

5,000 words

## **The Respect of Stone**

Rubble masonry. Simple, basic, natural. No quarrymen, no sawyers, no sophisticated sculptors. In this technique, raw stones are the master masons and choose themselves, speaking to the laborer through his hands, conveying their placement by color, texture, heft, diameter, shape, and angle.

Before the stones chose me, I was an ordinary boy. I grew up on my father's farm, collected pretty rocks, and skipped them across creeks. Closing my fingers around them, I sensed the possibility of a life imbued with the strength and tranquility I had yet to earn. Before I gained the respect of stone, I had to confront the obstacles that all who enter this life must bear . . .

Mama's death in December had ripped through our lives like a twister and left random emotional debris in its wake. By spring, my sister Jenna and I began to play again, acting out our pretend lives in the old shed Mama had fixed up for us the summer before. The bountiful spring rain and boundless farm work distracted Daddy from his grief long enough to look for the help we could not provide.

The first time I saw the new hired hand, he flopped out of our '47 REO flatbed, took a length of rope from the back, and wound it into a loop secured around one elbow and a fist — nervous, jerky movements like his body parts wouldn't cooperate.

Daddy gave me a boost into the truck's cab and interrupted my stare with an introduction. "My son, James," he said, resting a hand on my shoulder.

"Howdy, James," the man drawled. "Barley. You helping with chores?"

Riveted by the absence of first and second joints on the middle and forefinger of his moving hand, I stared again, soaking in details. Carrot-red hair perched like tormented fluff on a head too big for his spindly body, what Daddy called "rangy." An enormous forehead made his cornflower blue eyes seem squinty, small, and close set. Barley looked to me like a tall skinny pig, his sun-roughened pink hide freckled with a vengeance and swathed in curly red bristles.

Barley glanced toward me again, pulling a stiff, gap-toothed grin. "Just a battle wound, little soldier."

I watched Daddy for a clue how to respond, but he was studying the combine manual, one foot propped on the REO's running board.

Before long, Jenna and me had made up stories about Barley's mangled fingers, imagining mysterious reasons for their mutilation. Wolves or a secret gangster ritual, I thought. Daddy said he likely lost them to farm machinery.

"Oh. What happened?" My mind brimmed over with whats, whys, and how comes.

Daddy looked down at me kindly. "Well, I don't know. Baler, combine – you know how careful you have to be around machinery. Barley keeps his problems private."

I wanted to ask if our pain would make us like that. The thought of Mama caught like a peach pit in my throat and blocked my words. Daddy laid his hand on my shoulder again and then turned back to his work.

During our rare encounters, Barley always spoke without saying much. That I didn't see him unless he did chores around the barn made him more intriguing. He showed up at dinner and

supper just long enough to take his plate under the sycamore tree by the playhouse. Whenever we kids ran into him, he'd grunt in our direction, a fat chaw under his lip. Then he squirted tobacco between his gapped front teeth in a hawking spit we loved to imitate.

I started speculating about what he did on our old turf, and initiated my spying missions. Jenna reluctantly followed my lead.

"Jamie, you're gonna get it. Daddy told us to let the playhouse be." Jenna pursed her lips and squinted into the late morning sun.

"Come on, Jen, last one there is a rotten egg."

"Oh, all right," she whined, dusting her rear end off, a look of conspiratorial pleasure on her face.

We hitched up our blue jeans, raced as far as the sycamore and crouched sideways behind its trunk. In the background, I could hear the rhythm of Daddy's tractor pattering on some distant acre and a black bumblebee buzzing past. I lowered my voice to a theatrical whisper. "Coast is clear, let's go!"

We army-crawled behind the playhouse and I gazed with longing at the weathered silver-gray clapboard and green asphalt shingles on the little gabled roof, same as our farmhouse. We stood up and dashed around the side to the little covered porch Daddy had built with old lumber. Mama had sewn the yellow gingham curtains in the windows and lined the shelves with old ceramic whatnots bright with pink flowers, her favorite colors.

