

West Texas Dirt
by Stephen Jones

They sit there drinking coffee and eating peanuts they don't really want or sharpening knives that aren't really dull. Every once in a while one of them will clear his aged throat and say something vague yet probably true about the weather, and how it's getting to his right hand, which is forever formed as if resting on the smoothed down handle of an old hand-clutch tractor. Then maybe another will ask nobody in particular if he happens to remember when farming was *work*, and that may begin a conversation or it may not, for these men are in no hurry. They have nowhere to be getting to, no fields to be tending. Their farming days have long since passed them by, and they've handed the land down to their sons, remembering how their fathers handed it down to them so many years ago. And even though they know the cycle of life better than most, still they just can't seem to let go of what they had, what they were. The hard days they spent working in the sun, the dirt mixing in with their sweat until there was no difference between the two, these are the days they live over and over. These are the days they can't replace, the days that define what they were. And it's probably due to some longing to relive those days that they now gather down at the gin to pass these lonely mornings and feel like they're part of it all again. And each farmer that passes through every so often will more than likely sit down for a spell with these old men, will stop and listen to a story he already knows, will ask them the right questions, questions that start off about farming but lead into everything else. And he won't do this simply because these old men always seem to have an answer right on the tips of their tongues. No, he'll do this simply because he has some feel for what's waiting for him. He suspects that he too may someday sit in the gin all morning with nothing to do, that he too may eventually begin to feel disconnected unless someone needs him to explain how deep to plant late cotton, how long to pre-water. It's almost like he believes that at the end of his years, he'll get out of the cycle what he put in. At least that's the way it works with his crops most of the time.

One such farmer is presently sitting for a bit with these old men. Over a hot cup of coffee,

which he couldn't have enjoyed more had he known it would be his last, he finally gets around to asking them if there's really any way to keep the sunflowers from taking over his big dryland place just the other side of the bridge. The old men just grin amidst themselves as if lost in thought and then one makes a motion with his good hand which they all know means Pull, Pull. This younger farmer, Thad, smiles at the wall and drinks down the grainy remains of his second cup, looking around and feeling somehow out of place, feeling like he's really too young to be here this early in the morning. Lowering his eyes now to inspect the ashes left behind by his coffee, he knows that he really should be at home like the rest of the farmers his age, except that ever since Meg and him got on the outs two weeks ago, home has been the old run down trailer he used to let the hands live in. He misses the rest of the conversation that his question somehow got rolling, and eventually rises to throw his styrofoam cup away and leave quietly by the side door.

Reaching deep into his back pocket for his can as he pries open the stubborn door to his truck, Thad thinks of what all needs doing today, and smiles quietly again for the second time this morning, thinking of what all probably won't get done either. The seven o'clock news is slowly winding down as he climbs up onto the blacktop for the familiar ride ahead, fumbling around in the floorboard for a spitcup and finally settling on a good plastic one that he had planned on saving to drink out of. "Oh well.." he says to himself, "can't have it all."

The straight road from the gin to the house where Thad still keeps his equipment doesn't so much as come close to passing by his only daughter's elementary school, but lately for him it does. As he passes by and eases off the accelerator a little, the third graders are still lingering around on the playground, "probably waiting for the bell to ring," he figures aloud. His pipes wind up as the old Ford slows, and he tries hard to pick out his daughter Ashley, but just can't quite do it, although for a brief moment he thinks he might have, one bouncing face among many. "Oh well.." he says to himself, picking up speed again, "swing by after school."

The two miles slip by all too fast and Thad sees his old house, the same one his

grandparents once lived in, and vividly remembers the day they brought it here behind the truck. Looking back across the deep and straight furrow of the years behind him, he sees Meg as she was then, heavy with Ashley, tears in her eyes for their first home together. He probably even recalls having told her that it was their last too, but had meant it then in terms of forever, not in terms of what was happening now. As he turns wide into the drive, his dogs Cotton and Chance gather at the truck tires, naively not even knowing or wondering why he only comes in the day now, why he hardly ever goes inside anymore.

Rounding the bend that takes him around back to where he keeps his equipment, he notices Meg out in Ashley's little garden, watering the sunflower weeds that Ashley cherishes so. He smiles then, remembering that her well-kept little weedpatch is the result of one lonely sunflower weed Ashley found on his cultivator last summer and insisted on planting in back of the house, so she could grow things "...just like Daddy does." Easing through the leftover winter wheat behind the house, Thad shakes his head slowly from side to side, knowing full well that his friends would laugh him right out of the county if they ever caught wind that in his back yard he was growing weeds that everyone else was trying to get rid of. Thad himself knows full well that no farmer in his right mind would ever even consider helping weeds grow in his backyard, but all the same he still brings Ashley fresh sunflowers in coke bottles every so often, just to see the way her face lights up. Just to get to see her.

