Jack finally had a good excuse for not tending to the winter chores, Katherine thought. Being dead and all. As she had done for nearly fifty years of marriage, with no help from him, she kept the bird feeders filled, the sidewalk shoveled, the dirt road plowed, and the wood stove chocked full and hot. She watched goldfinches, chickadees, and woodpeckers squabbling for seed and suet through rippled glass etched with frost, the window sills crowded with her collection of dusty birds’ nests. Twigs dislodged from them and littered the floor. *National Geographics* and seed catalogues piled up. The farmhouse too seemed to wait for spring, muffled in snow. Sometimes Katherine found her mouth open, words collecting in the hollow, and would snap her teeth together, jaw creaking. She would not be one of those old women who talked to herself, though what would be the difference? Jack hadn’t listened when he’d been here. Jack was waiting, too. As she watched the birds, she thought of him, in the freezer of Seth Markinson’s Funeral Home in town. Waiting for the thaw.

She had waited for Jack to come home from the war, waited for him to move out of his mother’s house—this house, from which he had never moved, until now. A snort
of her laughter burst into the empty room. She shook her head and took a sip from her coffee cup. She had waited for Jack all those years ago to marry her and have children, which he finally did. Then she had waited for him to come home from work, from the tavern, from the diner, from the volunteer fire station, the Eagles, the V.F.W., from hunting camp or the ice fishing shanty. She had waited for him to retire. She had waited for him to take her on the long-postponed honeymoon to Europe, or even Disney World. She had waited for him to visit their children, their grandchildren, in Phoenix, in San Francisco, in Tampa. Her waiting had made no difference.

Katherine rubbed her forehead, where a dull ache was beginning. Too much caffeine, she supposed. Her tongue whispered against her teeth and a little gasp escaped. She had waited for Jack all her life, it seemed. And now she had to wait until the ground finally thawed to bury him in the family plot. Just like Jack Crossly to die in January.

The funeral had been on a frigid evening, and the turnout had been good despite the cold. Jack's buddies from the V.F.W. and the Eagles Club came with their wives. Katherine's friends from the perennial swappers group brought flowers. The church women prepared food. Nicky, their youngest and still single, flew up from Tampa, to stay for two weeks. Cecilia, the oldest, came all the way from Phoenix with her husband, Mark, and the three children, including one from his first marriage. Richard—her middle child—had left his wife, pregnant and unable to fly, at home in San Diego with their toddler for the five days. Reverend Willette said kind things about Jack, and about Katherine herself, sitting shoulder to shoulder with her grown children, her strong sons and daughter and their fine families. "Jack," he said, "has gone home to his Lord, to a warm sunny day of eternal life in heaven." And Katherine caught herself thinking ill of the dead. Would Jack want to be in a place where there was no good excuse to sit with his buddies around a wood stove playing poker in an ice fishing shanty or at the neon-lighted bar in the early dark of winter? She doubted it. But maybe he was gone to a better place with God.

During the service Nicky had taken her hand and stifled a sob, poor boy. He would miss his father most, Katherine thought, just as he always had. He had come late in life, when she thought she was finished with childbearing, partly because of her age but mostly because Jack had begun to turn away from her, crawling into their bed in the wee hours, smelling of beer and passing out facing the wall. Or most nights just sleeping in front of the television in the living room. She had tried touching him and kissing him passionately. She read some of those books that were so popular in the '70s about how to keep the sex alive in a marriage, but by then it had been too long. They were too old. It was as if he had shoved a boulder over his heart and hidden away those few bits of himself that he had shared with her now and then in the early years. Nicky came when they were in their forties, after the last time Jack had ever touched her like that. Katherine patted Nicky's hand. He held a tissue to his eyes.

Richard and Cecilia were already teenagers when Nicky was born. Of the three, Nicky had seemed the most lonely for his father, perhaps because he had no siblings at home after Richard left for college and Cecilia got mixed up with that boy. But Jack had been no more interested in Nicky than his older children—nor in her, Katherine supposed. She squeezed Nicky's hand, wishing again that Jack had just once taken the boy off to hunting camp or for one of those endless days in the ice fishing shanty with his pals without her nagging him to do it. How did Nick remember those days, she wondered. How did he remember his dad? She wanted to ask him, but she wouldn't like the answer. Poor Nicky, now a thirty-three-year-old man with grotesque muscles, no girlfriends she could detect and a job in a fitness center—whatever that was—seemed
aimless and frivolous. Jack should have showed an interest in the boy. He should have shown him how to be a man. She had tried to make up for Jack’s inattention, for his absence, but a mother can only do so much.

