A person is standing in a dark doorway, looking out at a bright, hazy landscape. The person is silhouetted against the light coming from the doorway. The landscape outside is bright and appears to be a body of water or a flat, open area. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

Lost Swans

Chrissie Dickinson

A Short Story

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By Chrissie Dickinson

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“Oh, I would hate to die like that,” Mrs. Manning thought, leaning against the weathered window frame in her kitchen. She surveyed the frozen landscape. The afternoon was fading. It was getting dark out there. Night was coming. The snow was falling hard now. The children would be rising soon. They always woke up when the snow fell hard.

Mrs. Manning cast her gaze further into the distance. On a clear night, if she squinted hard and focused, she could make out the faraway twinkle of light from Randolph Avery’s house. He was her closest neighbor to the north, his farm nearly a mile away. But tonight the sky was so thick with falling snow there was no distant glimmer to be seen. It was already knee-deep out there. Another eight inches were expected to fall. The sky was an unbroken curtain of pinkish-gray, that odd hue that signaled a serious storm. The flakes were hard and pelting. The temperature would drop below zero tonight, the wind chill even lower.

Three dogs wagged their tails and hugged close to Mrs. Manning’s knees. She looked down and smiled. “Supper soon,” she said, dragging her fingertips across each of their soft furred heads. Their names were Walt, Wylie and Cody, but mostly she called them the Boys because they operated as a pack. The three sturdy mid-size mongrels were inseparable brothers sprung from the same litter. Everything the Boys did made Mrs. Manning feel safe. They patrolled the perimeter of her farm. They stood sentry at the end of the long gravel driveway. Whenever an

occasional stranger stopped to ask directions, the Boys barked, bared their teeth and raised holy hell.

The Boys always spent the night in Mrs. Manning's kitchen, cuddled together on a bed of old quilts she'd piled under a work table. Today she brought them in early, on account of the storm. As the old saw went, it was not a fit night out for man or beast. But no matter how rough the weather got, no matter how inhospitable it became for all living things, the weather would not stop the children from coming. The children were neither man nor beast. They were not living things. They had not breathed the air for nearly a century.

Mrs. Manning called the children other names in her mind. The Wanderers. The Travelers. But no matter what she called them, it always happened the same way. They woke with the big bad weather. They were dead but they would not rest in peace.

Mrs. Manning shivered even though her kitchen was toasty warm. She sank deeper into the old cardigan she wore over a threadbare apron embroidered with tiny roses. A small crucifix hung around her neck and her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back in a loose bun. The radio on the counter was tuned to an AM country station. A voice rang out through the slight static: Glen Campbell singing "Galveston," a pretty song about an ugly war.

A large pot of stew boiled on a burner of her claw-footed stove, throwing off steam that danced in the air like a heat wave. But even when it got hot in the kitchen, the thought of how the children had come to their deaths made Mrs. Manning shudder.

The children. So weak in life. So strong in death.

They would visit Mrs. Manning again tonight. They would rise as one from their grave of rags and come to her.

She squinted through the window, scanning the deep shroud of snow. "Where are you?" she breathed.

The old clapboard house shuddered in the wind. The Boys began to whine, their hackles rising. Something moved in the snow outside.

Mrs. Manning pressed her damp forehead against the window. She could see them, finally. The children were coming now with the howl of the wind, their dark forms emerging from the field. She watched them in their tattered clothes, waist-deep in the snow, trudging across the back lawn. Like a snaking conga line of little leathered mummies dressed in thin pants and torn frocks, they pushed through the snow toward her farmhouse. Toward her. They came like little black moths drawn to the flame of her kitchen light.

Mrs. Manning exhaled.

She held open the back porch door, bracing it against the blizzard. The children made their way slowly up the icy steps, brushing past her into the kitchen.

Mrs. Manning had set the worn wooden table for eight. The children slid into the old high-backed chairs, slumped in silence. A tarnished wagon wheel light fixture hung above their heads, casting a soft glow onto what was left of their hard little faces, their expressions as frozen and remote as the moon. Mrs. Manning took the seat at the head of the table. She looked at the seven little dead ones. She smiled softly, made the sign of the cross and began to say grace.



Mrs. Manning lived alone on her isolated farm outside of Prairie Bend, South Dakota. It was just her and the Boys now in the weathered farmhouse with its rambling rooms. Her husband Bob had died four years ago, felled in short order by pancreatic cancer. It had been two years since her last child Deborah had left home.

Deborah was 19 back then and just married to Stewart Gulliver, her high school sweetheart and fellow bank-teller at the Sentry Building and Loan in Culbertson, the next town over. Deborah and Stewart had tied the knot at St. Agnes, the church attached to the parochial school they had both attended as children.

The wedding reception was held in Mrs. Manning's farmhouse. The occasion was so special Mrs. Manning stripped the sheets of plastic off the good furniture in the parlor, including the fancy sofa where normally no one was allowed to sit. It was a festive afternoon. Everyone toasted the new couple over sherry. Stewart made a speech about the late Mr. Manning.

"I wish Deborah's father could have been here to walk her down the aisle and give her away," Stewart said, his voice earnest, his words carefully rehearsed. "But as he told me in the

hospital when I first asked for Deborah's hand: 'If I'm not at your wedding in person, I will be there in spirit.' I know he's looking down at us right now and smiling."

The guests gently applauded. Deborah and her three older sisters daubed their eyes with cotton hankies. Mrs. Manning, dry-eyed, smiled stiffly.

When the celebration ended, Deborah picked up her suitcase from her bedroom and climbed into the car with her new husband. The two sped away, tin cans scraping on the gravel behind them, a hand-lettered "Just Married" sign taped to the back of the car. The couple was off to start their new life in a tidy ranch home in Culbertson.

After the last guest had left and the last piece of china was washed and put away, Mrs. Manning walked down the hall to Deborah's old bedroom. She sat alone on the empty bed, a Bible in her hands. She gazed out the window at the horizon until nightfall obscured her view and the house went dark around her.

She sat without moving. She sat for hours. It was the spring of 1969, the fifty-eighth year of her life. She wondered how it had all gone so very wrong.

Sitting in the dark, her mind spooled back to the beginning. She had been born in 1911. As a child she dreamed of becoming something important, like a nurse or a librarian or maybe even a schoolteacher. But there was no schooling beyond the ninth grade for Mrs. Manning because she was needed in the fields and the kitchen. Later, the Great Depression got in the way.

The die of her life had been cast as a child. She had no say over what followed. She would never wear a crisp uniform and stride purposefully up to a patient's bedside. She would never stand in front of a blackboard and expound with authority. She would always be a farm wife. She wore this hard life on her body, all cracked hands and faded clothes and sun-worn face.

She had married a farmer and bore his children. He was dead and gone now. Her daughters were grown and moved to town with families of their own. Mrs. Manning was still here, frozen in place.