We stood on tiptoe, pressed our noses to the glass panes, and studied the furniture inside: bed springs without a frame, a mattress, a chest of drawers culled from the dump pile — what we called "chester drawers"— and the old plank table and benches Mama gave us when Daddy remodeled our kitchen. A Folgers coffee can spittoon sat at a bench leg. Overalls, stripey boxer

shorts, grayish t-shirts, and threadbare flannel shirts drooped like old leaves from the rope clothesline strung across one corner. Our old straw broom and metal dustpan still stood near the door. The room seemed as flat as Barley except for Mama's pretty curtains and ceramics.

I wondered about the stains on the greyish bed sheet. "Jenna, you think Barley might pee the bed?" I did sometimes, especially since Mama had passed, but didn't like to talk about it.

"Oooh, looks like he never washes those sheets, could be anything." She wrinkled her nose, put off by anything unscrubbed. Having pronounced Barley's housekeeping skills deficient, she declined to pursue the matter.

I sighed. Nothing to get excited about. Jenna gazed at the whatnots and tossed a pinched nostalgic look at me, meaning she missed Mama. I suppose she missed Mama more than anyone, and she wasn't usually shy about saying so.

"Come on, we better go in case Daddy or Barley comes back," she whispered.

I whispered too, knowing darn well no one could hear. Bored, I tugged one of her sun-streaked braids and set off toward the swing, whooping my best cattle-driving *geehaw*. A big tractor tire suspended by a thick rope on the black walnut tree between house and playhouse, I climbed on and began pumping my legs higher and higher. At the zenith, I liked brushing one hand across the rough tree trunk and inhaling the pinchy green smell of walnuts still in their rubbery husks. Jenna usually joined me, but this time she trailed off to the house.

Daddy and Barley pattered up the drive in the REO after a spell. Daddy gestured from the cab and Barley stared straight ahead with his bright, dead eyes. I ran over to the driver's side door.

"Hey." Daddy slid out of his seat. Barley lumbered from the cab and adjusted the wooden rails of the flatbed. "Mrs. Pierce still helping Jen?"

“I think so.”

Daddy was bashful about the attractive neighbor lady who gave Jenna a hand in the kitchen some mornings, and knew if she was still there, he had time for another chore.

“Want to help? I need to get a load of bales for the Dawsons. They’re running short.”

He knew I relished his company but hated that barn. I glanced at Barley, walking toward the sycamore, the underarms of his blue work shirt dappled with sweat. Looking for shade, I figured. “Um, I think I’ll swing some more.”

“Young man, if you’re not going to help me, then you best go help your sister,” Daddy said. He spoke sternly but his eyes looked kind.

I nodded and turned to head toward the house, but when the REO disappeared from sight, I ran back to the swing and leapt on, squirming around to check out the world from every possible angle.

Quickly bored, I decided to visit the playhouse before heading to the kitchen. When I ambled over, Barley was sitting in the shade on a wooden crate in the doorway, playing his harmonica. I don’t recall he had any particular skill at it, like he soulfully tooted blues riffs or anything. He played stuff like *Oh, Susannah* and *I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*, old-time tunes everyone knew.

I watched, yearning for the chance to try the harmonica. Would Barley let me? When the song ended, he wiped the “blues harp” across one thigh and let it sit there.

“Whaddya say,” he muttered, ever the master of impersonal greetings.

I eyed the harmonica. “Mm, nothing.”

Barley’s mouth twisted up in a half-grin. “Hey, would you like to see the mouse in my pocket?”

Small pests were my specialty. “Sure!” I said, perking up. I fixed my eyes on his hand, which he eased past a brass fastener and into his overall pocket with dramatic flair, adjusting the fabric like a fussy hen.

“Get closer, he’s sleeping. I don’t want him scared,” Barley whispered.

I moved within inches of his knee and peered into his pocket, but couldn’t quite make out what I saw. It sure wasn’t a mouse’s furry body, and looked more like the soft pink tip of a thumb, only larger. I hated it when grown-ups played baby games, pretending to pull off your nose only to show you their thumb. “That’s not a mouse,” I grumbled.