Simply going through the motions now, he backs up to the disc with his truck, lining up effortlessly. While getting out to slip the pin in he almost spits too, but catches himself just in time, figuring Meg's probably watching him from Ashley's weedpatch. Without looking around to see if she's watching or not he swallows hard, and makes a noise to try and clear the grains from his throat. The disc now on and still raised up from the last time it was used, he pulls it out of its place slowly, knowing that if he swings around too fast, the outside discs will catch on the ground and

knock everything off the dash.

Ready now but not quite willing to leave, Thad begins to ease out the same way he came in, but stops just short of the butane tank and lazily steps out of the truck, walking around to the horse pen and on through it to the dark feed shack. Taking a couple of handfuls of oats, he makes his way over to lean back on the fence with his back to the bright morning sun, letting Meg's gelding Macaroni eat from his open hand. And he doesn't notice either, but his shadow drifts slowly down to the dirt in front of him and becomes trapped there by the heat, with his outstretched hand reaching towards the house. Not really thinking about anything particular at the moment, his eyes then wander unintentionally over to Meg, watering, and linger maybe a little too long. And he can't seem to help it either, but something deep inside him just wishes she'd look up, smile and say "It's all right Thad, I understand. It's a rough year, you got to work...", but he knows that's not likely to happen any time soon. For a brief but lasting moment however, she does look over, but neither makes the needed effort to wave. Instead they both just nod their heads, acknowledging each other's presence at the edge of their vision, each trying to feel as little as possible.

As he gets down from the rust-colored pipe fence he built years ago, Thad asks Macaroni how he likes it here, "with all the girls." Macaroni only tries to nuzzle some more oats out of his hand before easing back over to the feed shack and resting there lazily on three legs in the shade, where he spends most of his days ever since Meg quit riding him.

Getting slowly back into the truck while slapping Cotton's outlined ribs, Thad happens to momentarily catch Meg's reflection, looking around her long hair at him, forgetting both that she's watering and that he has mirrors. He closes the door then, at that distance not able to see the tears trailing down her face, the first of many.

The truck coughs itself awake and Thad pulls out slowly, heading down the road once again, barely keeping ahead of his building dust.

On the way to the field his wandering eyes come across the little run-down trailer up on the hill that he calls home, and he uncharacteristically remembers to stop by and grab the lunch that he forgot to pack this morning. While climbing the shaky old steps to the porch, Thad laughs and shakes his head slowly from side to side, because it's something he just can't seem to get used to doing, no matter how hard he tries. He's not used to being alone yet. Sticking the two burritos in the microwave so they'll have at least been warm at one time before being eaten, he hears Chance panting dryly outside the door, out of breath from the long run between the house and trailer. Thad shakes his head in disbelief as he gathers his burritos in some tin foil, fills his water jug and walks out the trailer, not bothering to lock the door, leaving the screen door slowly creaking in the wind.

"Where you gonna live, boy?" he asks the lean white dog, "Here or there? Shoot, you gonna run yourself silly trying to figure all this out." Chance offers no reply as Thad walks to the truck, parked in the ditch because it's still got the disc hooked on it, but stands there until he's gone, until he's sure his master isn't coming back, and then crawls under the porch and digs down into the cool dirt. Across the field he hears Cotton calling to him, but lies there quietly, ignoring him for once.

By the time Thad gets to the field, he's given in and already eaten one of the burritos, and has had to get a new dip just to keep himself from eating the other one. "Gonna be a hungry day," he says to nobody in particular, "pretty hungry."

Pulling the disc right up by the tractor way out in the middle of the young cotton where he was rotary-hoeing two weeks ago, Thad unhooks and takes his truck back to the ditch where it'll be out of his way. It's a big dryland field between him and the tractor, almost half a section his dad left him -the only one he isn't leasing- and he anticipates at least a good ten-minute walk back out to the tractor. But ten minutes slowly turn into twenty as he stops every few rows to stick his fingers through the pale crust down into the reddish-brown dirt beneath; then twenty minutes stretch into

thirty as he stops to tenderly inspect the small cotton plants, searching in their three young but raggedy leaves to see what might have been squares in a few weeks, had the hail not come. And Thad can't seem to get away from it, but an instinct buried deep in his bones wants to go ahead and try to make something from this crop, to try to nurture it and force it to survive. But it's already too late for that, he knows. The insurance check is in the mail. It's only been two weeks since the storm, and the agent's already been out and told him to just go right on ahead and plow it all up, it'd be too big a gamble to try and make something out of it this year. All Thad could do was agree, and set aside a few days to plow up everything that could have been.