There were many times in her life when she had hated the homestead and asked herself why she stayed at all. But the old dreams were dead now. She told herself that a person had to make peace with the past in order to feel any happiness at all in this world. For better or worse this place was her home. She knew every inch of it. Every dip and curve of the landscape. Every nail in the barn. Every drafty corner of the house.

She could have sold the spread and moved into town herself, closer to her children and grandchildren. But something kept her rooted at the kitchen stove, seated in the armchair by the fireplace and working the water pump outside. The farm was like her own body now. She lived in it. It was home. It was the old poster bed she slept in at night. The dirt she walked on. The blood of the ducks she slaughtered. The seeds she planted in the spring. The wet laundry that hung on the clothesline and slapped in the summer breeze. It was as close as the skin on her bones. Everything above and beneath the ground was hers now. Hers. Her.



Walt was the one who first led her to where the children slept. It was early October, the farm wild with autumn colors. Mrs. Manning grabbed a large woven basket and set off to collect leaves in the woods.

It was an activity she loved but had seldom allowed herself as a young woman. The few times she had done it, she sat on the kitchen floor, her leaves spread before her, pressing them individually between the pages of the thick encyclopedias she kept on the shelf in the parlor. But there had always been so much guilt surrounding this lighthearted task. How could a farm wife justify such a thing when there was so much real work to be done?

“What’s the point of collecting leaves?” her husband Bob had said. “All you do is stick them in a scrapbook.”

Mrs. Manning bristled at the memory. Bob had no right to make her feel so bad. But it didn’t matter now. He was long dead. Good. She answered only to herself now. She wanted a big bouquet for the parlor, a vase stuffed to the brim with leaves. Something pretty to look at in the morning dawn and by evening firelight. Something just for her.

The thought made her hum “Greensleeves,” an old folk ballad she sang as a child. The version she had learned was strange, the lyrics filled with images of fading youth, missed opportunities and lonesome death. In the final verse, an old king wanders through a winter forest.

*Now he walks through snow
To his ancient bed
In the woods where he loved
His dear Greensleeves*

The words were sad, but it made Mrs. Manning happy to sing them. She walked down the lane with the dogs, bundled up in checkered flannel, her cheeks flushed pink with the first rush of cold weather.

They made their way to the woods that sat behind the furthest field to the west. Mrs. Manning seldom ventured this far. It was the very edge of her property. Beyond it the land gave way to wilderness. The dirt path that led here became nearly impassable once the snow came.

She ventured further down the path into the woods. Walt, Wylie and Cody trotted at her heels. Walt cocked his head, his snout catching the scent of something in the air. He made an abrupt left turn, disappearing into a tangle of tall brush. His brothers followed suit.

Mrs. Manning came to a stop beneath a cottonwood tree. She leaned down and picked up a leaf. It was bright gold, a small vision in her fingers. Her eyes watered in the crisp air.

She suddenly felt Walt panting next to her. There was a small object in his mouth. He dropped it at her feet.

The dogs were always presenting Mrs. Manning with things they had found or killed. Most of the time they gifted her with the carcasses of moles and rabbits. The thing Walt carried today was different. It was human. Part of a body. She saw small curved finger bones. It was a child's hand, withered into a balled fist and clutching a piece of rotted fabric. Mrs. Manning stared at it. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. How does such a horror fit into a basket of leaves?

She picked up the small hand and held it in her palm. It was forlorn, terrible. The thing itself was old but its spirit was young. Mrs. Manning could feel its sad desire. It wanted to be held. It wanted to be whole again.

Mrs. Manning slumped to the ground and lay in the damp carpet of leaves, clutching the small hand to her chest. Under her back was the earth: flat, solid, eternal. She wondered where she would fall if an earthquake came and split the world in half.

She looked up and saw the clear sky above, an empty, cloudless expanse the size of heaven. For the longest time she had no thoughts. When she finally did, she wondered if she was sleeping or awake.

How much time had passed she couldn't say. Walt was whining now, a thin high-pitched sound that squeezed out of the back of his throat. He stared into the brush then turned and looked at her. Again and again it was the same motion. Stare and turn. Stare and turn. The mutt was agitated. His whole body trembled. There was something more in the brush. He wanted to show it to her.

Mrs. Manning rose in slow motion. She laid the little hand in her basket and followed Walt into the brush.

She pushed through the dense foliage into a small clearing. Ten feet ahead she saw the hind ends of Wylie and Cody. Their heads, snouts and front legs were plunged downward into an opening in the overgrown hillside. They were investigating something in the earth. Mrs. Manning glimpsed pieces of wood under a tangle of weeds. Half-collapsed and long forgotten, it was a root cellar dug into the side of the hill, compromised by time and reclaimed by nature.

“It’s been here all along,” Mrs. Manning muttered to herself, shaking her head. She had always been convinced that she knew every inch of this land. But she had never stumbled upon the root cellar before. No one had. Buried under thick clods of dirt and brush, it had remained a secret. Hidden.

The rains had been heavy recently. Driving. The storms soaked the dirt that shrouded the root cellar. Part of the door underneath had finally given way under the weight, exposing the opening. Now the dogs had pawed their way in, pursuing the faded scent of something inside the hole.

The doors were little more than crudely fashioned boards on hinges with looped twine for handles. One door was closed, the other collapsed in on itself. Wylie and Cody were half-disappeared in the open side.

“What do you see?” she called softly to the dogs. Wylie and Cody jerked their heads up and out of the hole. Their eyes filled with guilt. This is how they looked whenever Mrs. Manning caught them disturbing a rabbit’s nest full of baby bunnies. They turned and slunk toward her, glancing back at the door in the hillside.

“It’s okay,” she said. All three dogs hovered around her now, shivering and shuffling at her feet like three ghosts lost in the mist. Their behavior was odd. They would be barking if they had found something alive. They would be silent if it was dead. But the Boys were in a disoriented state somewhere in-between. All three dogs were agitated, whining and trembling. Their hackles were up. Mrs. Manning had never seen them quite like this. Whatever was underground, it was clear they couldn’t figure out how to feel about it.

Mrs. Manning pried open the remaining intact door of the root cellar. She squatted down and crept into the dark hole. She went to see what belonged to the hand.

Mrs. Manning squinted her eyes. It took several long minutes to adjust from the bright fall day outside to the darkness of this black hole in the hillside. The earthen walls were cool and dry to the touch. Mrs. Manning was relieved. She had feared muck and salamanders.

She made out a large misshapen mound in the corner. She squinted her eyes harder. Crouched lower. Crawled closer. Her hand touched a pile of old, stiff rags. There were hard crusty pieces inside.

The place was quiet as a grave.

It was a grave.

Her hands navigated the pile of small bodies. The corpses clung to one another in a stiff, petrified huddle. Their limbs intertwined: dead arms wrapped around dead torsos, legs draped around legs. Small tufts of dried hair clung to their heads, their skin stretched like rawhide over their skulls, their bones brittle like old cornstalks.