Katherine caught Cecilia and Richard on her right exchanging a look. Probably a comment on Nick’s crying. The two of them had always seemed so confident, so strong. They had been a team even in childhood, only ten months apart, first Cecilia helping the younger Richard, then, in adolescence, Richard becoming the protector of his sister. There had been little room for Nick, the baby. And Katherine in turn had had little extra time for them too, sleep-deprived as she was, rocking a colicky newborn at forty. No wonder Cecilia had gotten involved with that boy. Katherine prayed that God would forgive her her faults and failures as a mother. She had done the best she could. Maybe Cecelia’s eye-roll was just a response to Reverend Willette. “Jack Crossly will be remembered as a giving man,” he asserted, “a man who walked close to God in all he did.” Katherine swallowed and blinked, trying to work up some tears for the sake of appearances.

January dragged into February, the days beginning and ending in a darkness broken only by the hoof-hoof barking of owls. Each day stretched the light a minute or three longer at dawn and dusk. Seed catalogs crowded the National Geographic in the mailbox, but Katherine couldn’t make herself plan for planting, for trying new strains of tomatoes or new lettuces. Gardening season seemed so far away this year, the cold so complete and the earth so iron-hard, still buried under feet of snow. She flipped through an article on Mozambique rather than read the magazine through as was her habit, and she didn’t bother to snip any articles on places she thought she might like someday to see. The old office filing cabinet in the unheated parlor where she paid bills was too stuffed already with clippings about the travels she had imagined. In the seed catalog, she turned down

the corner of a page not to remind herself of a broccoli or a dahlia, but to mark the passage of minutes. She sipped coffee from the pot she kept going all day.

She stopped often to look at the feeders. The yellow of the goldfinches glowed against the gray skies. Red Hot Poker this year, she thought, in the front flower bed by the walk. Maybe some Snow in Summer in the window boxes. She could see the file cabinet through the glass door to the front room. It seemed heavy, the dust on it thick. She could almost feel the paper maps and articles fossilizing in the cold. Mount Kilimanjaro, the Great Wall of China, the Silk Road, the Appalachian Trail, the Circumnavigation of the Earth, the White Cliffs of Dover.

This winter’s days were not so different from any other. Jack would be ice fishing if he were still alive, huddling in his plywood shanty over a hole in the lake, warmed by the little heater, the Wild Turkey, and the poker-talk of his buddies. She would be here alone, in his mother’s house, scanning the catalogs and watching the birds, stoking the wood stove and shoveling the walks, waiting for the sound of Jack’s truck in the drive, and for spring. Maybe she should do something different this summer. Maybe no garden at all. Maybe she should leave, finally travel.

“Come to Tampa for the winter,” Nicky had said, sitting here at the kitchen table after the funeral. “You’ll be warm. You need a change of scene.”

“Or Phoenix,” Cecilia said, careful not to look at Mark, her husband. “We have a room just waiting for you. And a swimming pool. And the children would love to have you there after school. I would love to have you there.” Mark, to his credit, didn’t move.

But Katherine knew what it was like to live with a mother-in-law. She noticed that Richard wisely kept silent. Her daughter meant well, but Katherine had hated those first two years of her own marriage, living with old Mrs. Crossly—she still thought of Jack’s mother that way—taking care of the old woman while she slowly died, as a
That worker, pocketed through the snow, piling the barn
where only ricks of part-tricks the same model as the one
were just placed by the wind, the cap went up the tool
of the pitch fork. You could see the hay from the sky,
before you could see the hay from the top of the silo,
and the hay from the sky. You could see the hay from the sky,
and the hay from the sky. You could see the hay from the sky,
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This year, she decided as she drove out, she wouldn’t mow or spray Round-Up back there. Let the poison ivy and Virginia creeper and honeysuckle vines grow, and parts for the truck be damned.