Barley roared with laughter, shaking so hard he started to hiccup. I backed up, shook my head, and turned toward the house. Barley followed, chuckling and hawking up more brown slime.

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A few days later, Daddy told me to look after Millie in the barn. A bottle-fed orphan, the ewe was our pet. Our big collie Copper had led the flock to pasture at daybreak, but Millie seemed sick and so Daddy had penned her.

When I pushed against the great creaky doors of the barn, little shivers of fear tickled my neck. A mouse flickered through a pool of afternoon sunlight, casting dust motes that rose in a sunbeam stretching from the high arched roof to the dirt floor. I didn’t have to look up, but I almost always did. On top of the central rafter perched a big barn owl, sovereign of the straw-bedecked kingdom. It blinked sleepily, ruffled its snow-white feathers, and closed its enormous eyes to rest again.

The barn owls scared me. Daddy assured me they were nature’s way of keeping rats and mice at bay. They’d never harmed people and never would, he said, but I felt a prey animal’s

sense of panic around them. Owls reminded me of movie monsters, creatures with painful intentions.

Something rustled in front of me and I startled, the shivers of stepping from daylight into shadow still rattling me. I hesitated while my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Barley came into focus in the corner of a pen. On his knees, he pressed his pelvis into Millie's hindquarters, groaning softly.

The ewe bleated in a mournful counterpoint. Curious, I knelt near an empty horse stall to watch. Barley has his back turned, but I could see his maimed hand gripping a pen slat. Too young to know exactly what he was doing, I recognized that farm animals coupled like this, that babies were made this way, somehow. I hadn't yet made the leap of understanding to include people in this activity. The scene stirred a vague memory of the enema bag old Doc Collins used on me at age three when I'd become seriously constipated after eating a bolt and two metal nuts. I felt a small warmth at my own groin and looked away.

The sound of Millie's bleating choked me. I ran outside and kept running, past the silo, the garden, and the swing under the great walnut tree, beyond the house toward a soybean field. Waves of humid air broke across my chest like alternating warm and cool water currents. I ran until I stumbled and fell, lost to the day's bright beauty. The sky wheeled around me. In my panic, the sun looked like an open eye searching for any weakness. I practically dug my nose into the ground until it touched cool soil. I breathed in hard, inhaling the scent of grass and dandelion and clover.

I could still see the top of Barley's pale behind, a crescent moon pumping back and forth, and that imperfect hand clenching harder and harder. I couldn't make any sense of it, nor the big greenish horsefly's hard sting to my wrist that brought sudden tears to my eyes.

I wanted Millie to be all right and Barley to be a regular guy. Like I'd done after Mama died, I thought hard about Davy Crockett, Sky King, and Mrs. Pierce's cherry pies. Then I thought about baseball, bubble gum, and Mickey Mouse cartoons. Anything 'cept this thing that might explode my head in two.

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I don't know why I didn't tell Daddy. If I'd told Jenna, she'd have broadcasted the incident until satisfied all was right in her world. Maybe I clammed up because of the way Barley always looked — sullen and covertly threatening. If I didn't voice my panic, it might go away. The numb space inside me from losing Mama probably had a lot to do with it.

I didn't know how to articulate my feelings, so I started acting out, throwing rocks at sheep. I did it to Millie even though she was our little darling. Daddy was perplexed when he caught me. We'd driven the flock down by the creek a few days later. Daddy, Jenna, and I strode across the pasture with Copper barking and bouncing at stragglers and the lambs bleating dumbly, not comprehending the dog's intention.

I started searching for pretty rocks, fossils, and arrowheads, turning up a granite boulder to peer under it. Daddy said I might grow up to be a geologist, but I just liked the way rocks looked and feeling the weight of them. I picked up some flat stones and tried skipping them across the little creek like he'd taught me. When Millie put her head down to water, I bopped her squarely between the eyes with the last skipping stone. Blood welled up from the ragged little cut on the wool of her forehead as she bleated and scurried away.