In her initial panic it was hard to keep track of just how many limbs she was feeling. Her fingers fumbled upward to the skulls. Now Mrs. Manning understood. Even before she made the final head count, she knew there would be seven in all.

These were the Lost Swans. They had died here, clinging to one another, huddled in this bleak and hidden corner of the world. Mrs. Manning sat down next to the silent corpses. She made the sign of the cross. The Lost Swans had been missing for over eighty years.



Mrs. Manning had heard about the Lost Swans as a young girl but hadn't thought about them in years. Her mind spooled back to her childhood. She had grown up in this tiny town. The Lost Swans had lived in Culbertson. Everyone in these parts knew the story. They were the stuff of legend and mystery, a group of children who had disappeared in the century's worst blizzard in the late morning hours of January 12, 1888.

The locals called them the Lost Swans. They were named after the three Swan siblings among them: Jack, the oldest at 10, and his two sisters, Helen, 8, and Katherine, 6. The Lost Swans also included the Rochelle twins, Michael and Marvin, aged 6, along with their fellow first-graders Carol Dornan and Beverly Macklemore. When last seen alive, all seven were leaving their single-room schoolhouse, holding hands and headed in the direction of their homes.

They never made it to their destination. Although their bodies had never been found, it was believed they had perished in the School Children's Blizzard, the infamous storm that swept through the Dakota Territory and plains states, killing over two hundred people in its wake. The horror had started quietly with a seemingly innocent fluke of nature. The day began with

uncharacteristically warm weather, a wonderful break from the harsh winter chill. Everyone went into early spring fever. Farmers stripped off their long johns in favor of thin coveralls. Children left their heavy coats, mittens and winter hats at home and happily skipped to their far-off prairie classrooms.

Without warning the day turned deadly. A massive cold front swept down from Canada, bringing with it a frigid storm that spread like a pall across the land. In just a few minutes it was 20 degrees colder. While some teachers stayed put in their classrooms with their students, others sent them home early. No one had any idea just how bad it was going to get.

The mercury kept plunging at a shocking rate. Within hours the temperature dropped to Arctic conditions. The screaming winds brought snow so blinding that entire counties were thrown into whiteout conditions. The children who had left school ran into the very center of the storm.

By the next morning corpses were everywhere. In the days that followed, search parties found bodies scattered across the countryside, frozen on the roadside and crouched in desperate makeshift shelters. Some died far from their homes, others just a few strides away from their own front doors. Many of the dead were children. Dozens of tiny frozen bodies were uncovered in the aftermath. They silently told the stories of the children's ghastly ends. Little corpses were found buried deep in the snow, huddled together in ditches and haystacks and frozen against fence posts and trees.

All the missing were eventually recovered. Except for the seven Lost Swans. The searchers finally gave up, figuring their bodies would eventually be discovered in the spring thaw. But when the thaw came and the last of the snow and ice melted away, the bodies were nowhere to be found. It was perplexing. A mystery. Where had the Lost Swans gone?

The story riveted Mrs. Manning as a young girl. She was an obedient pupil of ten when Sister Joseph Ann read the class the story of the School Children's Blizzard and the mystery of the Lost Swans. It was one of the great horror stories of the Old West. It ranked right up there with the infamous Donner party, the wagon train of pioneers who had headed west to California in 1846, became snowbound in the Sierra Nevada mountains and turned to cannibalism.

These true stories of the frontier were not for the weak of heart. They were even more exciting than one of Zane Grey's western novels. They were certainly scarier. Mrs. Manning and her classmates hung on every word.

The story of the Lost Swans was even better than the story of the Donner party, because it was a story that had happened right here where they lived. It was the great ghost story of the county. All the adults seemed proud of its ghastly heritage.

Mrs. Manning's classmates teased one another with sightings of the Lost Swans. "Look out!" a group of boys yelled at her after school one day as she started down the road toward home. "Jack Swan is waiting for you at home. He's hiding in your barn." The boys laughed and ran away. Their words rang in her mind. For months afterward she lived in terror of going into the barn alone.



Mrs. Manning sat in the dark abandoned root cellar, remembering all the long ago details from childhood. Looking at the corpses of the Lost Swans, she was astonished that the children had wandered this far off course on the final day of their lives. They were a whole town away from where their homes once stood. Clearly the blizzard had turned them around. Caught in whiteout conditions they had staggered far afield in confusion. They must have gone snowblind.

Mrs. Manning remained next to the mound of bodies until the sun began to dip toward the horizon. She didn't want to leave. She could have slept there all night and been fine. But the dogs were whining outside. They were agitated. They needed to be fed and put up for the night in the warm kitchen.

Mrs. Manning whispered a good-bye to the Lost Swans.

"Don't worry," she said, touching the bodies softly. "You aren't lost anymore."

The thought made her feel happy inside. After all this time, the Lost Swans were found. Found by her. She would never let them feel lost again.

All through the fall Mrs. Manning visited her new children. She would make an afternoon of it. She packed a small lunch, a water canteen, a book, a flashlight and a thermos filled with

coffee and Milnot cream. After morning chores were done she'd head to the root cellar with the dogs. This was her time.

She'd sit next to the huddle of little bodies with a flashlight. Shadows danced on the walls of earth. She read aloud to the Lost Swans from children's books she'd checked out of the little library in Culbertson. She adored the "The Black Stallion" series. Anything by Marguerite Henry: "King of the Wind," "Misty of Chincoteague," "Mustang: Wild Spirit of the West." Mrs. Manning loved that last one best. It was a children's book about Wild Horse Annie, a real woman who had saved America's wild mustangs from slaughter and extinction. It touched Mrs. Manning's heart to think that one person could do all that. That one person could save something so special and misunderstood.

Mrs. Manning told no one about the Lost Swans. They were a secret she shared only with Walt, Wylie and Cody. The dogs weren't telling a soul. Neither was she.

No one could know about the children. Mrs. Manning understood that from the instant she saw the small pile of bodies.

She thought about all the "shoulds" that a person was supposed to do when confronted with a dead body. She should call the sheriff. The bodies should be removed as discreetly as possible from her property. The surviving distant relatives should be contacted. The children should be given a proper Christian burial in their respective family plots.

But Mrs. Manning bristled at the thought of all the things she should do. Her entire life had been defined by shoulds. She should work in the fields, forego education, marry a farmer. She should hold her tongue. She should be a good Christian.

She had done all those shoulds but what had it gotten her? Nothing but a nagging sense of loss at the center of her life.

Mrs. Manning was done with "shoulds." She was older now. She had not expected youth to flee so quickly. She had not expected any of it, really, this life that had come and gone. Trying to hold onto time was like holding water in your hands. No matter how hard you tried it always ran through your fingers. There was no getting any of it back.

The only thing more disappointing than a life gone by was a life gone by in such disappointment. Other than the births of her daughters, finding the Lost Swans was the only important thing that had ever happened to her. They belonged to her now. It was up to her to decide their fate. She could no longer allow anyone to intrude and tell her what she should be doing.

