

Joe Wilkins

an excerpt from

Eight Fragments from My Grandfather's Body

You Ready?

I am sixteen and driving fast down Highway 12. My younger brother and Justin, a skinny kid who stays with us when his uncle beats on him, are in the back seat taking pulls of cheap vodka straight from the bottle. Amy Wilson, dark eyed and slender and beautiful as moonlight, is sitting next to me. Justin hands me a beer. I pop the top and take a long swig. Amy smiles and the stars go wild in the sky. I drop the pedal to the floor. We hurtle through engine grind and frog song, beer foam and brash laughter, and finally skid to a gravelly stop in front of our house. My mother's gone for the weekend. My grandparents live just a quarter mile down the road, but my brother and I tell everyone not to worry. *Just keep it quiet.* Then, for what seems like hours, there is only the smooth line of Amy's shoulders and her hair falling across her face. But too soon she's gone, always careful to beat her father (still holding his stool to the sawdust floor of the Sportsman Bar) back home, and B. J. Murnion shows up with some girls from the nearby town of Roundup, three cases of beer, and a shotgun. The stars explode across the sky.

And then it's early in the morning, not quite 6 A.M., the sun just a rim of light in the east. Someone's knocking on something. Knocking hard, rattling glass. I swing open the front door, and my grandfather hands me a bucket of staples and a pair of fencing pliers. *You ready?* he asks. *There's miles of fence to be walked up north.*

We drive north. All morning he idles behind me in the truck as I hammer staples and hold my aching head. I'm delirious by noon. He lets me rest at lunch, then walks with me as we string wire and rip up rotten wood posts

while the hot sun hangs in the sky. My grandfather, even at eighty, walks the prairie fast and sure. I straggle behind.

put up in the higher grades for math and reading at school, and my mother went to college. But this one man, uneducated and burly as any of them, my grandfather—whose crib was a shoebox on a woodstove, who sat on the jug when his daddy ran whiskey, who has broken a thousand horses and been struck by lightning—does not care. He grins and tosses me into the world of scars and bodies, the world of cyanide shells and death, the world of his dark hands. I know the craggy bark of the cottonwood tree in front of the house, the soft brown shag on the living room floor, and my grandfather's hands, tough as worked leather. *Come on, pardner*, he says, clapping me hard on the back. *Let's go get some grub.*