“James Ronald Morrison.” Daddy lifted his striped engineer's cap and slicked his hair back in one motion. “That is *not* how we deal with animals. We do not abuse them. Throw your stones only at the ground or the water.”



His stern words and dark questioning eyes startled me. Jenna stared at me with boiling disdain, incensed I dare hurt Millie.

“OK, Daddy,” I conceded, but I really felt like clobbering another sheep. I wouldn’t cross Daddy when he warned me, though, not because he was mean, but because what he said always made sense.

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Sunny weather prevailed a few more weeks, and then Daddy got up one late summer morning before dawn and cut the oats. The stalks lay drying in the sun, covering the fields with a blanket of gold lace. He returned and listened to a weather report on the kitchen radio over a late breakfast. The weatherman predicted a low front would sweep northwest from the Gulf in a couple of days, careening across the Midwest with its thunderstorms.

“I better get the hay in. Need to send Barley to the stockyard. Those three big sows are ready for market. We could use the cash and some meat.”

“Yuck.” Jenna turned her nose up. She hated the animals’ cries and the stockyard stench.

“Can I go with? Please, Daddy?” I feigned nonchalance, swallowing hard to hold back my anticipation.

Daddy paused to think about it. “Well, all right, son. Hurry and get dressed. Barley might move a trifle faster if you go along.”

I hadn’t paid any attention to Barley since I saw him in the barn. I held my shadow feelings back, pretending nothing had happened. I was guaranteed a treat on this trip, maybe a burger and a root beer. I wolfed down my Cheerios, grabbed a t-shirt and pair of shorts that roughly matched, and retrieved my dirty Keds from the mudroom. By the time I reached the truck, Barley had installed the side railings and he and Daddy coaxed the sows up a wooden

platform from the pigpen. They squealed with trepidation, a sour scent wafting from them.

As we drove off, Barley cradled a coffee thermos in his lap. Beyond me how adults drank the poisonous-tasting stuff all day, especially in the heat. Sweat beaded up on the back of my neck and it was only seven o'clock. Always tight-lipped, Barley seemed even more so this early. He met my attempts at conversation with grunts. I grinned when he pulled a tin of chewing tobacco from his overall bib and stuck a chaw under his lower lip.

“Can I try some?”

He considered my question, looking at me with morose eyes. “Better ask your pa ‘bout that.”

I knew what that answer was, so I leaned my head out the window, opening my mouth to hear the rush of air that circled inside. I started bobbing my head back and forth to vary the tone and tempo. That kept me occupied until I nearly swallowed a fly.

When we got to Prairieton, we headed across the river, over the railroad tracks, and up the bumpy dirt lane to the stockyard. Idling behind a pair of farm trucks, our turn came after a few minutes. Barley pulled up to a concrete dock with a chute that funneled livestock toward a scale and the holding pens.

Barley gave the stockman some instructions while another man in green mechanic's coveralls scuffled with the sows. Barley said to deliver a side of pork over to Bertram's. A heavy man with a cheery disposition, Bert would smoke ham and sausage, wrap the loins and chops, and place the raw meat in our rented locker freezer next door.

The stockman left and returned with some cash in a careworn envelope. Barley perked up. I imagine some part of the money was his wages.

“You want some pop, kid?”

“Sure. Root beer. Can I get a burger and fries, too?”

“A little early. I got some errands first.”

Disappointed, I told myself to bide my time. Everything would go my way eventually. I heard more muffled shots and the squeals of frightened animals as we pulled away from the dusty lot. Some were slaughtered, some loaded into the stock cars lining the tracks. Whenever trains derailed in Iowa, the inevitable casualties were sheep, cattle, and hogs.

Barley headed for the farmers’ cooperative to pick up the kerosene and sundries Daddy wanted. Grown-ups spent enormous amounts of time doing the most boring things, I figured. I twitched around on the scratchy fabric of the truck seat, watching folks go in and out of the co-op. Once in awhile, someone recognized the REO and hollered out “Hello, Jamie, glad you came uptown!”