"Your secret is safe with me," she whispered to the children who had wandered far from home one terrible day. "I'm your mother now. No one will ever hurt you again. No one will ever take you away from me."



Mrs. Manning's daughters pressured her to sell the farm and move into town. Since her husband's death, it had been the same conversation at the end of every Thanksgiving dinner. After the dishes were cleared and the kids ran off to play, the grown-ups would talk over coffee and pumpkin pie at the kitchen table.

"You have to face it, Mom. You're getting older," Deborah said. "It's not safe for you to live alone here on the farm. You can move in with me and Stew."

Mrs. Manning shook her head. She would not budge. "You're so sweet to offer, Deb," Mrs. Manning said, patting her daughter's hand. "But this is where I've always lived. I'm not leaving now."

"What if something happens to you out here?" Deborah insisted. "There'd be no one to help you."

"I'm healthy as a horse. Fit as I've ever been," she said. "And if anybody comes around trying to make trouble, I've got the guns your dad left me. You know I'm a good shot. I know my firearms. Plus I've got the Boys here with me. They're all the company I need. They keep me safe. The Boys protect me from anything I need protecting from."

With that, Mrs. Manning shut down any talk of a move into town. Her daughters sighed at their mother's stubbornness.

Deborah shook her head and furrowed her brow. "Just tell me why you're so attached to this old rundown place," she said.

"Really, Mother," agreed second-to-oldest daughter Becky. "It's so lonely and depressing out here. What do you see in this old place that we don't?"



Mrs. Manning visited the Lost Swans nearly every day. As fall turned to winter, she laid a large board over the opening to the root cellar. She knew that when the big snow came, the path to this place would grow nearly impassable. It would be hard for her to make the trek to see the children. She wanted to make sure they were safe during the months she could not visit them.

It was late January. The holidays had been hectic. Everyone came to the farm for Christmas dinner. The kitchen and parlor had been filled with her four daughters, their respective husbands and five grandchildren.

That was all over now. The flurry of family subsided. Everyone returned to their own lives in town. It was just Mrs. Manning on the homestead, the only human in the house.

It was late afternoon. A hard snow began to fall. It quickly became near-blizzard conditions. Mrs. Manning's phone rang. It was Deborah. She was pregnant and due within the next month. She had quit her job and was at home awaiting the baby's arrival.

“We’re supposed to get over 24 inches with lots of drifting,” Deborah said over the line. “Stewart is getting ready to leave work. They’re closing the bank early today. He’ll come and fetch you. You can stay with us until this is over. We don’t want you to get snowed in alone out there.”

“Thank you, dear, but that’s not necessary,” Mrs. Manning said, her voice firm. “If Stewart comes now he’ll just get stuck out here on a back road. With the baby so close to coming you need him there with you, not stuck out here with me.”

Deborah paused. “Are you sure you’ll be okay, Mom?”

“I’ll be fine,” Mrs. Manning assured her. “I’ve got the dogs for company. I have plenty of food and water and heat. I’ve got enough wood to burn in the fireplace to last me until spring.”

“Okay, then,” Deborah said slowly. “But you’ll call us if you need any little thing, right?”

“Right,” said Mrs. Manning. “Any little thing. I will let you know.”

Mrs. Manning hung up the phone. A great gust of wind rattled the entire farmhouse. The lights flickered and went dead. “You’re not kidding around, are you?” Mrs. Manning sighed under her breath, rolling her eyes toward the heavens.

She lit several candles in the parlor and a fire in the fireplace. She pulled on thick winter boots, a heavy coat and hat. She walked out the back door of her kitchen and down the steps. The snow was thick, merciless and completely silent.

Mrs. Manning called out for the Boys. They had gone patrolling the far edges of the property earlier in the day. She knew that even if this weather didn’t immediately drive them back to the house, the prospect of food would. She scraped a pan of gristle, fat and cow bones onto the frozen ground and beat the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. She yelled out their names like a chanted mantra: Wy-lie, Wah-alt, Co-dy.

The three dogs materialized, their dark figures bounding out of the blinding snow. They sidled up against her legs and greedily attacked the meat scraps. “Eat fast, Boys,” she said. “Then it’s inside for the night.”

Suddenly the dogs stopped in mid-bite and turned their heads in unison toward the field. Their eyes unblinkingly focused on a distant target in the snow. They didn’t move a paw. They didn’t bark. They stood frozen as statues.

Mrs. Manning looked at them quizzically as the wind whipped against her coat and threatened to blow off her hat. This was odd. Anything out of the ordinary was always met with a cacophony of barking. Other than that, nothing ever distracted the Boys from wolfing down their food. Yet here they stood, frozen, silent, braced against the wind, their eyes riveted on a fixed point in the howling whiteout that surrounded them.

“What is...” Mrs. Manning started to say. But something hovering on the edge of the field moved into her peripheral vision and stopped the words in her throat.

Mrs. Manning felt as if she had been struck in the heart. What unfolded before her was something she never dared dream she would see in the real world. It was something mystical and ecstatic, like an angel or the Virgin Mary. It was so much bigger than her own life. She could only compare it to the word of God revealed. A gift that made you feel privileged to be alive. A vision that made you feel worthy.

At the edge of the field, the black moving forms that transfixed the Boys and Mrs. Manning came forth. The closer they came, the more defined they grew. It was all seven of the Lost Swans in a line, one after the next, trudging slowly through the deep snow. The wet snowflakes clung to the tufts of hair on their skulls. The dark rags that hung on their thin bones flapped in the stinging wind.

The Boys remained frozen in place, their heads cocked at the sight. Mrs. Manning clasped her hand over her mouth and choked back a sob. She had not been able to go to the root cellar to visit them. Now they were coming to her. She understood. The Lost Swans loved her as much as she loved them. She pushed off into the snow toward the seven little ones.

Their mouths were frozen open in wordless screams. They stretched their skeletal arms toward her above the snow. Mrs. Manning reached the first one, what had once been a little boy in life. She picked the body up in her arms. He was a nearly weightless thing, dried and cold, cracked and bloodless. "My poor babies," she yelled into the wind, holding the boy-thing close to her chest and nodding to the others. She carried him slowly into the house while the rest of the dead ones followed behind, the snow pelting their backs as they made their way up the back steps and into the kitchen.

The Lost Swans were dead. But still, they lived. In their sad and terrible and spectacular way, they lived.



The visitations began in winter but did not stop there. The Lost Swans rose and receded with the weather. Mrs. Manning began to see a pattern across the seasons. They always came to her when some force of nature disturbed their hidden grave. The icy rains of autumn. The thunder and lightning of spring and summer. The punishing snowstorms of winter. Any time the elements tapped their tomb, the wanderers roused from their death slumber, rose up from the root cellar and crossed the fields to her kitchen.

