where pebbles, branches, rocks and cowflop contested for his balance. He thrust his boots through the mulch and saw the darker forest ahead. "If those bastards ever piss in my spring, I'll string 'um up by their balls!" he said, entering the forest, feeling the warmth of the maples and their dryness beneath, walking several hundred yards until he was well into the depth of the trees, then stopping. For no apparent reason he thought of his childhood then. He remembered the trees he'd climbed as a boy—the branches and the sky and the aphids that crawled all over his arms and legs; he remembered the white farmhouse where he lived with his parents, the algaeic horse trough behind the barn, the frogs in the horse trough in summer; he thought of his old dog Felix. Here beneath the trees the earth smelled musty and damp, here it was not cold. Josh turned about and looked where he had come. It seemed far, so very far . . . he judged it to be about sixty years. He noted the fences which separated the fields into fallow and fecund. Someday he would be on the other side of the fence. It came upon him then—a sudden, cogent realization—that the light of the last stars always seemed to find the sorrow of the earth, its salty toil, its fields and barren wastes.

Morning was breaking. Josh felt his chest rise and fall, rise and fall, and heard his exhalations unsettle the air with a hush. Slowly he knelt himself on the ground, bending himself at the waist, and buried his face in the leaves. "Don't take it from me," he whispered into the soil. He dug his fingernails deeply into the leaves, pressing his forehead into the humus beneath. "Don't take it from me," he repeated. He arose silently on his knees then, rubbing the leaves over his eyelids, down his face and across his throat, and felt the moisture seep into his skin. He stood, brushed himself off, and walked deeper into the forest.

He found the stream and followed it until he came to a hill. Here, on the other side of this hill, next to a small rectangular plot about the size of two men lying side by side on the ground, was the spring.

Josh followed the stream around and, arriving at the spot, removed his cap and glasses, setting them on a log nearby, stepped out of the streambed and up the incline, and knelt himself before the pool. He inched forward on his knees until he overlooked the water. Looking down, the first thing he saw was his own face. How strange his eyes looked! were those really his eyes? No matter, he looked past them and studied the pebbles at the bottom of the pool, the black earth beneath the pebbles, and the decaying bodies of the leaves along the floor and sides of the pool. Three or four discarded crayfish shells hovered uncertainly in the water on the other side of the spring, and above and behind Josh, just coming into full light now and reflecting off the surface of the pool in a sudden display of blue and gold, was the morning sky. The light came new upon the land, shocking the air with a crystalline, a prismatic, presence.

Here where it was good. Here where it was not cold.

Josh drank long and hard, cupping his hands together before him and taking the water down his throat in hungry gulps. The excess dribbled down his chin and into the pool.

"If one of those bastards ever sets foot on my land—" he started to say, but something inside him in a shape remotely human held up its hand (didn't he know this face?) and spoke to him in a firm voice, saying "Silence!" It was his own voice—

and he was silent.

The sunlight then—like a hobo in search of a trashheap bottle—thumbed through the branches above, and plumes of breath-smoke (his own) mounted further into the sky. The earth smelled new and raw and crisp and fragrant—the fragrance of autumnal surrender—and something solid in his heart urged him homeward. “Pa!” he heard his eldest son shout into the gully; “Pa!”

He would sit in his chair tonight and tell his wife how good the water had tasted. She always listened, always said, “Yas, yas . . .”

Josh stepped down the embankment, retrieved his cap and glasses, followed the stream for a quarter-mile or so, then broke for the open field. He marched out defiantly beneath the bare trees, kicking his heels high, his knees too, and walked swiftly, purposefully across the meadow to the gate. He kicked the gate once, hollared, “Yah, Boss!”—then, feeling young and perhaps even a little reckless, scaled the gate like a child and jumped down the other side.

He called to his sons at the end of the road. “Hey you!” he shouted. They looked up momentarily, then went back to their work.

He stopped once to check a fencepost, another time to remove a log from the road, a third to slip his hands into his rear pockets, lean back and watch the sun rise—to look out for a moment over the steelmill smokestacks and then turn away from them forever.

For a while longer he would have his farm, then he would go off somewhere and die. But not even death could take it away from him. Josh saw his wife standing on the backporch step and felt a clump of soil crumble beneath his foot. Even from here he could see that she was waving him in for breakfast.