Barley looked even more cheerful when he returned with the cardboard box of supplies. He turned the key, hit the ignition button with a jaunty flip, and backed out of the angled parking space. He headed back across the river and tracks, double clutching toward a big green farmhouse gussied up with brass fixtures and stained glass.

Every school kid in Prairieton knew about Pauline’s, even some too young to know what went on in there. From the tone of it, I gathered it was grown-up activity and not spoken of in polite company. I’d heard one of the sixth-graders brag that his dad and “every red-blooded man on the river visits Pauline and her gals.”

When I’d asked Daddy if that was so, he said he wouldn’t know, a broad smile creasing his face. “I think more with my heart, Jamie.”

I scratched my head. “How do you think with your heart?”

His eyes twinkled. “We’ll talk more about it when you’re older.”

Daddy mentioned some of the farmers liked to lay money down to drink and gamble at Pauline's. Everybody had seen cowboys drinking and gambling on TV or in the movies. So I figured Barley just wanted to toss back a beer or make some more cash.

Barley pulled a pack of Juicy Fruit from his front shirt pocket and offered me a stick. "Stay with the truck," he said, winking at me. His eyes nearly glowed. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Can we go to Kerry's next?" Prairieton's only family restaurant, the town hotspot, had a new parking lot with heavy two-way speakers you could hang from your car or truck windows.

"You bet." He spat brown juice on the ground and nearly bounded up to Pauline's door like a red-headed grasshopper.

I sat on the running board and watched big cumulus clouds form in the sky, daydreaming about Kerry's. Then I heard loud voices issuing from an open window.

"I gave you twenty, woman!"

"Fifty. You'll pay the whole lot first," a husky female voice shrilled back.

A girl in a flimsy dress, her ample bosom wobbling ahead of her, pushed through a creaky screen door and stood on the porch. Her red lips and nails shimmered in the sunlight. She looked up at the menacing sky and fanned herself with a folded newspaper. Then she noticed me and skittered back inside.

Barley stomped out the front door, the screen door slamming behind him. He looked sour, sweat beaded up all over his big forehead like he'd broken a fever.

"Well, now it's *your* turn to celebrate," he said.

I smelled something pungent on his breath. Maybe liquor had ruined his disposition.

When we got to Kerry's I wanted to go inside and eat. I liked to sit on the chrome and

vinyl stools at the front counter and whirl around. Watching Kerry mix the soda syrups and carbonated water gave me an orderly feeling. He pulled and served drinks in one long smooth motion, right down to slipping the red and white striped paper straws through the crushed ice to the bottom of the glass.

Barley grunted at me. “We’ll take it out. Gotta get back and finish baling before the storm hits.”

I wanted to protest, say he’d had his fun and only fair I got mine, too, but I didn’t. After all, Barley was a grown-up and it wasn’t good policy to sass grown-ups.

I gulped down a frosty mug of root beer while we waited for my food. I studied Barley while he studied the waitress, looking her up and down like a prize heifer. She wore roller skates, black pedal pushers, and a jaunty black cap with red and white piping.

“That’ll be one dollar, sir, one-oh-five if you keep the basket.”

Barley gave her a little smirk and handed her a crisp one-dollar bill and a shiny nickel. I felt better with my burger and fries in hand, gassed to take the red plastic serving basket home. I imagined all sorts of uses for it.

When I munched the last French fry and smacked my lips, we were nearly halfway home. We turned from the highway onto the dirt road to the farm. Barley hummed to himself under his breath and smiled at me.

“You wanna drive?”

“Yeah!” Nobody had to ask me twice.

Barley pulled the truck over and I climbed into his lap. He put my right hand over the stick shift, which I could reach only by leaning over, and placed his own over it. I stared at this mangled fingers.

“Keep your eyes on the road. That’s the number one driving rule.”

Barley eased the truck back onto the road’s high crown. We shifted up through the gears. I beamed from ear to ear, loving the sheer power of it.