“They miss me,” Mrs. Manning said to the dogs. “They need me. They’re afraid of the weather.”

Mrs. Manning felt she understood the Lost Swans on a primal level. How could she not? She was a mother. She understood the suffering of a child. Across the infancies of four daughters, she had walked the halls countless nights with a squalling baby in her arms. She had worried over all the childhood illnesses: croup, measles, chicken pox, unexplained fevers and rashes.

She saw the Lost Swans as her own children now, little ones in need of guidance, understanding and protection. She was their mother, yes. But she was more. She was their nurse and their teacher. Most of all, she was their protector. Who else in this lonely land would understand the Lost Swans?





“Fill ’er up, Miss Manning?” Benny Knowles smiled and held the gasoline nozzle up to the window of her pickup truck, his face red, his breath expelling clouds of vapor into the frigid air.

Mrs. Manning had known Benny since boyhood. Nice kid. He had attended school with her daughter Deborah. Now he pumped gas at the Texaco station in Culbertson.

“Yes, that’ll be fine, Ben.” She was bundled up and sitting behind the wheel, her frosted driver’s side window rolled halfway down.

Benny was dressed head to foot in thick coveralls. He smiled at her as he diligently cleaned her windshield. She smiled back. It was Friday morning. The day was cold and overcast, but Mrs. Manning felt sunny inside. Happy. Ten inches were expected to begin falling around midnight tonight. She would sit up in her kitchen and wait for the children.

“It’s gonna be a rough night,” Benny said when she handed him the cash for the gas. “Make sure you get home in plenty of time before the storm. I hope you’re okay out there alone.”

She thought about her secret. How would it feel to say it out loud to Benny? What would it be like to watch his face as she unpacked the hidden details of her wondrous life? She would tell it calmly and without affect and let the story speak for itself. Tonight when the snow came, the children would wake from their bed of dirt. They would push themselves up from the frozen grave they shared in an abandoned root cellar on the back field of her farm. They were the Lost Swans. They belonged to her.

Suddenly something occurred to Mrs. Manning. She had never had a secret before. Not a real one. Not one like this. She had no close friend to tell it to. No one to confide in.

A wave of sadness swept through her. Mrs. Manning looked at Benny. His eyes were kind but incurious. She didn't say a word. She started the engine and headed for home.



They filed stiffly into her kitchen, one after the next, like stunned travelers staggering in from the cold. Mrs. Manning breathed a long sigh. Poor babies. She knew what they were coming for. They were coming for her. Or at least what she represented. Home. Shelter. Warmth. Food. The very things that would have saved them from their dreadful end all those decades ago.

The fact that they were dead wasn't even the worst part of it. No. The most horrifying thing was that even though they came for food, they couldn't eat. Even though they came for warmth, they couldn't feel it. There was no spark of life in the Wanderers' black, dried-out eyes, hard as buttons and sunk deep in the sockets of their faces. Like large broken dolls, they always fixed those fathomless eyes on all the things they couldn't have.

Nonetheless Mrs. Manning went through elaborate rituals of making dinner whenever they came to her. She liked to cook for the little ones even if they couldn't actually eat. It gave her a sense of purpose. When all the burners were fired up the kitchen glowed like home.

But still the death part of it hurt. There was no assuaging the children's bottomless hunger. Mrs. Manning tried, but how can you feed the dead? It didn't matter how much food she heaped

on their plates. All the wanderers could do was turn their faces toward it in wordless longing. They couldn't taste or chew or swallow.

It was the same with the heat. No matter how big and cheery a fire Mrs. Manning built in the parlor, the children could only mill around it like it was an abstract idea. Their broken teeth chattered in their leathery faces. Their filthy, cracked bones trembled before the crackling flames. Everything about them was dead, save for their ravenous, unquenchable desire.

As with all new parenthood, it was not an easy adjustment for Mrs. Manning or the Lost Swans. But like a new mother nursing her first infant, mother and child eventually settle into one another and find the curves that fit. And so it was with Mrs. Manning and the children. They bonded over time, feeling their way together through the dark. She delighted in the moments when the children responded.

Jesus had said it himself: "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Whenever the Wanderers made their way into the parlor, Mrs. Manning read the Bible to them. At first they seemed confused by the sound, agitated and blindly thumping into walls and stumbling over table legs, like a herd of spooked cattle on the cusp of erupting into a stampede. But soon enough Mrs. Manning's unwavering voice calmed them down.

The Lost Swans never spoke. If they were capable of it, they never attempted to do so. As Mrs. Manning sat in a straight-backed chair and read aloud into the night, they would slump into sitting positions on the floor and huddle together around her legs, nuzzling their blank leathery faces into the folds of her skirt, their black eyes fixed on the floor.

A mother isn't supposed to pick a favorite. But Mrs. Manning had hers. Jack. It made sense she should care for him above the others. He was the oldest and most alone. Carol and Beverly paired up by age, Helen and Katherine as sisters and the twins by birth. Jack was the odd boy out.

His age had made him the leader that day of the terrible snowstorm. Mrs. Manning clucked her tongue and furrowed her brow. What an awful burden for a boy of ten. She looked at him slumped on the floor, his body like a dried out corn cob, all cracked husk.

The Lost Swans had done nothing wrong. Why didn't heaven want them?


The fireplace crackled and lit the room in warm, muted light. Candles on a table threw light on the pages. As she softly read the Bible laying open in her lap, she would absentmindedly take her right hand and pet their heads one by one, gently tracing the scrapes and dents that pocked their tiny skulls. The Wanderers remained still as death. They were death. Breathless, wordless, sightless death. Calm death, as if all the hunger and despair had come to a brief standstill.

It made Mrs. Manning happy that she could effect such change in the Lost Swans. She read them the happiest parts of the Bible that she could find, which was not easy because it is a book with little happiness in it. Mostly she focused on the Psalms, but even those needed to be heavily truncated to avoid the violence and smiting talk. When the children came to visit she stayed away from the weeping prophet Jeremiah, who was always crying out in agony as if he were living inside a long fever dream.

On still nights, hot or cold, when the air was hushed and nothing moved, the Lost Swans stayed motionless in their root cellar. Mrs. Manning liked these nights, too. In warm weather she

would sit on the porch, swaying alone on a swing built for two, her hands wrapped around a glass of iced tea.

She enjoyed the quiet days of winter too, when the children stayed silent and resting beneath an ivory blanket of snow. Entire weeks would pass where Mrs. Manning saw no other human. It was just her and the Boys and the Wanderers, fast asleep in their makeshift tomb in the hillside. These were days that gave her peace in her heart. She felt content, like a mother quietly minding her resting children, pleased they were sleeping soundly and undisturbed by nightmares.





It was early summer when the letter came. The envelope bore the official stamp of the state. What it said was horrible. Grim. The government was building a new highway. Mrs. Manning's property sat smack dab in the middle of the new plan. She had no choice. She had to sell her farm to the state.

