

SWANS IN RETROGRADE

Driving home to see his grandmother for the first time in two years, Wyatt half expects to find skeletons propped up in front of America's Most Wanted in the living room, a great black bird waiting patiently at the door in speechless supplication. The bird, he has painted many times. It adorns a canvas resting on the cracked plastic seat, rustling against the exposed yellow foam beneath as the truck bounces over washboards in the road. On the floorboards below it is a duffle bag containing the rest of his possessions, everything from socks to silverware. Everything that he accumulated in five years of living in a one room hotel suite situated directly above the Tadpole Pub.

His hand hurts when he shifts gears. It is wrapped in a bandage with metal splints. A cop broke it with his night-stick when Wyatt refused to leave a street corner where he had set up his easel to paint caricatures of the tourists who had come to whitewater raft and fill their bags with fake Indian pottery and moccasins adorned with plastic beads, ceramic elk figurines and postcards of the mysterious Jackalope. He had never needed a permit in five years of doing business on that corner. People paid good money to be depicted like bobble-headed morons. Somebody must have complained. Wyatt figures it was the new manager of The NiceCreamery. From day one the guy was perpetually sweeping around Wyatt's chair on the sidewalk, never speaking a word while he did it.

Air rushes into the open window of the pickup truck, clean and loud. His hair blowing about his face, he feels in the pit of his stomach that he is getting closer. He smells the familiar scents of damp hay, the perfume of piñón and juniper trees, of horseshit and dust and oil rigs wafting over the land.

Wyatt recalls the last time he saw his grandmother Rosaline, about the time when dementia first took hold of her. She had been in the hospital, had just lost her arm at the shoulder. She was trying to drive on an abandoned branch of the old State highway, cracked with sun and webbed with weeds, and smashed headlong into a bridgeless creek bed, her arm preceding her mind on the certain journey out of this world.

He sees the church where his grandmother often played piano on Saturday nights for dances, auctions, bake sales, where he himself was first forced to play guitar in front of people.

Turning onto the final stretch of dirt road, he winds his rattling truck through a fragrant tunnel of trees to the farmhouse. The paint is mostly gone and the dry wood has grown almost blue with weather. The outbuildings around the house, their windows broken and their doors hanging odd-angled, are overgrown with sagebrush, sunflowers and weeds.

The yard is a moat of dry mud. Some toys he remembers still lie tossed about, emerging back out of or sinking down into the ground: a sun cracked plastic tricycle with only one wheel, a couple of half melted army men who lay where they fell, a metal dump-truck still surprisingly yellow and intact sits as if waiting for the hand that left it there to play again. Among these things are cigarette butts. Crumpled cans. Broken bottles. A rusty motorcycle skeleton adorned with a filigree of bind weed.

Seeing these things, it occurs to Wyatt that the days of his youth seem part of a separate person's reality, as if he can peer into moments in the life of a young man preserved in clear orbs, as static as snow globe scenes. Immutable. Safe. He holds them suspended in his thoughts.

Parking in front of the house, he sees the pond nearby. It is changeless, still the place he used to catch bright green frogs as a boy, fished for too small fish or snagged carp, shot BBs at newspaper ships.

Wyatt's step-father Calvin comes out of the house in faded Howdy-Doody pajamas and a cowboy hat. He is thirty five, a year older than Wyatt. A former medical assistant at TriCounty General, Calvin is being paid by

Wyatt to take care of Rosaline and stay with her at the house, even though he legally owns the property. Wyatt believes he knows Calvin well. He is probably doing as little as possible, just enough to keep her alive and keep the checks in the mailbox while Wyatt is barely able to feed himself in his noisy hideaway above the bar.

“Wyatt! What brings you out here? You homesick?” Calvin leans on the truck. He bounces on his heels and twists a corner of his scant mustache. Calvin lost his job at the town hospital when he was caught pilfering sedatives. After that, he worked as a janitor at the little country school and is currently under house arrest for alleged theft of school property. This he denies, but Wyatt does not think him incapable of very many things, though he prefers to think this untrue. The house arrest, though, gives Wyatt confidence that Cal will be stuck at the house to attend to Rosaline.

“My hand is busted so I can’t paint.” Wyatt holds up the bandaged hand in the truck window. “They threw me in the jail for a week for getting it broken by a policeman. Figure that one out. You can’t make that kind of thing up.”

“Nope. Don’t need to, I guess.” Calvin tilts his stained, felt cowboy hat back. He takes a can of Skoal from his back pocket where the indelible imprint of it remains. He shoves the dip in his mouth.

“How is my grandma?” Wyatt asks.