I kept my eyes glued to the highway through the windshield even when the sun’s glare blinded me. Lush fields of mature corn and soybeans spread out as far as the eye could see. I loved watching the fields flow past like squares on a giant checkerboard. When I glanced down through a little hole in the floorboard, the road whizzed by, making me laugh with pure joy.

Barley laughed too. He took his hand from the gearshift and squeezed my thigh. I didn’t think too much about it, even at the second squeeze. I was having too much fun. On the third squeeze, I pushed his hand away.

Barley’s voice sounded raspy. “Remember, don’t take your eyes off the road.”

A rusty pickup passed us, a farmer’s wife headed to town. I waved and Barley put my hand back on the gearshift knob, forcefully this time. He let up on the accelerator and we downshifted. I felt something hard against my rump. Barley thrust his hips up a little as we bumped through a pothole. Considering the situation now, I suppose his unconsummated visit to Pauline’s had gotten him revved up.

“Oopsy-doo,” he said loudly, close to my ear. He thrust his hips up again. “Did you like what you saw in the barn?” His breath felt warm on my ear and the rank mixture of tobacco and liquor stung my nose as he pumped his hips again.

My heart fell. Those were scary words.

“Millie liked it,” he whispered.

I leaned to the right, trying to get back to the passenger side of the cab. When Barley let the steering wheel go, the truck swerved toward the ditch until I gripped the wheel tight and

eased the truck away from the shoulder. Barley held me down with both hands and ground his groin hard against my butt. Then he fumbled with his fly. The other hand pulled at the elastic of my Buster Brown shorts.

I began to cry. I knew Millie hadn't liked what Barley did to her and that I probably wouldn't either.

I clutched the steering wheel with one hand and grabbed the waistband at the back of my shorts with all the determination I could muster. Barley continued to grind, his breath becoming shallower and faster.

"Let go of me," I whined.

"Watch the road. You know you feel good, boy." He reached around my waist and thrust harder. He jabbed something warm and hard up one leg of my shorts and started pumping steadily.

Sobbing now, I let go of the wheel. Barley moaned and braked hard without downshifting. I felt something warm slither down the back of my leg as the truck sputtered and stalled, lurching into the ditch. A wave of nausea rolled over me. I gagged and threw up a gooey brown mess all over Barley's boots.

"Ah, shit. Why'd you do that, boy? It weren't called for."

Barley adjusted his fly and shoved me toward the passenger side of the cab. I retched again, this time out the window and into the tall weeds of the ditch. Barley flung his door open and stepped out, muttering as he rounded the truck. He wiped his boots in the weeds, twisting each foot under at the ankle to drag the tops clean. I took a napkin stained with catsup and mustard from my red basket and wiped the back of my leg, and then threw the napkin down in the little puddle of vomit.

We didn't say a word the rest of the way home. I trembled with the realization we'd been lucky the REO hadn't rolled. Even a six-year-old farm kid knew rollovers were the most common truck and tractor accidents.

Barley dropped me at the house, cast me a blank look and headed toward the barn. Jenna and Mrs. Pierce were breaching chicken in the kitchen, dabbing each other's noses with flour. Giggling uproariously, they barely noticed me slink past.

My vision blurred as I stumbled down the hallway. I locked the bathroom door and opened the lavatory and bathtub hot water taps. When the water gushed out in thick plumes, I grabbed my toothbrush and stabbed at my mouth with hot water and lots of toothpaste, staring at my reflection until the bathroom mirror steamed up.

Outside, thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. Gritting my teeth, I stepped fully clothed into the topped-up bathtub. The hot water almost boiled the flesh off my bones. I bit my lips to stop the scream that swirled in my throat like the approaching storm, sitting rigid until the pain numbed and my exposed skin turned bright red. I rubbed myself, skin and clothes, with Ivory soap in big, white swirls until my arms ached. Satisfied with my cleanliness, I climbed from the tub and dripped across the room to the bathroom cabinet. Burns the size of dimes glared from the soft flesh of my inner thighs and upper arms when I peeled off my wet shorts and t-shirt. Drying myself with a sun-dried towel that smelled fresh like Mama, I rubbed and cried and rubbed and cried until I spent my grief.