The dirt road down the mountain was treacherous, the mud still frozen but skinned thinly with melted water. At least the town trucks had been out ahead of her, spreading gravel and salt, something for a little traction. At the end of the stone wall that marked the Crossly land, Katherine stopped and shifted the truck into park to keep the engine running and the heater going while she scooted across the seat, rolled down the window and reached into the mailbox. Bills, the new *National Geographic* with a feature titled “On the Brink of Extinction.” A map fell out onto the seat. She sat still for a minute, smelling the air and listening to the little breeze clacking the birch trees together. She noted a tiny nest about six feet up in the sugar bush beside the road. It was cup-shaped, a hummingbird nest, she thought. She didn’t have one like that in her collection. Could she reach it? Maybe so, if she could climb the snowbank pushed up by the plows. Next time out, she’d bring some nippers to cut the branches.

Bootprints marked where someone had gone up and through the opening in the wall into the Crossly family cemetery. Maybe Seth Markinson or one of his boys from the funeral home had been by, checking on the location for Jack after the thaw. The snowpack was still knee-deep, crusted with a layer of gleaming ice from the last nor’easter. Likely they’d have at least a few more big storms before spring truly arrived in April, but this little plateau got good south light, the view down the valley to the white steeples of town wide and bright. The snow would melt early here. She could already see old Mrs. Crossly’s gravestone protruding through the white, like a gray bridge, the arch too perfect against the wildness of the sugar bush and snow-draped hemlocks. The footprints continued past it to the far stone wall, and there sat Sam Fellows in the sun, scribbling on a pad. He looked up and waved.

Katherine set the parking brake, left the engine running, and eased herself down from the pickup. A map from the National Geographic fell into the road, and she stooped to rescue it, dripping with mud and ice crystals. Sam stood and started over, sinking into the snow with each wide step. “Morning Miz Crossly,” he called. “How are you?”

Katherine stopped at the snow bank, the hand with the map resting on the warm hood of the truck, and waved back. “Doin’ fine, Samuel. And yourself?”

He kept walking as he called back across the snow, “Well, thank you.” Sam was not a young man, though Katherine remembered minding him as a baby, just after Jack had come home from the war, when she had still been giddy with the thrill of their engagement and before it had become clear that old Mrs. Crossly did not want to lose her son to another woman just yet. Why Sam must be nearly sixty, she realized. Such a sad life. Gone to the bad war in Vietnam and come home, like so many of the boys, bearded and quiet. A few years later he married Lucy, that hippie girl from New York, in the orchard at his grandfather’s place. She remembered holding Nicky in her arms, she and the baby both crying. Weddings—the way the young people looked so fresh and confident—always pushed a chunk of bile and pain up into her throat. A year or so after that, Richard had been Sam’s student in History at the high school, the same year the wife, Lucy, had gone missing. Sam had found her; she’d hanged herself from an apple tree in that same orchard.

“What are you up to out here in the cold, Sam?” Katherine called.

He half-slid down the snowbank, just under the hummingbird nest, and stood by the truck, stomping his boots to make the snow fall off his wool trousers. “Working, Miz Crossly,” he said. “Working.” He wiped the hoarfrost from his mustache with a finger and grinned. “I’m documenting
all the cemeteries in the county, making a list of repairs needed. The state gave me a little grant money, and in the summer I’ll have a bunch of Y.C.C. kids working for me.”

Katherine smiled. Sam had taught history at the high school since the ’60s, and everybody knew about his graveyard interests. “Good for you,” she said. She nodded toward the Crossly plot. “How’s she look?” she asked.

“Oh fine,” Sam said, consulting his little pad, “near as I can tell with the snow anyway. I reckon we’ll at least come by to right that stone that’s askew.” He pointed to the tall column that marked Jack’s grandfather’s grave and grinned. “Every spring after the thaw my pap used to say he was harvestin’ stones. Frost heaves, you know.”

Katherine laughed at the old joke. Then she made her mouth serious. “Well,” she said, “we’ll be putting Jack in there soon as it’s warm enough.”

Sam nodded and put his hand on her shoulder. “Yep,” he said. “I’ll come for the burial, Mrs. Crossly,” he said. “You be sure and let me know when. It can be a hard time. Harder than the funeral even.”