Before climbing up into the tractor, he automatically checks the oil and hydraulic fluid, reminding himself to bring some out next time, it's a little low on both. "Hell, I'll probably remember both of 'em and still somehow get here without my lunch," he says before closing the door. Grabbing the cold ether can from behind the seat, he pushes it up into its place under the dash and turns the wheel sharply from side to side while twisting the key, trying to get the old Deere running one more time. After a while it reluctantly catches and coughs, manages to stay going, and he lets it warm for a bit while trying to line up the fine threads of the metal cap to the nozzle under the dash where the ether can attaches. Once it starts running smooth, he takes the rotary hoe to the nearest riser and leaves it there before backing around to the disc and connecting the dirty lines. Climbing back up into the cab to stay finally, he turns on the radio, opening the dusty side windows on account of the AC having been out the whole season. "A hungry *and* hot day," he says while getting himself situated behind the wheel.

Ready to go now, he lowers the disc and slips into fourth, letting the clutch out slow and throttling up. The discs turn and turn behind him, mercilessly tearing up what should have been this year's crop and burying it like it never was, levelling almost everything down to ground level. But some things manage to slip through. For instance, every once in a while a resilient plant will

manage to escape the discs, purely by luck, and it might even somehow make it through the hard and dry season ahead. But that won't be enough. When it finally gets its bolls full and ready, there'll be no one there to relieve it of its burden, to help it, and the plant will slowly wither away in the same spot where it spent its whole life. On the morning after the first good freeze it'll stand there dead and alone, a monument whispering quietly with the voice of the whole dead crop, "We could have made it, if only you hadn't given up on us. If only you'd tried."

The long hours pass slowly for Thad, and he grows weary of hearing the bearing on the right wing talking to him above the tinny radio, but there's nothing he can do to save it now. It's too far gone. The hawks are all circling around the tractor as they tend to do on these days, blending in with the dust as everything eventually does in West Texas. They've been at it for a good while too, catching the rats and rabbits that run out into the open, scared enough by the discs to bare themselves to the open sky. Thad has counted fifteen of these birds of prey so far, but now no longer watches them dive and fight each other in midair for the rats and rabbits. The sun is too high and too hot to put his face to the window. He's already eaten his second burrito too, while listening to Paul Harvey talk about Buck and Irene's golden anniversary a few passes back, and is now patiently counting the minutes until three o'clock, when he'll leave early to be there already waiting when Ashley gets out of school. "May even have to stop and get a frosted coke too," he says to himself from a far off place, "she'll probably be needin' one about then." By his feet, on the other side of the cab from the door, he's laid some fourteen hand-pulled ragged sunflower weeds to wither away there in the corner and thus hopefully not spread their seed any further. This field is pretty clean though, Thad knows. The only places he sees the sunflowers are around the old dried up risers with last year's volunteer cotton, where he's never quite able to get to with the cultivator or knifing rig.

As he passes by one of these risers, Thad stops and climbs down to pull a sunflower weed so large and straight that he figures it must have grown up right after the hail, except that it's so tall. Almost up to his knee. A big one for this time of year. While putting the plant into one of the gin's coke bottles and filling it with a little of his precious thermos water, Thad finds himself absently wondering if it was really just a deformed weed before the hail came and reshaped it into something almost beautiful. But he doesn't ponder this too long before deciding that couldn't have been the case. Those kind of things just don't happen. "Well, it's a good one anyways," he tells himself, "she'll be proud of it."

Going strong again for a few passes, Thad instinctively looks back from time to time to survey the damage he's doing, and this time simultaneously sees and feels a pile of dirt and plants beginning to be pushed along by the front shaft of the right wing. Stopping and lifting the disc, he shakes it a little and backs up, then sets it back down not quite all the way and runs it lightly over the mound that the stuck disc with the bad bearing has built up. Somehow the bearing frees itself and the shaft of discs that it was holding back, and he whispers pleadingly, "Please, just 'till the end of this pass, c'mon, c'mon, you can do it, c'mon."