The dinner bell clanged outside the back door, signaling the men in. I splashed cold water on my face and slunk down to the kitchen after I heard Barley leave with his plate. I don't recall much about that meal. No one noticed me shrinking in my chair, not even Daddy. I helped clean up and then fled to the sanctuary of my swing after he'd praised me for being so good.



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I avoided Barley like death until he left a few days later, the soybeans and corn harvested and funneled into silos. School started the next week. Mercifully overwhelmed by the mountain of learning required in first grade, I found it easy to stuff those bad memories into the deepest cellar of my mind.

After we moved to Arizona when I was thirteen or fourteen, Dad mentioned Barley at supper one evening. A slow rhythm and blues song issued from the old 1940s radio we'd brought from Iowa. The lead singer's husky voice singing *Whatcha gonna do, watcha gonna do* oozed through me from heart to gut when I heard Barley's name.

Barley's short foray into our lives had almost become a forgotten never-you-mind. Daddy and Jenna never said boo about him except this one time. I'm sure Daddy had been preoccupied for a long time with losing Mama.

"He was really weird, Dad." Jenna glanced at me for corroboration.

"That he was. Certainly." Daddy sawed thoughtfully on his grilled chicken breast. "I didn't focus on it much, but he *was* an odd bird."

Barley had drifted from our farm to another and kept wandering. Someone found him hanging from a rope in the stable of a Michigan farm, killed by his own hand.

Daddy got up, poured himself a cup of coffee, and returned to the table. "You know, Barley was a cousin far removed. Wife was odd too. Both of 'em loved their liquor. Heard he had a problem keeping his hands to himself. Figured he was in too much hot water to cause any more trouble when I hired him. Shame he took his own life."

"We're related to that freak?" Jenna asked in a loud voice, surprised by the family connection.

I listened with a growing sense of dread, wanting to say something but not knowing what. I felt relieved, and then guilt at my relief that Barley was dead. I suddenly realized that Barley had exploited not only me, but my father and sister as well. And, I must admit, so had I exploited them by not sharing what Barley had done to me. Dropping my fork with a clatter, I ran outside to puke under a mesquite tree.

Even so, I still wondered what Dad's oversight and my stubborn refusal to think about Barley meant for us all, but my anxiety began to dissolve that night. Barley could never bother me again. I woke up in a sweat one more time the next morning, though, dreaming of him twisting from a noose suspended over my bed.

When I graduated from high school, I rejected farming and discovered the physicality of stone masonry, piling rocks into fireplaces and patio walls on fancy custom homes. The work left my mind free to wander. The pain Barley had inflicted on us melted into the pain of losing Mama, and then into the stones. I lay course after course, singing my pain into them, feeling their mute acceptance as I hefted them into place.

In the company of the stones, I returned to the old barn through my mind's eye, finding it not so big or as bad as I'd recalled. It had loomed above me like a country cathedral as a child, always moving me to fretful anxiety. More than a half-century of dung and dust defined it, the faded red walls, rough-hewn beams, stone foundation, and earthen floors aching with hard work and neglect, planting and harvest, sex and seed, flowering and decay. When I dug deep and visualized that barn, the steps men had taken to build it, a bewildering host of emotions emerged.

As the courses I constructed piled into walls and the walls into patios and fireplaces and homes, my emotions rearranged themselves too. After thirty years, I had picked up the final stone from memory lane and place it in the final gap of the project, viewing Barley – and my life

– in a fresh light. My eyes teared at first, and then I wept in great, heaving sobs that left my face damp with shame. And more than shame — pure naked relief. I’d found my respect, another way to think, create, and live.

My despair lay dormant, underground for many seasons, gathering heat and moisture until it germinated. Fine roots and tendrils emerged, taking nourishment until they possessed the strength to penetrate stone. Finally, I cracked, a boulder into fragments, rocks to pebbles, pebbles to the sand and soil of this new understanding, a plot of ground to plant anew.