“You know. Still in diapers, if that says anything,” Calvin says. “So Wyatt, we saw your picture in the paper when the cop roughed you up.” He leans into the open window, elbows on the door, smiling wide with his brown stained gopher teeth. Wyatt pulls his head back and looks the other way.

“Hell, Cal. I saw your face in the papers too. Stealing from a school? Wasn’t it chicken fingers and toilet paper? You could have at least taken something you could really use, like that sawdust vomit stuff for your girlfriend.”

“Let’s not get off on the wrong foot already, Wyatt.”

“Your little girl goes to that school, right?”

“That school was always looking for an excuse to fire me; they knew I was overqualified from the beginning. As for your *sister*, I haven’t been able to see her for about six months. Her aunt took her to Salt Lake where her Mormon folks come from.”

Wyatt breathes heavily out of his nose, his eyes shut tight. He sits still for a moment, opens his eyes still looking ahead through the bug-smearred windshield.

“Anyway, it’s good to see you,” says Calvin, gazing downward.

“If you say so.” Wyatt is still sitting in the truck. He wipes his hand down his stubbly face. He sits back, looks across the field toward the murky pond. Its stagnant breath hangs in the air. He doesn’t want to open the door, to commit to being where he now is.

Calvin turns his head and spits on the ground at his feet. “Anything interesting happen in jail? You get rehabilitated like me?” He laughs, reaching in the window and tilting the painting of the bird to look at it.

Wyatt watches him, watches his face as he stares at the painting. Calvin’s brow furrows in a way that suggests confusion, or possibly disapproval of some kind.

“Well, when I was in there I had a dream about the pond over there,” Wyatt gestures toward it, “and that old swan.” Wyatt gestures to the painting, pulls a cigarette from a pack sitting by the gear shift and lights it. “Did my mom ever mention that bird?” he asks.

“Nope,” Cal says, turning his head to look back at the house.

“It couldn’t fly. Walking around the bank in circles, paddling around the green water in circles. It was black, so black. It just swallowed up the light, is how I remember it. And it had these blood colored eyes. Sometimes it scared the living shit out of me. I’d be standing there, fishing, and I’d look over and it’d be standing right next to me, looking up, like it was about to say something, like it wanted something.” Wyatt is remembering the times he played guitar on the bank and watched the swan, the times he would paint the swan and entertain the idea of being a famous artist someday. “One day it

was just gone. It was like it got tired of trying to tell me whatever it was. But in the dream the swan talked, not with words, but with those red eyes looking right into me.” Wyatt ashes his cigarette out the window.

“And what did the bird say without sayin’ it?” Cal asks, looking to the pond and smiling, tobacco between his teeth.

“That’s the thing. It seemed important when I dreamed it, but I can’t remember. But it got me thinking that I should come back here and see how grandma’s getting along.”

“That dream sounds spooky, Wyatt. And I would like to give a fat turd about it, I really would, but I’ve got enough nightmares around here to keep me up nights already,” Cal chuckles, sticking his thumbs in the back of his elastic waistband and spits into the dust at his feet.

“She’s inside, Calvin?”

“Yeah. It’s a regular brain-trust, between my old lady and that one armed battle-axe,” says Calvin. “Anyway, I’m going to head down the road a bit, take a short walk. As far as I can go, anyways,” he points to the ankle monitor strapped to his boot. “I’ve had enough of the fun in there.”

Wyatt notices that Calvin’s belly has grown, hanging in a white fleshy roll over the lip of his pajama pants. Calvin shuffles away, his faded pajamas tucked into his worn cowboy boots. Every so often he spits into the road as he goes.

Wyatt gets out of the truck, leaving his guitar case, some paints and a couple of plainly unframed canvases on the passenger seat, and walks to the house.

When he gets to the front door, he pictures himself unsealing a disremembered tomb. The house belches smoke when the door is opened.

Extending his head into the living room, he sees Calvin’s girlfriend, Moira, sitting in a recliner. He has rarely seen her in any state resembling sobriety since her father and mother were killed, murder/suicide style, several years earlier. That was the final chapter, the act that resolved decades of their

liquor-fueled spats. Wyatt feels a slight camaraderie toward her, despite the awkward way she was grafted into his family. He also believes that he knows what it feels like to be a leaf clinging to a severed branch.

His own father shot himself in a rowboat on the pond when Wyatt was sixteen. He said he was going to fish. The gunshot was sharp and clear in the silent light of a summer morning. His mother dropped a hot pan of eggs on the kitchen floor, ran right out of her backless slippers, and was the first to see him—the boat navigating itself slowly around the ring of water, a bloody hand hanging over the side of the bough, fingers trailing gently across the glassy-green surface.