But it doesn't take two more tractor lengths and the bearing locks up again, stopping the whole shaft. Silently griping at himself for not having changed it earlier, when he knew it was going out, Thad lifts the disc and steps out to inspect the damage. "Guess I deserve this," he mutters to himself while getting down from the cab. Stiffly making his way around the front of the tractor and over to the right side of the disc, he's not even able to hear his own footsteps over the tractor's dull diesel moan. Placing his hand on the end of the shaft, he feels the heat from the violent friction within and shakes his head slowly, seeing the silvered race hanging out from under the outside disc. "Just waited too long," he says to himself, "waited too long."

Wondering if he should yank it off here or pull the whole thing home, he leans back on the

raised disc, and without thinking reaches back around to swipe the tumbleweed away from the back of his leg where it's poking him.

But the tumbleweed bites back.

Looking around quickly, Thad sees the little diamondback coiled up on the rectangular tubing of the disc. It's not even old enough to have it's second button and is striking wildly, as if blind. "Just about to shed," Thad hears a voice much like his father's distantly say, "lookit the pale skin and milky eyes there, kid." Looking in slow motion now at his hand, he sees twin droplets of blood coming from the two almost imperceptible penetrations, and feels his fingers growing somehow hot as his hand goes numb like the back of his leg already is.

Suddenly he can't think straight, he only knows to get away. Stumbling past the rear tractor tire he falls into the dirt hard and begins to crawl backwards on his hands, kicking with his feet as if the snake is coming after him. As he nears the front of the tractor though, some part of him begins to remember other people's words, maybe instructions his grandparents used to tell him when he was young: "Stay calm..Calm..Don't move. Breathe slow. It's scared as you are..gone now. Yeah, gone. Calm. Just take it easy," he repeats to himself aloud, directions everybody knows by heart but nobody ever really expects to use. Trying desperately now to slow his blood flow down any way he can, Thad tries to divert his attention by getting a dip and somehow shakily does manage to get two fingers and a thumb of Copenhagen into his lip with his good hand while leaning against the front tire. As soon as he's gotten the dip though, he drops the can, spilling the rest of it and watching it fall, watching the grains scatter, not even noticing that it seems to take forever. "Still good.." he says quietly but clearly, "..like always." Out there looking around a few days later, his daughter will find the can he dropped and give it to her mother Meg, who will never really let go of it again.

Reaching up for a grip on the weights after what feels to him like a half minute or so, Thad pulls up with his left hand and stands uneasily, trying not to let the welling fear inside take over and

rush the venom to his heart. "I never even heard it rattle," he says to himself in a removed voice, "never...I always thought you were supposed to..always thought I would at least hear it..."

Feeling somewhat calmer now thanks to the dip, Thad follows the tractor around to the door and climbs up into the seat, slipping the Deere into fifth without the clutch and throttling up at the same time. For a brief moment he almost pauses too, remembering that he hasn't unhooked the disc like he should have, but soon forgets his oversight as he changes course to head diagonally across the rows toward his truck, just a speck in the distance.

But Waylon hasn't even gone through the second verse of "Six White Horses" when Thad simultaneously hears and feels the heavy Clunk, and disconnectedly listens to the engine screaming and the sound of metal on metal as the tractor slows to a stop. "Broke axle," the voice that sounds like his father says, "taking the rows the wrong way too fast, kid. Should have known." Understanding this all too clearly now, Thad reaches slowly down and pulls the kill switch, calming the screaming diesel along with his father. Sitting up there alone, he knows that now he'll have to somehow make the long ten minute walk back to his truck. "Ten minutes," he mumbles slowly, letting the words sink in, "ten minutes."

Looking down, he sees his hand already swelling up, his fingernails black with the poisoned blood pushed up underneath. Reaching above his head with his good hand, he pulls the dirty red bandanna from its place as vent filter and methodically ties it tight around his swelling wrist, hoping against all odds that it will be enough.

Before climbing down from the deceptively inviting safety of the shaded cab, Thad hooks the handle of the water jug around his wrist and grabs the bottled sunflower weed. He's twenty stumbling steps from the tractor before he realizes that the weed is in his hand, too. He doesn't drop it though, as his burning arm and heavy leg are screaming at him to, but instead tries to focus on how happy Ashley will be to have one this big and alive to put in her garden. Thinking of her he

almost manages a smile, out there alone and dying, but then finds himself wondering about her garden. "Who'll bring her her sunflowers?" he mumbles, voice full of fear instead of sadness and sounding very much like it did two weeks ago when he had quietly asked himself, "Where'll I live now?"

As he gets further away from the tractor, his steps become more and more dragging, and he moves the weed and the jug to the crook of his bad arm, reaching into his pocket and grabbing the old yellow Case knife his father gave him years ago, carelessly cutting the now-tight jeans from the back of his leg, not even feeling when he cuts skin too.

