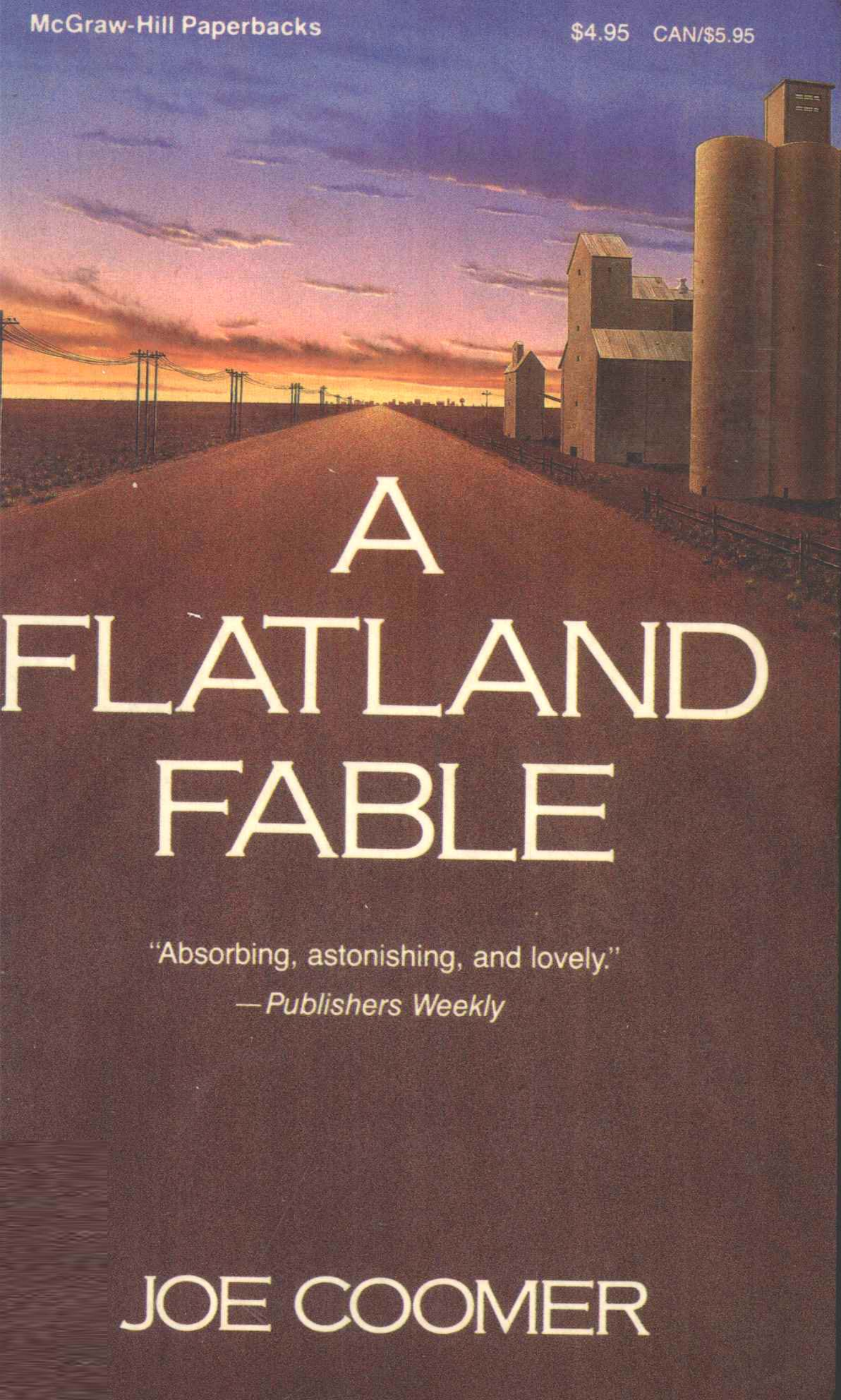


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A FLATLAND FABLE

"Absorbing, astonishing, and lovely."

—*Publishers Weekly*

JOE COOMER

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— A —
FLAT-
LAND
FABLE
—————

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY

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for Heather

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A Flatland Fable takes place during a single day in Eckley, a small flat town in the middle of a vast flat midwestern landscape. Our protagonist is Horgan, who, at 40, is waiting—waiting for life to happen to him. And in the course of this single day, it does.