Six months later his mother brought a date over for dinner. Wyatt could see immediately that he and Calvin couldn't be more than a couple of years apart in age. Calvin stayed, and before the year was out, he was Wyatt's new dad. Wyatt tried to tolerate him for his mother's sake, and five years later, when his mother became ill with stage four cancer, Calvin said he'd take care of her. He had completed his medical assistant certification, after all. Calvin moved Moira into the house a month before Wyatt's mother was dead.

Moira's back is to Wyatt, a cigarette-clouded hand hanging at a right angle from the end of a thin, mottled arm. She is in her bathrobe. Her head leans to one side. On the table adjacent to the recliner there is a half-eaten Stouffer's dinner which is doubling as an ashtray. An assortment of Milwaukee's Best beer cans are positioned around it, one fallen over on its side in a pool of its own contents.

Stepping into the house he sees his grandmother Rosaline standing at the living room window. The window is dirty, rain freckled, finger smudged, with leaves suspended by strands of spider web. Dead bug husks line the bottom sill.

Rosaline stands statue still. Her one arm is held across her body, holding the stump of her opposite shoulder. She stares unblinking out the window. Her face is tranquil, unreadable. Wearing what Wyatt can only guess are

Calvin's clothes, she resembles a white-haired scarecrow in oversized jeans and an unclean Metallica hoodie. She is barefoot and one of her big toes has a red-rimmed gash on it, bordered by sticky dirt.

"Remote. Get me the remote, Cal. Call!" says Moira.

"It's me, it's Wyatt."

"You give it to me then. I need it. This show is stupid...stupid." She drops her cigarette on the floor.

A shirtless Mario Lopez sits in a hot tub on the TV sipping a glass of champagne.

Wyatt circles around the front of Moira's chair and picks up the burning cigarette butt, dropping it into one of the beer cans. He is struck by Moira's appearance—he can see someone he knows there, lurking beneath a layer of wrinkled and splotchy flesh, but he can't quite reconcile the face he sees now with his memory of it. Her eyes are nearly crossed. The irises wobble, unable to find a center to fix on. She looks thirty years older than Calvin, though she is only his senior by half that much.

"This show is pretty good, don't you think?" she says.

Mario says, "Today's ladies like a man who waxes everything. Everything."

Moira's sudden laughter turns to a coughing fit and she doubles over. She tries to spit into a can but misses the hole. She recovers, saying, "Just look at those little brown dimples. Beer me, Wyatt."

"I'll get you one," says Wyatt.

He goes to the kitchen and brings her a beer and one for himself.

She takes a drink, spilling half the can down the side of her face and into her robe. Taking the can from her hand, Wyatt puts it on the side table. He walks over to his grandmother. Standing next to her, he peers out of the window. Her eyes widen, her face contorts, lips peeling back from her still youthfully attractive teeth.

She points a bone-crooked finger at something outside.

"What is it grandma? You OK?" says Wyatt.

“My arm,” she whispers. “My arm, there it is, it’s coming to get me, it’s coming to take me.”

“Oh, gran, it’s alright, there isn’t anything...” He reaches out to put his arm around her.

“I know what I see! It’s coming across the pond. It’s coming,” she shouts this time, putting a quaking hand over her eyes. Then, as quickly as it began, it stops. Her hand goes back to her shoulder and she stares vacantly out the window. Wyatt helps her to sit on the sofa and puts a throw blanket over her legs.

He decides to step outside. He is feeling lightheaded, sad. Hands in his pockets, he kicks at the dirt.

He goes to the truck, reaches through the open window, and pulls his guitar case out. Opening it, he lifts the instrument baby-like out of the blue velvet backing. He sees the sky, a few streaks of cloud and a passing crow reflected there in the instrument’s sleek belly. The name Rosaline is etched onto it in a delicate, filigreed cursive.

He sits down on the truck bed where the tailgate is missing. A few wavering sounds come to life as he tunes the guitar. He starts to play a slow, backwoods dirge that he learned when he was eight. *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone*. His grandmother always liked the Woody Guthrie version best. It was one of the first tunes she had taught him, sitting on a sandstone boulder at the top of a forest ridge.

He plays with his eyes closed for some time. Opening them, he sees Rosaline standing before him, smiling. She seems to be listening, seems to be aware of Wyatt, aware of the music. She says nothing. There is an empty coffee cup in her hand.

Wyatt continues picking. Rosaline begins to sing, “...*come and sit down beside me, come and sit beside my bed, lay your hand upon my brow, while my aching heart grows dead.*” Her voice is broken when she sings, a staccato montage of rattling sound.