Katherine looked up at the nest again to avoid his gaze, blinking, remembering that his wife, Lucy, had died in the winter too. The woman had been buried in the Fellows family plot up above the orchard, and Sam too had probably had to wait til spring.

When Nicky and Cecilia urged her to leave Vermont for the winter, Katherine had used Jack as her excuse. “I can’t leave your father here like that,” she’d said. “Not yet at rest.” But she knew he was at rest, even in the freezer at Markinson’s, as much at rest as he’d ever been or ever would be. “It just wouldn’t be right,” she’d told them. Unfinished business. Though he never finished anything else, she’d make sure this last thing got done right. She hadn’t left him in all these years because God wouldn’t have wanted it; divorce just wasn’t done, not in her family or in his. And she damned sure wasn’t leaving him now, not yet. She loved him, though he was a hard man to love, and he had loved her, after his fashion. They were husband and wife, joined by God in the church, and that was as it should be. Til death do us part.

“The pipes will freeze,” she’d said to her children. “And the goldfinches . . .” The goldfinches, in particular, needed her to keep the feeders full. She had lured them with thistle seeds into staying north for the winter, so she had to be diligent in checking and refilling the plastic tubes at the windows, nearly every other day. They would die if she didn’t keep feeding them now.

“I don’t like leaving you here alone, Mama,” Nicky had said, finally packing his bags to return to Florida. “What if something happens?”

Indeed, Katherine had thought. What if something happens? That was what she had needed Jack Crossly for: to come home eventually and find her dead or injured or stuck in the snow. But he had died, not her, and she had kept from falling and breaking a hip all these years already, and could wrap the chains around a tree to pull herself out of a ditch just fine. Nothing had happened in all these years of waiting; why should it now?

When she finally reached the paved highway at the bottom of the gravel road, Katherine’s fingers ached from gripping the steering wheel. She’d left Sam at his truck at the foot of the mountain, then turned down the highway toward town. About two miles toward Brattleboro, the Village of Neweden road crew—Kip Hathaway and his son, Kip Junior—looked up from the hand-painted board they were affixing below a speed limit sign and waved as she passed. The dip and bump in the asphalt, just where it appeared about this time every year, confirmed the warning they were posting: Frost Heaves. Katherine slowed, of course, the Saab with the Connecticut plates riding her bumper be damned. The old pick-up rocked and creaked without any damage to the springs, or so she hoped. The Saab roared
past her, crossing the yellow line of the curve, and shot ahead. Jack would've cussed 'em out or worse, chased them toward the Interstate, but Katherine just wished them a busted tailpipe at the next frost heave or a patch of black ice on a curve. "What's your hurry?" she muttered. She'd had enough wildlife jump out into the road—deer, mostly, but twice moose and once a big bobcat—to know you needed to keep alert and within the speed limit. Now the thaw had begun, the critters would be moving down from the hills.

When she reached town, Katherine was gratified to see the Saab stopped in the long line of cars at the first traffic light. See, she thought as she passed the little red car and turned into the parking lot of Markinson's, hurrying never really gets you ahead.

The waitress at Sally's on Main Street had light blue hair that stuck out every which way, a ring in her upper lip and another in her eyebrow. "Hi," she said, brightly. "Something to drink?"

"Coffee," Katherine replied, picking up the menu so she wouldn't have to look at the girl's perforated face or at the large brown envelope she had gotten at the funeral home now resting next to the salt and pepper shakers.

"Be right back," the girl said, and Katherine saw that she wore bright yellow tights under cut-off Army pants with black boots. Youngsters. Katherine shook her head. Back when Cecilia had waited tables here, the girls had had to wear uniforms, blue dresses with white aprons. Katherine remembered finding the note in the pocket of one while sorting laundry. It was from Bitsie Whitehouse—Cecilia's best friend—written in a teenaged girl's looping cursive. She waited up for Cecilia that long evening after putting Nicky to bed, and she remembered her daughter's admis-

sion that yes, she was pregnant, and yes, that boy with the ponytail from California was the father, and that yes, she was going to get rid of it. Katherine remembered that waiting room in Albany, the tiny high windows and green tile floors, and Nicky, a terrible-two, refusing to stay put in a chair. Katherine remembered the way a young girl came in the door, stomping her feet and blowing on her hands, and stopped in her tracks at the sight of the little boy staring up at her, thumb in his mouth.