“This novel establishes Coomer as one of our most talented young writers. If *A Flatland Fable* has a moral, it could be this: Even in the dullest of places, unexpected and wonderful things can happen. . . . Coomer brings Eckley to life with a loving eye for detail, an original, dry humor, and a strong sense of story and rhythm. Written to a human scale, this fable is absorbing, astonishing, and lovely.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Coomer in *Flatland*, like Larry McMurtry and John Updike in their early works, is a master of lyric brevity . . . [and] a vital new voice in American fiction. . . . The ‘truth’ Joe Coomer brings in his wonderfully crafted new novel is that there is change, surprise, evolution, and regeneration in life, even if that life is lived in a ‘far, flat place’ where nothing spectacular ever seems to happen. Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver have similar cautionary tales to tell. But even so, Coomer puts a peculiar spin on the ball, and pitches his own game. He makes a beautiful and complex thing from simple at-hand stuff.”

—*Texas Observer*

Also by Joe Coomer

The Decatur Road

Kentucky Love

The land for miles around is a level spot, flat ground. It is just waiting for something to happen. There has been an ice age, and a sea, a couple of tropical jungles, a forest or two, and so on, but now there is just the flatness with some grass, a little range brush, and an occasional rock. There is very little or nothing going on at all. A boy, maybe. A good long slow rain wouldn't hurt.

The land for miles around is a baseball field. Carry a home plate with you and you can stop anywhere, plug it in, and begin play, hit away. There are the cracks in the earth to contend with, bad hops, but also the big blue sky for the ball to rise into and drop out of. And you can run then. You can do this in the meantime, while it's still flat.

The sun comes up in the morning here. That's something. You can wait up for it. It comes up, happens, early in the morning; there's nothing to stop it; it's one of the first things, really. What it's like: like something faraway coming to your moment, like something you knew was going to happen all along, sure, but Christ, here it is.

A fly, not incessantly, but buzzing against the rusted screen of the window near your bed. A fly just waking up. And the one white sheet, because it's hot

even at night, crumpled across your brown stomach. The one fly buzzes and bangs into the screen again, and walks a little, and then buzzes off into the high, open room. And since it's morning and it's the summer and hot still, you watch him. He flies around and around the open room, under the suspended light fixture, around and around. He comes home to the screen after a while and you see there is still the morning happening outside, where it is flat.

Sometimes it is the morning, the sun, coming up from among the brush and dust in the east, and sometimes it is just the Burlington-Northern. The Northern is quicker but the sun has a more general effect. With the sun, almost every summer morning, there is an eclipse; after the greying, the subtle wearing and chafing of the edge of the earth, the edge turns orange for an instant and then brims, catches on fire: all that dry grass, hair and fur hung on barbed wire, blown grain from the long-haul trucks out on the Route, it all catches fire, just the border of the sun rimming the earth for a moment and those solar flames caught among the dryness here. People wake up early and call the Fire Department. "The whole east end of the world is on fire," they say, "and it's coming this way." The Fire Department, if he is awake, tells them he doesn't have enough water to put out the sun.

The Burlington-Northern comes west out of the night on some of the highest ground in this country. The tracks rest on a full eleven inches of gravel and crosstie. People get up on them and put their hand to their brow, like they're standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. They feel like they can see forever, till the earth bends out from underneath their stare. The train tracks come west with Route 50 and a line

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of telephone poles. Between the tracks and the road there is a ditch, in case anything should ever happen, like rain. The ditch is the very lowest place in this country. There are rumors, theories, that suggest if there was enough water in the ditch, enough to keep it running, the water would make it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, the ocean. But this would require a degree of slope almost unimaginable to most. It would require the term "downhill." Most people continue to park their trucks in neutral. Some have even gone so far as to take a glass of tap water out to the ditch and pour it in, delighting in its equidistant spread, flowing as far north, south, and west as it does east, before it is swallowed by the red dirt and dust, or taken almost momentarily and wholly up into the dry sky. "Look," the people say, pointing down at the flat earth, "isn't this the best goddamn country for baseball you ever saw?"

The sun comes up out of the brush huge and round and orange, its yellow through the earth's red dust, cool to stare at and lukewarm to the touch. It rubs you on the forehead first, the heat does, as you lean from the bed and look out. It comes up fast till it rests a foot or so above the horizon, where it's hard to look at, and hard to judge, without the earth there next to it. It moves only slowly, imperceptibly, then, through the rest of the day; no clouds to mark it by, just the open blue sky, so consistently blue it could be overcast.