Rosaline taps her bare foot in the dirt a few times and then becomes still again. She looks around as if she has suddenly materialized where she stands.

The notes resonate off into the still air.

Getting down from the truck, Wyatt lifts Rosaline up and sits her down in the truck bed. He sits back down beside her. They remain this way, unspeaking, for a long time. Her eyes remain fixed on something neither in front of her nor probably in the present moment. Perhaps she is lost in a phantom memory, perhaps in nothing. She lies back on the truck bed and closes her eyes.

Wyatt hears Calvin's whistling getting nearer, his boot heels crunching on dry pebbles. Calvin leans against the side of the truck, peering into the bed.

"Hey, sonny boy. She finally croak? Looks like you've got her all loaded up to take to the bone-heap," he says, looking down and spitting a long brown stream at his feet.

"Look here, ass. Don't *even* play dad with me."

"Come on boy. It's funny, you got to admit. Not anybody dying, but me being your dad and all."

Rosaline moans and rolls onto her side in the bed of the truck. The side of her face squashes flat against the corrugated metal.

"Grandma's asleep. And my God, the shitty things that come out of your mouth, Calvin."

"Rosaline might as well be dead, Wyatt. Her body doesn't know it, but she's gone," Calvin says, picking tobacco out of his teeth with his thumbnail.

Wyatt shakes his head, gently wakes Rosaline, and raises her up. He escorts her arm-in-arm back into the house, leaving Calvin leaning against the truck, looking down at his feet.

Moira is unconscious in the recliner, the remote in one hand and a box of Cheezy-Nips between her legs. Wyatt leads his grandmother quietly through the room.

He takes Rosaline to her bed, lays her down and whispers that it is time to rest. He tucks the blanket around her. It is his old *Return of the Jedi* comforter.

He looks around the room. A picture of his parents, himself and Rosaline sits on the scratched and peeling pressed-wood vanity. In the photo everyone is smiling. Rosaline's vanished arm is around him. On the wall above the bed is a black and white photo of his mother in her prom dress. She is smiling, maybe thinking of the future.

The front door slams. There are voices in the living room.

Wyatt goes down the hall and sees Calvin struggling to wrestle the remote control from Moira. A vague and angry anguish fills her swollen eyes. Cal almost falls backward when he finally wrenches the controller from her grasp.

Moira's robe is open revealing stained underwear. Her sides are bruised, as if her elbows touching her body have the impact of a hammer. She takes a beer can from the side table and takes a hefty swig, coughs, and spits a blackened cigarette butt on the floor.

She looks at Wyatt.

Calvin is already lying on the couch with his legs crossed watching David Hasselhoff jet-ski, effortlessly jumping waves. He spits chew into a Dixie cup full of Kleenex.

Moira sways on her feet momentarily, and then leaves the room, hunched, ghostly.

"G'night bitch," says Calvin.

Crickets and a frog keep rhythm outside.

Wyatt goes to the kitchen. He raises himself up onto the counter, balances on his knees and takes a bottle of Ol' Grandpappy whiskey from the topmost shelf. Moira won't drink anything but beer. Wyatt knows this is how she convinces herself of a certain level of control. The bottle has been in the cupboard for as long as he can remember. It is like her strategic reserve, kept stashed away for the end of days when the neon at the Buzzy Bee liquor store down the road has blinked off forever.

He sits at the dining room table and takes a swig. He taps his fingers to a song conjured in his head. The hot liquor starts to surge in his veins and he cracks a walnut from the wooden bowl at the center of the table.

Calvin starts to snore down the hall.

Wyatt gets up, grabs the bottle and exits the house. He walks out to the pond in the cool air of the new night. The water is sprinkled with liquefied sparks of starlight.

He sits on the bank in the tall grass. Unscrewing the bottle he takes a big, burning draught. He continues to pour the bottle down. He sits and drinks until his eyes cannot stay open any longer.

Head throbbing, Wyatt awakens to the sunrise. He is on his back at the edge of the pond, the nearly empty bottle still clutched in his hand. Calvin stands over him, nudging him with his foot.

“Wake up boy. You could have been eaten by coyotes out here, passed out like that,” says Calvin. He is still wearing the same pajamas.

Wyatt rolls over on his side and he feels his guts shift like a bagful of rotten meat.

“Your grandmother’s up. Surprise! She doesn’t remember you’re here. You should go see her.”

“What good would that do? She won’t remember later anyway.”

“Just get up.”

“She’s my grandmother, and you’re my fucking dad, if you can believe that, and what the fuck did I do to deserve it,” spits Wyatt, plucking at strands of grass.

“Come on now...”

Wyatt squints, trying to process what he is looking at. There is a human hand sticking out of the water.