The blue-haired waitress slid a cup of coffee onto Katherine's table and held her pen over her pad. "Ready to order?" she asked.

Katherine glanced at the Specials board over the counter. "I'll have a bowl of the soup," she said. "And bread." The girl nodded and took the menu away. The lumpy brown envelope seemed to move in her peripheral vision with the imperceptible pace of a glacier. Katherine shook herself. Foolish to be spooked by such stuff. She picked it up and tore open the metal clasp, then dumped the contents out on the table. Jack's personal effects, Seth Markinson had called them. Jack's body had gone to the funeral home from the fishing shanty where he'd been pronounced dead of a heart attack, and these were the things in his pockets. A pen knife made from a deer's hoof Jack's grandfather had owned. She would give that to Richard, the first-born son. A pocket watch that had been stopped for forty years, a casualty of the war in the Pacific, by the salt of the sea. Katherine still couldn't imagine Jack on a ship, on the ocean, coiling ropes and hoisting anchors. How could a Vermont farm boy—logger, snow plow driver, volunteer fireman, pulp mill laborer—also be a sailor? It hadn't fit, though that was the thing she had fallen for when she was fifteen, his white uniform with the jaunty cap, and the romance of loving a man away at war. Nicky should have the watch, she decided. Maybe he could get it fixed. Three dollar bills, two quarters, and a penny. Not enough for a man to have in his pockets, Katherine thought. He should have had more. She looked down the length of the diner toward the front windows. She thought of Cecilia dozing in the car after their trip to Albany, and Nicky bouncing on
the backseat. She thought of Richard when she confronted him years later with his sister’s disappearance: “Leave her alone, Mama. She’s fine. We can take care of ourselves.” Maybe they *all* should have had more.

The waitress stood at the end of the counter talking with a young man whose hair was matted into thick cords. His thick sweater looked foreign, like one of those sold by the Guatemalan immigrants in the farmer’s market. At least he was clean-shaven. “I like waiting tables some,” the girl said. “It’s like a great thing to do while you’re taking a break from real life, you know, going to college or having a career or being like a productive member of society. But the standing around, you know—Shit. Bor-ring.”

The boy nodded sagely. “So why not get on with it?” he asked. “Go somewhere.”

The girl shrugged. “I don’t know. Get on with what, is the question, I guess. Go where?” The cook dinged a bell, and the waitress started over to pick up Katherine’s order. “It’s not a bad job in the meantime,” she said.

Katherine pushed Jack’s personal effects to the side to make room for her soup and let her hand linger on his thick brown leather wallet. She slid her thumb into the fold, swelling half-open with all the junk he carried. Cecilia used to call it a filing cabinet. “How can you bear to sit on that?” Katherine remembered exclaiming to Jack.

The waitress put the steaming soup in front of her, a thick chunk of bread on the side. Katherine flipped open the billfold. In a plastic case, she found school photos of Cecilia, Richard, and Nicky, three each of the older two, chronicling their growth from first to sixth grades to high school, and only one of Nick, when he was about ten. Old Mrs. Crossly scowled out from a black and white taken near the time of her death, her hands gripping the porch railing tightly, chickens in the yard. The only photo of Katherine was tiny, a snapshot of her at fifteen, just before Jack had left for the Navy. She remembered giving him the picture, shy and embarrassed and also excited, feeling daring, because she was wearing only a swimsuit in the photo and had posed like a film star, hip thrust out and her lipstick-painted mouth in a pout. Who had she been? Where had that girl gone?

Katherine dipped her spoon into the split pea soup. The color was beautiful, the color of spring, and she felt the warmth of it travel down her throat. She counted sixteen gas station receipts dating back three years. There were folded flyers from a volunteer fire department benefit barbecue and the V.F.W. annual community service awards banquet. Inside one soft sleeve, she thought she felt a twig that turned out to be a small red feather, a cardinal’s probably. Jack had never seemed to notice her bird feeders, except to complain about how much money she spent on seed. Where had he picked this up? Why had he kept it? Katherine brushed her lips with the feather and laid it on the table beside her coffee cup.