Out in the red dirt, amid the morning, there is Sickopoose, the center fielder, and his mom. Sickopoose, with his back to the sun, balances on the balls of his feet and smacks his fist into the palm of his glove. His mom tosses the ball high into the air, lets it fall, and smacks a low hard line drive in Sick-

opoose's general direction. Sickopoose kicks out across the plowed field, leaps across the furrows, and dives, stretched taut, horizontal, screaming. He thuds into the earth, jackknives, crumples in the dust, and the ball, tipped, rolls along a furrow beyond him. It lies there, the ball does, dusted, but round and white and perfect in the V of the furrow, still. Sickopoose brings himself slowly to his knees, rests his open glove on his thigh, and looks at the perfect ball beyond him. Then he looks for the sun, which is still low in the morning, and gets up, throws the baseball in a high arc back to his mom. It plops and nestles into the soft dirt six inches from her foot.

You roll back into the bed from looking out the window, where the fly is frantic with the coming heat. The sun is blinding off the white siding of the house. You turn back over, crumpling the sheet, and there is your wife beside you, new and young and almost unexpected, gorgeous and fresh in the morning, hair down across her cheek and falling between her breasts. She is still asleep, the sheet across her white hip. And so you roll back over, leaning on your elbow. And the fly is gone. He must have found the hole in the screen, the hole just above the eyehook, where you put a screwdriver through once when you were locked out. Almost every screen in the house has these holes.

The chickens are up and moving around the yard, walking as if their legs were Popsicle sticks. They strut and peck cautiously around the old hen who sits on her brood under the corner of the garage. She fluffs and coddles. The rooster, a big, arrogant bird, moves center backyard and cackles, then spreads his useless wings and crows. He turns around and crows

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again and again. You sigh with him and his old hen. You had always thought that no matter how bad things got you could always fall back on the statement that you could do anything a chicken could do, and maybe do it better.

The Burlington-Northern, a little late this morning, hauls past, one hundred and eight green and yellow cars long, on its way to the Eckley Elevator in Eckley. Big trucks, carrying grain too, run alongside on the Route. And the grain—oats, wheat, rye—falls through cracks in the trailers, through the rusted seams of the cars, and falls along the Route and between the rails, and blows. The wind comes, but it doesn't rain, hasn't rained.

Witherspoon, the catcher, four-foot-eight and ninety-five pounds, a doorstop, corners a calf in the corral. He locks the calf's mother in a pen, picks up his catcher's mitt, pounds it with his calloused fist, and steps between the calf and its mother. The calf, strung, bawling, paces back and forth, looking for an opening. Witherspoon settles to his haunches, squats in the manure dust in front of the calf, pounds his mitt again, and waits. Wide-eyed the calf darts and Witherspoon shifts, half-hops to the side, a cutting horse, and jams his glove up in front of the calf's pink nose. The calf backs up and shoots for the other side, but Witherspoon sidles again, raising dust and squaring his shoulders in front of the calf. They go at it, again and again, grunting and snorting, the calf pivoting and racing for a gap and Witherspoon prancing sideways on his haunches, squatting, his mitt up, his toes bent deep into the manure, knocking down errant throws, wild pitches. Nothing will get by him. But the sun rises up over the second rail of the corral,

and from the house, Witherspoon's dad calls him in to breakfast.

You know one of the last of the long summer days has come, is coming. A dust devil twirls in the backyard, picking up feathers and straw, whips around the edge of the house, and returns and falls apart before your eyes. The fly is back too, trying to get back through the hole in the screen. You put your finger there for a moment to thwart him. You roll back into the bed, feel the muscles strain around your heart, a little twinge.

How is your dying father?

"Morning, Horgan," she says, reaching over and rubbing your belly. You remember her, almost afraid that it's not true, but yes, she's here. God.

"Hi. Morning," Horgan whispers.

"How're you feeling?" she asks, and drops her hand under the white sheet.

"I'm okay, I'm good. I think I can."

"Love you."

And Horgan, moves to her, quietly, holding your breath, in the morning.

Everything in Eckley, the center of this country, is galvanized. Things come that way. From the air the town looks like a great many chicken feeders and overturned buckets. The whole place is corrugated and bumps when you run your hand along it: roofs, water tanks and towers, the grain elevator, every windmill, every barn. In the middle of the day, sun glaring, a tin roof or door will flash at you like a shard of glass under your fingernail. But in the morning and evening the whole town is the color of the sky. Shake this town, it sounds like thunder. Let a wind come and it whistles. And the tin roofs, they're for when the rain arrives: to hear the first startling pop, and

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then the drop's slow course down the tin furrow. This town listens for rain like a bucket: mouth open, waiting.