They would pay her for her troubles, the letter said. But make no mistake: Legally, she had to vacate the premises.

The highway project had been brewing for some time. There had been much speculation in town about its route. Mrs. Manning had not taken much note of it. She assumed it would not come near her small corner of the earth. She was wrong. It was coming. Right through her farm. Right through her.

Mrs. Manning saw in her mind's eye what would happen when she left. Men in hard hats and earth-moving machines would tear all her buildings down. The woods would be stripped of all its trees and brush. The fields would be cleared and plowed under to make way for concrete and steel.

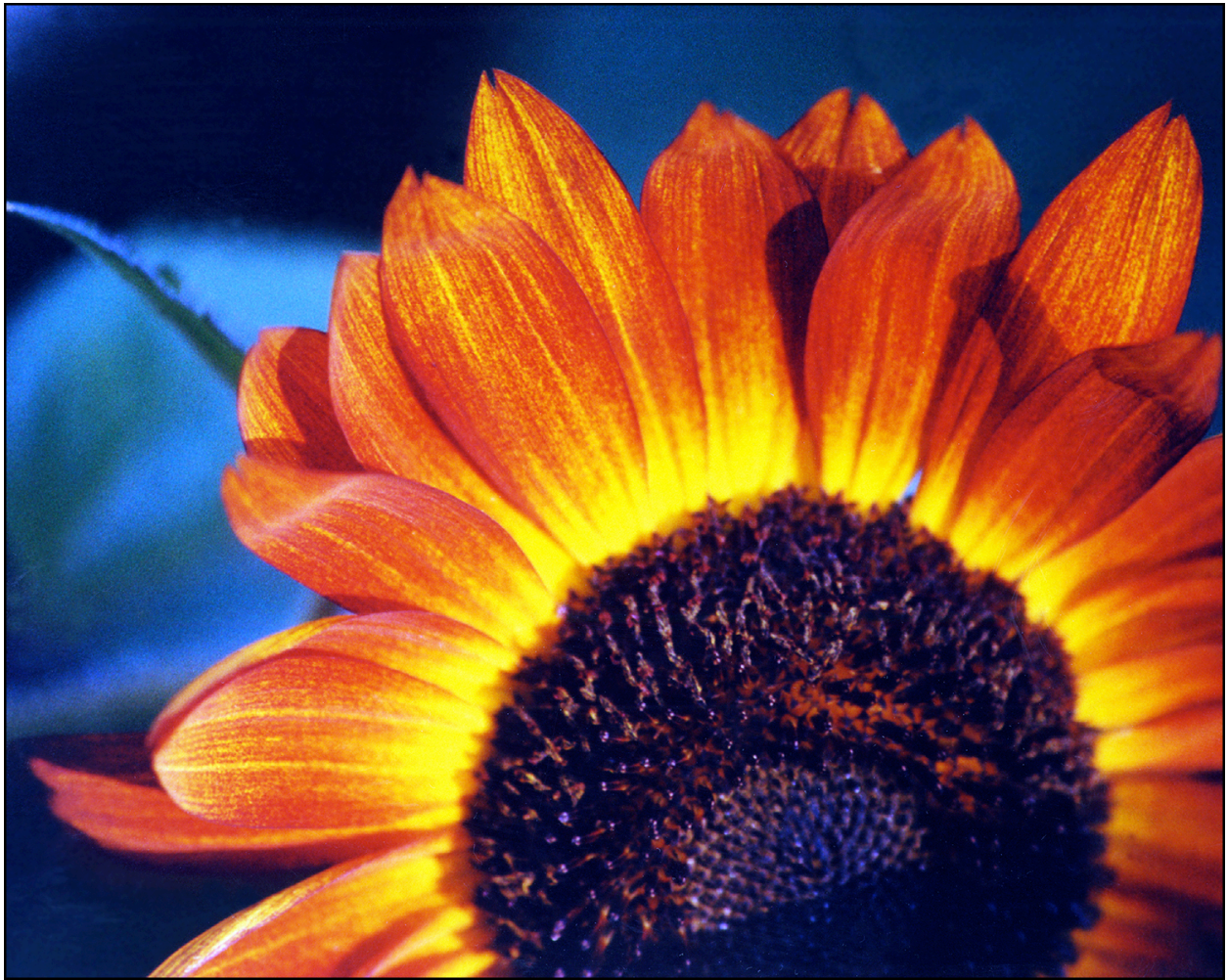
The root cellar would be destroyed. Even worse, what if it were discovered? What if the Lost Swans came to life in front of the construction workers? Would they beat the children to the ground with shovels and sledgehammers? Would the men flee from the site and sound the alarm in town?

It would become a Frankenstein movie. An angry mob would make their way to the field, stabbing their spades deep into the children, axing the Wanderers to pieces.

Hadn't the children endured enough already? Hadn't it already been the worst for them? How much more horrible could it get for a child than to be lost in sub-zero temperatures? To huddle in a dark hole with other terrified children and fall not into sleep and dreams but coma and death?

They mustn't suffer anymore and certainly not at the hands of ignorant panicking townsfolk. Mrs. Manning gazed out her kitchen window and wondered: was it even possible to kill the dead? She didn't know. She didn't want to know. It was for God to sort out and she was not God. All she knew was that the mob must never know of the Wanderers. The farm could not be sold or taken.

The world had already killed them once. The world would kill them again without a second thought. Mrs. Manning was the only thing standing between the children and that outcome.



It was her Christian duty to protect the innocents. That's why she was driving to St. Agnes church today. She would tell Father Kiernan. She knew it was a gamble to tell anyone. But the government men were coming and she had no one else to turn to for help. The priest seemed the best bet. He was bound by his vows to keep her secret.

Mrs. Manning's footsteps echoed through the empty, silent church. The only other parishioner in the building was the aged widow Mrs. Coyne, sitting alone in a pew near the front. No surprise. Rain or shine, she was in church every day, eyes snapped shut, mouth moving in silent prayer, feverishly working the rosary beads between her fingers like worry stones.

Mrs. Manning opened the door to the confessional box, stepped in and closed the door behind her. She knelt in the dark, feeling the priest's presence on the other side of the curtained partition.

He began to mumble.

"Thank you, Father, for blessing me," Mrs. Manning said softly when the mumbling stopped. "It has been four years since my last confession and these are my sins."

She paused and clapped her hand softly over her mouth. Instead of saying “these are my sins,” she had almost just said “these are my sons.” In real life she had no sons. Only daughters. It was different in the root cellar. She had three sons there. Four more daughters too. Before the Wanderers, her life had been colored in a series of grays. Now it was Technicolor. She wondered if Father Kiernan would understand.

She had known the priest forever. St. Agnes sat a block over from the town square in Prairie Bend. She’d been coming to this church since childhood. She was baptized here. It was where she had her first communion and confirmation into the faith. She’d even married Bob at the foot of this altar.