The wallet held fifteen business cards from tractor salesmen and antique dealers. On the back of several, in Jack’s familiar block print, were notes and numbers, prices or sizes of items he was considering. In the section for money, Katherine found a copy of the poem Gravy had read at the funeral, a page torn from a book, yellowed tape holding it together at the folds. She re-read the last stanzas.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Why this poem? Katherine fingered the smooth tape on the page. Jack’s life had been ordinary, plain, as plain
as hers. Did he regret his choices? She clanked her spoon against the bowl and sat straighter. What right had he to regrets? She was the one who had made the sacrifices. She had traveled his road, the ordinary road. She had done what was expected of her. She had tended to his mother. She had raised his children up right, had taken care of all of them, of his house, his mother’s house. She cooked and cleaned for him, made a home for him. She stayed with him even after he turned away from her. She never complained. She did what was right, had she not? What had he lacked for? What did Jack Crossly think he had missed?

Katherine stared down at the green soup, watching as chunk of ham broke the surface. Her stomach turned. She pushed the bowl away.

“Everything okay?” Katherine looked up, startled, at the girl with the blue hair. “Soup okay?” she asked. Katherine blinked. The girl waved the coffee pot she was holding.

“Would you like a refill?”

Katherine nodded.

“Oh, Frost,” the girl said, pouring. “You know that’s the most-loved poem in America. I mean, that’s the poem most Americans say is their favorite.” She grinned when Katherine met her eyes. “Ironic, huh?”

By the time Gravy and his grandson loaded the ice fishing shanty into the bed of Katherine’s pick-up and tied it down, the sun had been completely extinguished, first by clouds, then by snow and ice, and finally by complete darkness. Katherine fumed, driving back up the highway toward Neweden, white ghosts swirling in her headlights. She should have known better than to expect Graves Laval to be on time. She had paid her bill and left Jack’s $3.51 on the table at the diner for the blue-haired waitress at exactly 2 P.M. and pulled off the highway beside the frozen pond at 2:30, just after Gravy’s grandson was due out of school. She sat there for over an hour before the pair turned up, and when they finally got the shack to shore, Gravy said,

“Maybe ya oughta wait out the storm,” and offered to put her up in his spare room. But Katherine was no fool. Gravy knew how she’d taken care of Jack all those years, and she bet he was just tired of doing his own cooking and laundry. She wasn’t going to be stuck with another old man to care for in this life. Gravy probably took his time getting the shack loaded on purpose.

The owl came out of total darkness, swooping low into her headlights, and Katherine gasped and ducked in reflex. It was snowy white and huge, wings and tail feathers spread, talons reaching for some small creature on the other side of the road. A wingtip brushed her windshield. Katherine pumped the brake, but it didn’t matter. The bird had already disappeared into the darkness. She remembered to breathe again. Her heart pounded, rushing warmth into her chest. The truck rolled slowly forward, settling into a straight line, not skidding or sliding on the slick road. Lucky owl, she thought, probably a male, hunting to feed his mate, already nested in the dark woods above. She would never have been able to stop in time, and she would never have forgiven herself if she had killed him. Still warm and a little queasy with adrenaline, Katherine didn’t remember the frost heave until it was too late. She hit the dip and the bump at her regular speed of forty-five miles per hour. The truck clunked.

She had nearly forgotten the ice shanty behind her in the pickup bed. Maybe it had begun to rock when she swerved to miss the owl. Maybe the ropes had slipped, Graves Laval and his grandson having not taken the proper care in tying them. Maybe she hit the bump too fast. Whatever the reason, at the frost heave, the tall plywood ice shanty behind her screeched against the metal side of the truck and tumbled, with a satisfying crunch, into the snowbank on the roadside.

The storm had been a big one, dumping two feet of heavy wet snow overnight, the morning sky a deep blue and
everything dripping in the bright sun. Katherine stood at the window, watching the fluttering goldfinches jockey for perches as she sipped coffee. Great clumps of snow whumped to the ground. Katherine thought about the ice shanty, a pile of twigs, kindling on the side of the road, surely now buried by the storm and snowplows. She'd stopped, her flashers illuminating the snowy road, and got out to look, but there had been nothing to do for the little house. She was alone on a February night, a seventy-year-old woman, no traffic, no movement. She might have waited for someone to come along—Kip and Kip Junior were likely out in the plows—but Jack's shanty was broken, all akilter, worthless. She remembered the sound of the laugh that snorted from her nose into the night, a short huff under the rumble of the truck engine, the shush of the snow falling. She'd been surprised by the tears freezing to ice pellets on her cheeks. "God damn you, Jack!" she'd yelled into the white silence.

