

excerpt from **DUSTING DOWN**

THE COOL, CRUMBLING scoria rocks dug through Jacob Metzler's jeans, bloodying his knees as he chased his dog up the side of an abandoned oil site he'd been playing in all morning. The rocks dusted down into his eyes and clothing as he ran up and then slid down the steep walls.

He reached the top, breathing hard, and turned to see his shadow extend to where it climbed up and over the side of an opposite wall. He felt the cold autumn wind blow against his sweating face, and he lay, face down, in the pasture's grass. The grass poked up into the front of his shirt as he raised his head and looked out over the landscape and transformed all that he saw into seas, blankets, clouds. In the distance, five cows swam single-file through an overgrazed pasture toward the inverted tractor tires that served as feed bunks. Black and red calves dodged in and out of the line, kicking and jumping through the browned grass. He imagined the tires hissing past on the interstate as he watched tiny cars and semis drive by two miles away above the cows on the horizon.

To the left, a distant engine bore down under the weight of hay bales and he imagined his father cursing under his breath, not knowing what had become of his son as he did the morning chores alone. Large waves of calves jumped and kicked and flowed to the hay feeder in the middle of the pen where his father pushed forks full of yellowed hay from the unrolled bales to their waiting mouths. In the large feedlot, calves from the other pens all ran in toward the corners facing the tractor, leaving the center empty. It looked, from where Jacob lay, like the feedlot had been picked up in the center, sliding groups of calves down into the corners of the pens, pushing them into the straightened angles of the wooden fence lines as they stared and called out at the tractor unrolling hay. He could see the frost rising from their breaths as they bunched together, even from here.

He rose and impatiently stood, waiting for a break in his father's rhythm, waiting for his father to stall when he sensed a dark silhouette in the distance, a figure in the middle of a pasture who

of climbing over more than rocks, watching the cold wind blow his loose and torn, too big, handed-down coat into malfunctioning wings. Above him, a vee of birds flew, small shadows jaggging across the pit through an unnatural flight. He watched the center of the formation as its point shifted through the uneven rocky bottom and then flew up fast over the other wall.

His instinct drove him to follow the birds; he took two steps back before thrusting his body out, flung through the air. The rocks kicked down the sides of the wall echoed down into the shaded pit. But he couldn't hear. The blackened world spun up around him and the cold air pushed up through his shirt, wrapping about his face. At the last moment, he opened his eyes; remembering to buckle as the ground raced up, he felt his knees jar before he rolled onto his back and onto the loose, sharp scoria rocks as he lay, looking up to the blue, unrestrained sky.