Father Kiernan had presided over all of it. He had once been a young man new to the priesthood. Now he was in his 80s. He still said mass here and baptized the new babies. He held confession every other Saturday, even though many parishioners whispered that he mostly slept through them these days.

It occurred to Mrs. Manning that she had been telling this man her mundane sins for 50 years now. As she knelt on the small pew in the confessional, she could hear his breathing just on the other side of the thin curtain that separated them.

The anonymity was just a rote ritual at this point. She knew Father Kiernan recognized her voice. There was no hiding her identity. There never had been any hiding it. The priest always knew who it was behind the curtain: little Alma Doherty, youngest daughter of Samuel and Emily Doherty. When she grew up and married, she became simply Mrs. Manning, Bob’s wife. It occurred to her now that she’d lost both her first and last names when she married. No matter. That’s how it happened in this town. Everyone stayed the same, even when the names changed.

It was the same way with the sins. Mrs. Manning always had similar ones to tell. When she was little, she admitted occasional disobedience to her father. When she was older, she admitted occasional disobedience to her husband.

“I was a bad daughter,” she used to say in the confessional. When she married, the script altered slightly: “I was a bad wife.”

Each time she would recite a list of her offenses: She made breakfast too late. Dinner too early. The bacon was burnt. The meatloaf was cold. The laundry was a day undone. The clothes weren’t folded properly. She thought a mean thought. She sassed back.

Each time, Father Kiernan snorted wearily behind the curtain, then made a stilted pronouncement, usually “honor your mother and father” or “respect your husband.” She could feel the whoosh of the priest’s hand drawing a cross in the air. He passed judgment and gave her multiple prayers as penance. Go home and say twenty Hail Marys, four Our Fathers and one Glory Be. It was like a doctor handing out a prescription: Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.

But Mrs. Manning was older now. There was no longer any man in her life to disobey. There hadn’t been since her husband Bob had passed away. That’s when she stopped going to confession. She couldn’t think of any sins to reveal.

Times had changed but Father Kiernan had not. He immediately focused on her absence.

“Four years since your last confession,” he said, drawing out the words for effect. “That’s quite a long time to go without the forgiveness of God.”

“I have nothing to ask forgiveness for,” she said. “I’ve been a good person. God knows that.”

Mrs. Manning heard Father Kiernan’s dismissive snort. She could feel his disapproval through the curtain: How dare she presume to know God’s thoughts?

No one ever questioned his religious authority. Mrs. Manning soldiered on.

“I didn’t come here to confess. I came here to tell you about a miracle.”

“A miracle?”

“A magical thing has happened.”

“Magic is the devil’s work.”

“This has nothing to do with the devil,” she said firmly. “This is about God. This is about everlasting life. And my place in it.”

She could hear Father Kiernan’s breath grow more labored than usual.

“For goodness sakes, woman, what are you talking about?” he said.

“The missing children. The Lost Swans.”

The priest was silent for long minutes. She could feel his mind whirring backward in time. “You mean those prairie kids lost in the snowstorm?” he finally said. “What about them?”

“They aren’t lost anymore.”

No words came through the curtain. Not even a grunt. Just silence

“I found them,” she said.

“Are you saying you’ve found the bodies?”

Mrs. Manning paused. She felt as if she held the whole world on her tongue.

“Yes. And no.”

“What does that mean?”

“Yes, I’ve found the bodies,” she said. “But they aren’t dead. Not completely. They come alive sometimes. I mean, alive in their way. I read to them. I keep them warm. I keep them safe. But when the weather’s quiet they don’t wake up. They stay sleeping where they are. I go to them then. I pet their heads. You know, like sleeping kids.”

Her own words burned in her ears.

His only response was silence.

The minutes ticked away without even a grunt from his side of the curtain.

Mrs. Manning started to stammer. An awful, wordless pocket of time hung between them. She tried to fill it with more details. Her words tumbled out in a rush.

“They come to me when the weather gets bad. I’m not sure why, but I think it’s because they’re looking for home. They were never found. Never reunited with their families. Never buried. They’re . . . restless. They’ve been between worlds all this time.”

“And you claim they’ve woken up from the dead now?”

“Yes. It was me who woke them up.”

“You? Why you?”

“They were children without a mother. They sensed I was there. I’m a mother. That’s what I am. That’s why they come to me.”

“What you’re saying is madness,” Father Kiernan finally said. “An abomination.”

Mrs. Manning took in a sharp breath.

“I’m not crazy,” she whispered. “It’s not wrong.”

Father Kiernan’s breathing was hard and agitated. Mrs. Manning wondered if he was going to have a heart attack.

“I thought maybe you could bless the ground where they sleep,” she said. “Bless it with holy water. Maybe that would send them to heaven.”

“You need help from a professional, Alma. Someone who deals with diseases of the mind.”

“I’m not crazy,” she snapped. “I have to save the children. The government wants to take my farm for the highway. I can’t let them do that.”

“I can have you talk to Dr. Galvin,” he said. “He can send you to the right place.”

Mrs. Manning suddenly felt outside of her own body, an observer of her own life hovering high above in the rafters of the church. She saw the confessional down below. She watched herself bolt from the large wooden box.

She saw Father Kiernan’s thick body nearly fall out the door of the confessional. He cried after her: “Stop, Alma. Stop.”

She saw herself run down the aisle and out the door into the blinding sun of summer. It wasn’t until she was in her own driveway again, weeping hard behind the wheel of her car, the Boys leaping up to lick her face through the open window, that she realized what she had done.

Father Kiernan was not a man of God. He would tell everyone. The horse was out of the barn. There was no closing the door now.



She saw the reason now that people prepared for Armageddon. Sometimes in life it actually is a battle between the forces of good and evil.

She had been holed up in her house for several days now. Waiting. Preparing.

Mrs. Manning went into her bedroom. To the left of the bed's headboard was her late husband's gun rack. Six long guns in all. Four rifles and two shotguns. Mrs. Manning was not an expert marksman, but she was decent. She was better than most and that made her surprisingly good. Shooting was a talent.

She loaded every weapon in the house. Placed them in strategic points. There was no telling where danger would come from when it came. One had to be prepared. There was no trusting anyone. There was certainly no trusting a priest.

She heard the loud barking of the Boys. She peered through the kitchen window. Two cars pulled into the driveway. The sheriff and his deputy were in one car, Father Kiernan in the other.

She felt the blood rise in her face. Father Kiernan had told them all. He had broken his vows.

The sky had grown dark. The radio on the kitchen counter was crackling with static. A tornado had touched down in the state earlier that morning. There was speculation it was headed this way. She heard thunder in the distance. If this kept up, the children would surely wake.

Mrs. Manning watched the three men get out of the cars and stand in her side yard. The dogs were going crazy, barking and baring their teeth. The priest picked up stones from the driveway and tried to drive the dogs off. It only made the Boys more fearsome. The sheriff angled his gun at the dogs and fired off a round. The bullet hit Walt in the side. He flipped into the air, yelping wildly as he landed, bleeding in the gravel.

