

MARC DICKINSON
DROUGHTS

It's night and there are stars. The day is so blue it's hard to imagine all this dark. But these skies still slip from one strange shade to the next. Tonight is no different, except it feels like dawn's coming sooner than usual. Like it can't keep away from this land long enough to get it cold for once. Even when it's winter, the air burns your skin. Tonight, the hot summer winds rattle at our windows like they've got something to say. The cattle are restless. They rustle all night, padding the ground and grinding teeth in their sleep.

Morning brings back the blue. Light stings our eyes, but we're used to looking through glare, even if the only thing to see is a long way in every direction. The farm report said new highs today. A record breaker and we scratch our beards at the given degree. Is it possible to worry more? Should we pray harder? We go on as it doesn't matter. We still wear flannel and denim, knowing the ground is cracked enough to bluster. It's hard to tell if we wear these thick clothes in defiance of the weather, a quick resistance to the farm reporter's voice, or if it's just because we don't know any different. It's time to step outside and it's true. It is hot. And windy. We make sure not to mention it.

The wives stay inside but not for long. From a distance, it's hard to spot them as women. They wear the same blistered boots and whipped faces. Their eyes have gained the same squint that comes with such spacious skies. All of our eyes have water in them. And it only takes a short lifetime for all skin to turn to burlap: a red, creased mask that can't distinguish a smirk from a smile, a glare from a grimace. Even in the wives it's difficult to see what's passing through their heads. Whether sun or stampede, time has become so embedded around here it's tough to tell what you're weeping about at all.

Some sons still have their baby skins. They're practically babies themselves but already have their own livestock, their own work to do. But with 4-H and Boy Scouts, it's all just a bunch of games. They're near home and barn life. And though they hate it, we tell them their futures will grow them up fast enough. That their kind of work has its own importance. We give them the time they need, the very thing they don't yet want.

But the other boys have already grown up into small versions of men. They've driven since twelve years old. They roll bales of hay all day. They're always mending fences. Everyday it seems the same thing: fixing posts, stringing up wire, everything happening within just a few feet of the other. But things are forever falling down, and we spend most of our lives keeping it upright. It's this echo that determines our days; a steady ricochet immediately returned, deciding our duty. We catch; this place releases. But when we wrap that wire around wood, sometimes we can't help but let a thought pass. And it's always the same thing: What is it we're holding onto when this place is constantly letting go? But before we attempt to answer such a question, we get caught up in the repetition again. There's always another one and another and then the next.

Repeat and ignore. The system holds us snug. So when the weekend comes, it makes trouble easy. Saturday nights our older sons get a wild hair and ride it for what it's worth. They wear pressed shirts and stiff hats, shiny boots all but broken in. They don't come home until the sun says it's okay. Then on Sunday mornings they find it wasn't worth all that much. A thirty-minute drive to the church and not a word spoken. They're pale and sighing. Their eyes are closed and it looks like they're praying to some god they forgot about the night before. Sometimes sinning is the harder work.

The daughters set up a picnic. They look striking and alive and we wonder when things will flip for them. Their church dresses cling to their bodies with skin that looks more tan than burnt. They're beautiful still and we hang onto that beauty for as long as we can and then longer than we should. But it's nice to see something growing out here that isn't doomed to dry and die, just to blow away that very next minute. It's restoring to see something that at least has a chance to bloom a little, even if only for a small while.

We watch TV. At least our eyes see the screen and the little living things moving across it. But we're somewhere else, thinking about those stars turning around the earth and wondering when they'll leave. It's time to

have some clouds, for once. We try to remember what it felt like to feel wet. When was the last time a towel was even used in these parts? We lick our lips where the thirst sits. But instead of fighting the thing, we give it a handshake as we leave the room and stand out under our porch lights, smoking cigarettes until our throats feel good and tight.

The heat makes animals crazy. They fear famine and get mean, snapping at each other's skin. When one mare comes in contact with another, there's bound to be a scuffle. We see it in their slick eyes, their shrill whinnying at all hours. But they're more of a danger to themselves. Nobody can predict what's next. And we just make it worse being around all the time, whispering in their ears that it'll all be all right. They know what we don't. They've had experience with these things. It's in their blood and they're laughing at us.

Our machines collect dust. Sometimes we take them out for a spin, just to know they'll still work when they have to. The tractors are spotted with winter rust that we scour and repaint. We wash combines and balers till they gleam. Feels like idle work, but it all seems to fall under that brand of late. It's quick and easy to wash dirt from metal and it's encouraging. A task's been finished and results are something we crave. Afterwards the equipment is slowly parked back into their barns, perched and nesting there.