A sweat already billowing from his forehead, Gaspar, pitcher for this evening's game, wakes up. His fingers grope for the baseball he meant to clutch all night long, and finally they find it underneath his backbone. He kicks away the sheet, rolls out, and then strips the bed, shoves the mattress to the floor, and yanks the box spring from the bed frame. It's all he can do to get it up on edge and ride it down the narrow staircase to the back door. Outside, he leans it up against the house, marks out a generous strike zone with a can of red spray paint, and then back to the house, where he dresses, picks up his bag of baseballs, tennis balls, oranges, and horseapples, an assortment, and takes his Flintstone vitamin. At the back door he adjusts the visor of his cap. He steps out, steps to the box spring, steps off the paces, makes a line in the red dirt with his toe. And he begins, the spilled bag of balls and fruit at his feet, winding up and uncoiling, zip, pop, throwing them everything he's got.

Across town the Rutley twins, right and left field, stand up close to the house, almost under the eave, and toss the hardball, hookstyle, up on the roof where they can't see it. Then listen for its tin smack and gathering roll, positioning themselves, gloves up, and fighting for the ball's fall off the roof. They manage this twenty-three times before their father raises the bedroom window, sticks his bedraggled tin head out, and yells, "You twins cut that out. It's all day before that ball game starts," and bangs the window to.

Horgan lifts himself gently out and off of her and

collapses at her side. She rolls and throws a leg over his thigh.

"That was good," she breathes.

"Right," Horgan wheezes back.

"Maybe again at lunch," she says.

"Don't know," he blows.

"Well, after supper for sure."

"Got the ball game tonight," he suggests.

"We'll see, though," she says, "after the ball game. I just can't get over the idea that anytime we do it, that time could be the baby."

Horgan's mind crawls under the bed. He knows she is going to bring up the doctor again.

"I'm going this afternoon to see the doctor. I'm late. It might already be," she says.

"You've been late ever since you got off the pill. Six times." His mind sneaks out from underneath the foot of the bed, bellies to the closet, and throws some dirty clothes over itself.

"That's something else, honey. You know what the doctor said. If I'm still not pregnant, and he'll know today, we should both go in and get ourselves checked over. It's sort of like Little League, you know, bottom of the sixth." She puts in a "ha, ha" after that last one. Then notices his mind is hiding. "But we'll talk about it after the appointment. No sense worrying ahead of having to. Right?"

"Right," Horgan affirms, sheepishly dragging a foul pair of underwear off his mind's face.

Feeb, shortstop, breaking in a new glove, looking for an unimaginable stab, dips it in the used oil drum at Phillips 66. He has only the one day, ten hours or so, to get it as soft as his own pink hand. He walks back home, his glove black and dripping on the sidewalk like a nosebleed, and since he hasn't an old

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Indian woman to gnaw on it, he steals his dad's truck keys and runs over the glove again and again, grinding gears.

Route 50 runs in one ear of Eckley and out the other. It spends no time at all there, really. There's not a blinking yellow light or even a sign that says "SLOW—ECKLEY." The highway moves straight, fast, and flat through the town, like the place isn't there at all, like it's just more dry country to get through, the same old thing. The Burlington-Northern has a single spur, to the elevator, but generally moves through pretty quickly itself. And the telephone poles, they let down a single strand, a loose thread, and keep right on going. One of these days someone is going to stop, by chance or circumstance, the world coming around, and the people here are going to pounce on him like a Messiah.

What there is in Eckley, and the reason to stop, is the Eckley Elevator, the reason the trucks and train slow down, the town's here, and the telephone even bothers to ring. It, the elevator, rises without comparison on this flat place, concrete canisters, like a whale breaching on a calm sea. The biggest thing around, taking in the least: grain—chaff, dust, and seed of all the summer and spring—gorging itself on cereal stuffs. The birds—sparrow, quail, crow—flutter and gawk about the elevator as if it were dead on the beach. The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The old woman, Miss Marian Eckley, she spends her free moments spreading poison for the birds. She moves willfully through the galvanized bins and hoppers of her elevator, under the chutes and all the way around the huge canisters, the tiny white pellets heaped in her uplifted apron, and she clucks while she casts them across the ground. A bird, descending

in slow circles out of the morning and the orange reflection off the bins, stalls and settles in front of her. It ruffles, slants its brown head, and looks at her, a deep curious pupil. And though it takes an effort, the bird far away and cautious, she tosses, gently, a few pellets its way.