Mrs. Manning jerked her head toward Walt's cry. She saw him fall. She screamed and lifted her rifle to the window. But before she could get off a shot, the sheriff rounded the house.

Sheriff DeLay walked onto the front porch and rapped his knuckles hard on the screen door. "Mrs. Manning?" he called. "Alma? Please step outside, Alma. We need to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," she called from the kitchen, surprised by the authoritative tone in her voice carrying down the hallway. "If you step inside I'll shoot."

A lightning bolt slashed the blackening sky. A rumble of thunder followed.

"Alma?" The sheriff ignored her warning and came slowly through the front door. She heard footsteps coming down the hall. His voice was calling through the house. "A tornado is coming, Alma," she heard him yell. "Please don't do this. We can resolve this peacefully."

She picked up her shotgun.

The thunder rolled. The radio crackled. She heard the distant whine of the tornado sirens in Prairie Bend.

The sheriff started into the kitchen, his revolver clasped tightly in his hand. Mrs. Manning stood frozen off to the side out of his sight. The back door was open. The light outside was strange, the color of big weather. She remained motionless.

He caught a movement on the back porch steps. He blinked his eyes, as if trying to clear them of cobwebs. He saw them. All seven of them. The little black figures were advancing up the steps, one by one, their little feet slowly scraping the wood.

The sheriff had no reference point for what he was seeing. They were dead things. But they walked. Like small, scrawny scarecrows that had lifted themselves off their posts and walked from the fields.

The lawman felt stricken, queasy. He thought he was going to vomit. He pointed his revolver at the dead children. But Mrs. Manning lifted her shotgun and pulled the trigger. The blast took off the side of his head and most of his face.

His body fell to the kitchen tile. Mrs. Manning stood over him. The Lost Swans were weaving through the kitchen now, their gait unsteady, their little mouths set in rictus, their black button eyes fastened only on Mrs. Manning.

She ushered the Wanderers into the parlor then returned to the living room. Through the window she saw Father Kiernan hobbling toward his car. She picked up a rifle from the table, aimed and shot. The bullet hit the priest in the upper back. He fell instantly. Tried to crawl. Then stopped. He was all blood and no motion.

Far off in the sky she saw the long tail of a twister trying to touch down to the ground. She remembered something she had read once about twisters: They are like people. They are born, they live, they die. The one she saw now was trying hard to be born. It was trying to connect its tail to the earth. But it could not. She saw the black swirl receding further from the land, disappearing back into the sky from which it had come. Sheets of rain began to pound at her window.

The deputy had taken shelter in the decrepit smokehouse that sat at the edge of the lawn. Mrs. Manning watched as he bolted to his car, gun drawn as he retreated.

She unloaded her rifle at him but nothing hit. He made it to his car. Jumped in. Peeled out of the drive and down the road, kicking up gravel and dirt in his panicked wake.

Mrs. Manning was not school smart. But she knew the difference between a battle and a war. Father Kiernan, killed in mid-run, lay face down with his arms outstretched above his head. Sheriff DeLay was dead on her kitchen floor, a shotgun blast to his head. Walt lay lifeless in the driveway.

Mrs. Manning sighed. This battle was over, but the dead here today would not be the last casualties. A war was coming now. The war would do what wars always do: take the children from their mothers.

She sat down at the kitchen table with a ballpoint pen and a sheet of blue stationery the color of a robin's egg. Her fingers froze above the page. There was everything and nothing to write. How to explain it all? The sheriff's blood was collecting in a large pool beneath her feet. She sighed. She had not murdered the two men. She had only protected the children from them. No one would understand. No one had ever understood.

"I love all of you," she wrote. "Don't worry about me. I have gone where I am needed most."

She opened the door to the mudroom that sat off the kitchen. Under the slop sink she picked up a can of gasoline. She carried it into the parlor. The Lost Swans were hovering about, softly bumping into one another like blind butterflies fluttering wing against wing.

Mrs. Manning poured a line of gasoline around the room in a circle, dousing the rug and the curtains and the furniture along the way. The scent was seductive and dizzying. It didn't bother the Lost Swans. They couldn't smell things of this earth.

It was best this way, she thought. The deputy would be in town soon. More men would come. There would be bigger guns. Loud voices. The news crews would come too. They would focus their cameras with long lenses through the windows. They would film the Lost Swans.

Everyone would see something different in the Wanderers. Some people would see witchcraft and Satan's work. They would stand on the perimeter with their homemade signs, calling for the heads of the children. Others might see the Lost Swans as a last vestige of the Old West, a part of the American heritage in need of protection. People would come to blows over them. But in the end it would be the children themselves who would suffer the most.

Mrs. Manning would not have that. She sat in her reading chair by the fireplace and gathered the Wanderers together. They sat around her on the floor. She touched their leathery heads one by one. Their nervous fidgeting stopped. Their faces fixed on the woman in the chair.

She opened the Bible in her lap. She began to read Jeremiah. She had avoided the prophet before. But now it felt right. It occurred to Mrs. Manning that all must be stripped clean before a new beginning was possible.

“Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns,” she read, her voice even. As she continued on through the passages, the Wanderers drifted into the strange lull that passed for sleep. Mrs. Manning quietly reached for a small box on the end table. She pulled out a long wooden match and struck it against the table leg. She gazed at it for a moment, looked down at the Lost Swans and then flung the match to the side of the room.

“Attack you they will, overcome you they can’t,” she said, the words of God eaten by a rush of hot wind. The fire tore around the rug and raced up the curtains. Mrs. Manning sat in the center of the flames with her children. She had no fear. There was no cold here. No one would go snowblind and lose their way in the darkness. They were safe here in the center. They had finally found their way home. They would all sleep together now, in this place where it was forever warm, listening to Jeremiah. The dogs howled outside as the storm raged around them.





Chrissie Dickinson

I grew up in a haunted farmhouse in Indiana. I know what it's like to live with ghosts. I was steeped in both the Catholic mysticism of my psychic mother and the eastern religions of my older hippie siblings. My childhood was filled with soulful horses, guns, cornfields and an alcoholic father, now on the other side, who I still occasionally talk to.

Learning to read saved my life (thanks Mom) and I've managed to make a living with words. My writing has appeared in numerous publications including the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, the Boston Phoenix, the Chicago Reader, the Christian Science Monitor, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Outre and Off Our Backs. I've contributed essays to several books including the Da Capo Press collection "Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader." I've also been a guest lecturer at Washington University, Columbia College and the Chicago Humanities Festival.

I was a guitarist, singer and songwriter in the all-female post-punk band Sally's Dream. I now direct my musical passion into soundtracks and a video series of my original country-punk-blues songs on my YouTube channel www.youtube.com/user/ChrissieDickinson.

The spirits I saw as a kid continue to inform my work, as does the Ouija Board I keep next to my bed. I still believe in ghosts.