We receive a call from the neighbor, a few miles away. He's seen strays on his property. Says he's always been respectful of boundaries, been mannerly about his spread, but if it happens again there'll be trouble. When pressed for details, he simply says to test him and find out. Threats are idle out here. There's too much open air to enforce anything. It's effort that could be better spent. But there's a new cut to the neighbor's voice, a strange ache, raw and tender. When told he doesn't have any right, that this can be worked out like Christians, that we're all going through the same, the neighbor doesn't say anything back. We sit and wait, but our words remain unanswered, leaving behind an unnerving silence—and more questions: we've finally been cut off, but is it by accident or on purpose? Have we been shunned or simply forgotten about? But once again, in place of answers, all that's left is static and the hum of a dead wire resting in our hands.

Soon enough they arrive. The water-witches. The mystics. Gypsies, who look normal enough, but can be seen strolling over the landscape, chanting

and carrying on. They advertise around town and hole up on its edges, camping in corroded vans. The local paper warns about these types, writing that dowsing isn't science but a desperate act feeding on the faint of heart. Our pastor condemns them at the pulpit, pounding his Bible and screaming that divining rods are as blasphemous as the crucifixion itself. *Make no mistake. There're reasons these devil's tools attempt to make an unholy mockery of the cross.* Most agree. Temptation is the worst kind of hustle, for there is no easy road to Heaven. *Put faith into the Lord and He shall provide.* Swindlers are looking for victims like us—eager people ready to believe in anything. Of course it doesn't stop a few of us from buying a pendulum or two, just to see what's what. And occasionally, at dusk, when you have to strain your eyes to look, you'll sometimes see a neighborly shape in the distance, walking around the land with arms outstretched like a zombie, a broken branch forked in their hands, leading them the way.

Sometimes we nap. Never for long and never aiming to, but it happens. It's something we haven't done since children, and we never mention it even when we catch each other closing our eyes. Maybe it's the sun or lack of sleep, but a weariness follows us around. It comes in sudden places—taking a sit or in the back of truck bed—but there's no denying the fatigue. But we never dream, which is another kind of sign. And we know tonight we'll be up again, half out of it and listening for those first buds that haven't come. Silky stalks piecing through that baked seal. A green growth slowly rising from the earth.

There's a moment when it looks like a thunderstorm sits on the horizon. We see lightning and the air feels so electric it throbs. We stand on our porch and study its pattern, but if anyone attempts a prediction we cut them off with stares. No one can guess the weather, and superstition tells us to try is to fail. Someone tempting fate is a stranger to this life; and there's no place for foreigners around here. The wind shifts and we wait for it. Somebody thinks they feel something but the dirt is still. A hired hand—a young man who thought there'd be work right around the corner, and who was kept on for fear that firing a man looking for work was the worst possible luck—wonders if a twister will come out of this. The sky seems the right light and it's quiet enough. But there is no tornado. Soon, the distant haze lets up and gets sucked into the sky. We watch it slowly lift, a foggy curtain being pulled up and out of reach. Nobody speaks. Nobody moves at all, even when the blue returns and the sun is called back home to us again.

A fire occurs in the southwest field. We see smoke and let it burn for awhile, thinking it'll put itself out. That maybe it's just what our land needs: a good kick in the ass. Some purification. Plus, how much fuel could be out there, really? But we see the drift and know it plans on spreading itself around. So we fill up tanks, ignore the restrictions, and drive out to the pasture, still ablaze. It's unsettling, fire waving in the heat; like it's not really there at all. We feel the flames though, scorching up the leftover brush with its angry fingers. We figure there'd be neighbors congregating, but we're all that's left. Everybody's fending for themselves now. So we spray down the land, waste what water we have, and wonder if we're doing the right thing, resurrecting what's already departed.

The farm report keeps talking to us. The next state over, prices are soaring. Markets are on the rise. Every cent is squeezed for profit. *A real killing*, the newsman says.

We eat each and every meal. It's the one thing we don't deny ourselves. Food is comfort and it won't be ignored. Even in lean times, when weather takes away our work, the days are still taxing. And being fed isn't a luxury. It becomes a necessity, an obsession. We can't wait until midday sometimes before we're chewing on something. We no longer rely on three squares a day. Now it's a constant hunger gnawing at our bodies, our thoughts, our teeth. And the more full we get, the more emptied out we seem.

One of us falls ill. Not from being overworked but still, plain pale and sweating. It's a summer sick, the worst kind of fever. It's strange how scarcity shifts and shoves us around. Abundance falls in one place, shortage another. But where things tend to swell up creates a bigger loss, a lack we can't do without. And when the plenty shrinks, it's always something we never thought about till now. We try to make heads or tails of it, knowing it'll never even itself out. Instead, we tend to our youngest, thrashing and delirious in his soaked sheets. It only seems a matter of time and, in a way, we almost pray for it to come, one way or another. Anything is better than this waiting around. But even if he is taken from us, we hope he's blessed with some kind of final resting place. That he isn't lost somewhere in between, a place that persists on playing tricks with the middle.