How is your dying father?

It is warm now, so Horgan flips his pillow to the cool side. He looks out the window again and sees the morning is well on its way. What else could happen this day? There would be breakfast, and work, and lunch, and that, maybe, and then to see his dad, and then the ball game, and that again, perhaps, if he could, and maybe that would be all. Just so much palaver and nibbling, and that, till the day was through, waiting for a baby, waiting for his father, for a fire. Maybe it will rain. Maybe we will be rained out this evening. That's a possibility for hope.

He wishes, suddenly, that he had the authority to set her, Miss Eckley, to set her about collecting a full quart of gnat's milk. Putting his hand on the small of her back and pointing out a likely swarm, giving her a smile and nod of encouragement.

"Horgan," Kidder says again, coming out of the bathroom with a towel held tightly between her thighs so that she has to take baby duck steps, "here's your vitamin." She hands him a glass of water and a pill that reminds him of the knob on the end of a baseball bat. She's been bringing them out of the bathroom every morning for the past six months.

"I'm not seventy," he'd said the first time, "I've been doing all right," and he'd put a hurt look on his bottom lip and part of his chin. "I'm only fourteen years older than you are."

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“It’s for the baby, honey,” she’d said, “I know you’re not even forty-one yet. You’re real good. It’s for the baby. I take one too.” And she reached down and rubbed herself with the towel, her legs bowed, as if she was a cello.

He’d never tried to have kids before, it was true, but he thought he could. They’d only been trying for six months now. Still, the vitamins aren’t a great boost to his ego. They’re a prop. He wants to do it on his own. And then there is the other thing that doesn’t help: for the last two months, as soon as they finish, every time, Kidder spins around on the bed, raises herself up on her shoulder blades and props her feet high up on the wall. Horgan knows it’s so everything will run downhill. She stays that way for a full five minutes, making small talk, before she goes to the bathroom for the towel and vitamin.

Across Eckley the morning is an orange blanket shaken out. The wind picks up the dust and lint, funnels them about, changes things a little from yesterday. The shadows of houses go all the way down the street.

Yanks, batting cleanup, out in the middle of the asphalt street, pops the ball up in the air with his left hand and hauls back, folding himself up into a two-inch strike zone, and then explodes at the ball, like a deck of cards pinched and let go; arms, bat, cap, legs, go in all directions, but the ball leads out high, white, and true down the street, finally falling and caroming off the steel cab of a pickup and then rolling further down the street along the curb. Yanks crouches in fear, a manhole in the street, a dent in the truck more than plausible. But no one wakes up. No one comes out. He stands up, drops the bat brazenly on the street, raises his arms in Homeric glory, and trundles around

the bases—mailbox, curb, fender—nodding his head, yes, yes, it's true, again.

The sun chases the night across the county and through Eckley and out west, and the night leaves shadows like cuts, like pieces of the past. They heal to noon and then relapse. The day is a bleeder. It happens over and over again.

"Horgan," Kidder calls from the kitchen, "time to get up. Just a half-day today, remember."

Horgan moves his mind around and remembers, yes, it's Saturday, just a half-day at the station. That's okay. No one had called during the night. He looks back out the window, winks at another dust devil to see if that will stop it, and wishes the wind would die down. That wouldn't help matters if something, God grant it, were to happen. He rolls on the bed, sits up, snatches a sleepy seed from his eye and flicks it toward the throw rug, where it won't be easily spotted. Then he rises, popping on his underwear, popping the elastic in front again for his work that morning already, and patting his stomach. He puts on one of his ten blue, short-sleeved shirts with the white oval above the pocket that says "Horgan" in dark blue cursive. For a moment a slight sensation of nausea runs through him... wearing a shirt with his name on it for the sixth day in a row... but he runs that off by rubbing his crotch and remembering to pee.

He stands over the bowl. Sometimes he had to wait a bit. But it finally comes and Horgan nods, megaphones his voice, and says, "Okay, truck number three, get a hose on that second window. Careful, she's burning hot. Careful. Careful with that glass. Okay. Good. Good. She's under control. Wrap her up." And he gives himself a little shake. These