“Jesusfuck!” he shouts.

“What? What is it,” asks Calvin.

“There’s a fucking arm...in the water,” says Wyatt.

“Oh, yeah. That...” says Calvin.

Wyatt edges toward it. It appears to be fresh, unspoiled. He pulls it out of the water. It is an entire mannequin arm, covered from the wrist to the shoulder in bright green algae.

“Yeah,” says Cal, “This is really funny. You know how out of it Rosaline is. She gets all crazy about her missing arm, you know, when she forgets what happened to it. I stole this plastic arm from the art room at that school where I worked. I figured it would make her happy. She got way too attached to it though. It got to be a real pain in the ass. She wouldn’t let go of it for anything. Wouldn’t bathe, shit, eat, nothing. I finally had to take it away and I threw it in the pond.”

“What?” Wyatt stares at him, openmouthed.

“You should have heard her shriek, ‘My arm, my arm’. It was crazy.”

“Seriously?”

“I had to take it away. It was like a dog that makes itself sick over a bone.”

Calvin’s head spins violently sideways and he falls to the ground as the arm comes smashing into his mouth. Wyatt holds it as if he is about to strike him again, like a batter at plate. Cal’s face is smeared with green algae and his teeth are red with blood.

“Goddam it, Wyatt,” says Calvin.

“You insensitive bastard.” Wyatt takes a breath and lowers the arm. “Wipe off your damn face. You look like Christmas took a shit in your mouth.”

“What did you do that for?”

Wyatt clutches a handful of his own hair, grits his teeth. “Are you kidding? First, you give her a dirty old plastic arm, and then you throw it in here? What goes on in your head, man? She’s your family now too. Plus, you’re getting paid to take care of her while I waste away in my little goddamn room.”

There is a sudden rush of air and then a splash in the water. A white swan is kicking around the pond.

“Well looky there, Wyatt. What do you know? You must still be dreaming. Or still drunk,” chuckles Calvin, still sitting in the grass.

The bird lifts one wing and starts grooming itself with its beak. It raises its head again and warily watches the men with one eye averted.

“No. This is your nightmare man, like you said. I’m taking grandma with me. I think I’ve seen enough of you and your girlfriend’s compassion. Your special brand of care.”

Wyatt leaves Calvin at the edge of the pond and walks back to the house with the mannequin arm tucked under his own and the whiskey bottle clutched in his other hand. When he gets to the truck he props the arm on the side and opens the driver’s side door to look for his cigarettes. As he is doing so, he hears a dull thunk and a strumming sound coming from the guitar, still in the bed of the truck where he left it the evening before. Wyatt turns and sees Calvin coming at him with the guitar raised above his head, poised to strike. Wyatt’s hand reaches for the mannequin arm faster than he is able to even think about doing it. As the guitar comes whistling downward toward his head he swings upward with the arm. With perfect and vicious simultaneity, the guitar frame explodes on Wyatt’s head and the shoulder of the arm uppercuts Calvin’s jaw. Steel strings whip around with high, faint sounds for one long second. Wyatt sees bloody saliva spew from Calvin’s mouth and several teeth, he can’t tell how many, land in the dust. Both men drop to their knees.

Wyatt still has the whiskey bottle in his hand, and he thinks about striking Calvin again. But Calvin looks terrible. Blood, pain, confusion, nausea all come on his face. It is an expression Wyatt has never seen on a person before, and he feels bad. Then he thinks about his guitar, given to him by his dead father, named after his father’s mother Rosaline. He smashes the heavy bottle over Calvin’s head. It doesn’t break. Calvin crumples into the dust and a rivulet of blood runs out of his ear. Several little Howdy-Doodies are splattered with blood, his pajamas rising and falling with shallow breaths.

“Well shit. Why did you have to go and do that, dummy,” Wyatt speaks into the blue sky.

He drags Calvin around the back of the pickup and, with great effort, loads him into the bed. Calvin whimpers something faint and childlike.

Wyatt goes into the house. Moira is still sleeping. Rosaline is sitting at the kitchen table staring at a little glass bird on the table setting in front of her. Wyatt hands her the arm and escorts her out to the truck. When they get there he opens the door and helps her in, fastening her seatbelt.

“We’re taking Calvin to town, grandma,” says Wyatt, adjusting the rearview mirror. “And you and me, we’re going to go on a road trip. Would you like that?”

Rosaline rubs the fake arm like she’s lulling a baby off to sleep. “Where’s your guitar, honey?” she asks him, snapping once more out of her sporadic stupor.

The painting of the swan is propped up on the seat between them.

“It looks real,” she says, “almost like it could fly.”