In bed, my wife asks me how much more? I tell her not much longer, but I'm not sure it's the right answer. It all depends on which side of the field you're measuring: what exactly is being waited on? The quitting end or

that next beginning? My wife doesn't say. And nor do I. Either way it's a lie—both affirming and daunting. After all, we're still here, aren't we? But, of course, this is the same question keeping us awake nights.

We think the worst is over. That maybe the end is in sight when a meeting is called. They arrive in SUVs and vans, wearing suits and ties and sunglasses. They carry briefcases and look like what the government should look like if TV is any kind of guide. It's late summer and finally official, but we've been assured some answers. We're no longer alone. We congregate in the town hall, standing room only, and are given the explanation. Then we're shown slides for drip irrigation. Next, we're told to avoid over planting and soil saturation. Finally, there're tips for fixing leaky pipes and only flushing after number two. At last, when our neighbor sitting down front mentions that the talk seems to be straying, that solutions are needed, that hindsight is 20/20 and conservation isn't any kind of remedy, the black-tie men slowly look at one another, shrug their shoulders, and say it's all they got. What else can they do? After all, it's not like they control the weather.

River levels are low and it's finally getting serious. The trees are burnt bones clacking against one other. The ground looks like a beach without an ocean. We wonder if next year will be worse, at last putting us away. But with the decline comes the rumors. Stories travel about people eating horses, dogs, even birds. Neighbors spit on the ground to water the sand, thinking a little human touch will do the trick. Last week somebody heard a rooster crow in the dark, a sure sign of something. Of course nobody trusts this gossip, but we have become more alert to our own false notions. We put away our almanacs. We talk about the future, knowing it won't jinx a thing. And lately when we sit down to supper, our prayers are shorter and witnessed with one eye left open.

Tonight we camp outside. The house is too hot. Its walls too close. And we're tired of turning our backs on the one thing that's sustained us this long, so we decide to make it a home. We drag blankets and pillows out to the barn, set up crude kitchens in stalls, put chairs in the belfry. The kids keep it company outside, lying under those shining stars that watch us like a night light. We make a fire and stare at the flame. We don't roast marshmallows. Nobody has a story to tell. Our restless fingers sift through sand. Dust settles in our lungs. But we also sleep better. Or maybe we don't really sleep at all, but it feels nice and restful to lie in this dirt and forget about all the things it's keeping from us.

We study our barn as it burns. It's like something holy being sacrificed right before our eyes. A miracle, of sorts. We fashion theories about neglect: lit cigarette butts, embers from the ash, burners left exposed. Nobody mentions what's on everyone's mind. But even if it was deliberate, standing in the bright shadow of the blaze it feels like a final stroke of fortune. We gawk at the spectacle, biting our lips, until it's nothing but a bunch of black ash smoldering against the ground. Then we hold hands, bow our heads, and gladly thank our lucky stars, a thin smile spreading like white gashes across our face.

We see people approach in the morning light. They slowly stream into our yard, holding shovels and rakes. They have tanks filled with water and faces full of pity. No one discusses the charred carcass just laying there like a brittle body. They simply shake their heads and scoop up the black refuse. Someone brings timbers and planks strapped across their truck. We all work in silence until night comes again, and then we work some more. Lanterns are hung, headlights are positioned. But no matter how much light is shed, it's still too dark to see straight. The sky has been blotted out. It feels like we're in a deep cave and can't tell which end is up. Like we have our eyes shut and can't be shook awake. Like the stars have finally burnt out their bulbs. Some of us even imagine we hear a distant rumble. But all of us know to ignore it and keep moving on with our dark duty.

Fall is approaching. We can smell it in our sleep. We're back in our beds and know it's cooler, even if the thermometer doesn't agree. The fact that we can dream proves it. A waste of a season, but even squander can be recycled into something secondhand. We sold off pieces of this—equipment, hired hands, land. And we took on other pieces of that—promissory notes, final notices, a bit more of the bank. Our youngest made it through but not without some damage to his balance. And the girls have made their turn, at last, into wives, mothers, misers. Their soft skin and sweetness slowly get lost in the worry and debris; they're now the backbone for someone else's burdens and one less thing to take care of. The boys are forced back to school. The young men talk college but stick around. So the answer has arrived: we are, in fact, still here, at least to some degree. A little less than, maybe, but what remains is rooted tight to this ground. Because, don't you understand by now, where nothing ever grows, so will nothing ever yield?