Jack needed me to wait, Katherine thought now. He needed me here, waiting. That's how he loved me. Why? Why did she wait? Katherine thought of him waiting now in the freezer at Markison's. At peace. The wings of the owl had been so wide and white in her windshield, and she had made a little sound, Ahh. At least she hadn't hit the owl, hadn't killed it. Crazy old woman, yelling into the darkness, alone.

Katherine remembered Jack at the window, watching the feeders, just as she was doing now, not more than a month before he died. He had not known she was there, behind him, having just washed his breakfast dishes. A shadow rushed the window, scattering the finches, but Jack had not moved. A red-tail hawk snatched a bird as it fluttered up from the ground below the feeder under the eaves, one of the soft mourning doves. Katherine remembered the gray wing feathers spread wide, small against the background of the hawk's white and black speckled chest and russet banded tail. She remembered how the moment swelled, expanding time like a flame spreading out from twigs into the whole box of the wood stove. She remembered Jack's face in profile, his gray eyes steely, unblinking, observing. It was lovely, and it was horrible. He hadn't moved. The hawk flapped backwards, up again, and disappeared over the roof. Granite rose within her chest as she watched him, wanting him to be angry, to go for his shotgun, to do something, to say something. But Jack had just stood there, resignation on his brow.

Katherine touched her lips with cool fingers. That morning the birds had returned, one by one, to the feeders, plucking seeds from the little holes in the tubes, clinging to the suet cages, scuffling on the snowy ground. She had kept the feeders filled all winter. Jack sighed once, then turned from the window. He went off to the ice shanty to fish. To drink. To recite poems, of all things. She remembered thinking, stupid. The birds. Already forgetting.

The white owl had brushed the glass of windshield with his feather tips last night, as if trying to touch her. She could have killed him, changed the lives of his mate and their young forever. But she hadn't. He disappeared into the woods, the undergrowth, and Jack's shanty had tipped out of the truck to be buried by snow. The female would not have waited for the husband to return, not for long.

Katherine's chest expanded, and she felt the thickening of tears again in her eyes. Her lungs expanded, mud pushing against her chest, perhaps her heart beating. "No," she said aloud. She grabbed a tissue from the box and blew her nose with a snort that was loud and wet in the empty house. She wanted, suddenly, to clear the house of dust and cobwebs, to wash windows and scrub cabinets and closets, though it was nowhere near time for spring cleaning. Jack's clothes needed to be packed for the church's used goods store. Things needed to be gone through and got rid of. Space needed to be cleared. Wood floors scrubbed and waxed. Walls painted fresh. "Yes," she said aloud, the
words echoing from the plaster walls and wood floors. “I need to...”

Katherine let the words hang in the air. She sat her cup down on the windowsill with a thunk that knocked a bird’s nest to the floor, where it shattered into a heap of sticks. She smiled, remembering the hummingbird nest over the mailbox, imagining herself trying to climb a snowbank with clippers to get it. Absurd. And for what?

Gathering seed catalogs into a pile in her arms, Katherine opened the glass door to the front room and stepped into the cold air. In the parlor wood stove, she made a little pile of the birds’ nests from the window sills, dry and twiggy, in the ashes. They flamed up quickly at the spark of the match, smoking a little. She added pages from the seed catalogs. While the logs crackled, warming the room, she brought Jack’s wallet in and pulled out the picture of herself at fifteen, the girl in the swimsuit with life sparkling in her eyes, daring in her pose, hip thrust out. With that girl watching, Katherine opened the drawer of her filing cabinet and pulled out a pile of maps. Time to get on with it. Mount Kilimanjaro, the Great Wall of China, the Silk Road, the Appalachian Trail, the Circumnavigation of the Earth, the White Cliffs of Dover. She spread open On the Brink of Extinction, the blue and green planet and bright creatures blotted with mud from the road. Little gravel rocks clattered to the floor. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”