As the tractor begins to fade into the background like everything seems to be slowly doing, Thad falls, as would any man bitten twice by a snake too inexperienced to control its own venom. He lays there awkwardly on his side then, with the water jug leaking into the thirsty West Texas dirt, and looks down at the soil between his swollen fingers, at the cotton plants ravaged by life, and sees the shadow of a hawk pass briefly over Ashley's sunflower weed, now spilled alongside him.

Coming slowly to the realization that it's all almost over, knowing that he's about to be leaving too much unsaid, too much not done, Thad reaches out with his good hand and writes awkwardly in the crusted dirt between slowly dying cotton plants, "Meg, I Love You," while some part of his mind plays a black and white and golden clip of an old couple named Buck and Irene, still dancing together after fifty years. The scene slowly fades away for Thad, but right at the end, when all he can make out are a man and a woman holding each other close, he imagines it's him and Meg. It's a good picture. Rolling painfully over after a bit, he thinks again of Ashley, and probably would even cry now, except he really doesn't know how. It's something his father never got around to teaching him. So he lays there, alone, trying to remember it all, to recall everything, every moment that was good to him. A few motionless minutes pass and finally, in an inborn and

undeniable last effort to start the cycle one last time, Thad scrabbles out a shallow hole with his good hand and manages to place the sunflower weed in it, packing the dirt back around the stem as only someone who truly knows how to make things grow can. His thermos is close enough that some of its leaking water will find the roots, he knows. Life is that way. Looking past the sunflower weed silhouetted now by his point of view, he sees the dust building on the horizon and thinks he should be sandfighting over at the irrigated by the house, but then, from someplace a long time forgotten, he comfortingly remembers a poem Meg read him in high school, something like "I guess the lawn will mow itself this year," and closes his eyes for the last time, as the small bite marks dribble blood into the thirsty soil and a sunflower weed's small seeds are gently picked up and scattered by the first winds of the coming storm. The same indifferent winds that first erase the word Meg, leaving the words I Love You on the land for a while, then finally erasing them too.

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It's been sixteen years since the day you just read about, the day my father died. Sixteen years that sometimes feels like forever and sometimes feels like yesterday. I'm Ashley, and over the last few days I've painstakingly drawn this portrait of my father's last day farming as best I could, shading in the empty spots with what I figure to have happened. And it's kind of funny too, but I find that as I write this I can't help but look inside and ask myself, Why bring up all the old hurt, the old pain? But y'know, I think I know why, finally. I simply want to thank my father for letting a little girl once believe a little weedpatch was really a garden. Her own beautiful garden. My garden. I'd also like so much to explain to him that life isn't always fair, that sometimes snakes misread their orders and bite the wrong people. Sometimes people don't get to say good-bye like they need to.

There's just so much I'd like to say.

Y'know, to a young girl like me, my father wasn't simply a farmer either, he was farming *itself*. And I've come to discover that when I'm in my apartment in town, walking down the turn-rows of my memory and missing my father, I'm not only missing him, but the whole farming way of life. I miss that life-giving connection we once had with the land. I suppose that's why I sometimes go down to the gin nowadays, to try and surround myself with a way of life not easily forgotten. To try and be a part of it all again. It's a good time, too. I talk to the old timers about nothing and they fall all over each other trying to tell me stories about the dry summer of '58 or the time the tractor had to be pulled out of the field with a team of mules. I laugh with them and drink their grainy coffee, soaking it all up as deep as I can. And sometimes even, when only the old timers are there of course, I'll ask them about my father; What was he like? Tell me about him. Usually there'll pass a barely perceptible moment of silence, and maybe it's respect or a conversational downshift or something similar, and then it's gone and they'll fall into their places and tell me some story they once heard about him driving all the way to the valley to strip late cotton for a recently widowed cousin or something like that. And I've heard all the stories before and the old timers know this full well, but the way they talk about him, so down to earth like, it almost puts him right there with us in the old run-down gin. Right there with us. And every single time I'll get something new from the same old stories if I listen close enough, something new about my father. Something else to hold onto. Like I said, it's a good time. Real nice. And y'know, it's funny, but I've never quite been able to bring myself to tell them about the garden my father helped me with. Every time I start to, I feel like I'm telling his secrets or something, and I feel apprehensive that they might laugh that someone would actually grow weeds. They wouldn't mean any harm of course if they did laugh, but still I don't tell them. Y'know though, as I write this and picture them down there at the gin together in their loneliness, something tells me that they already know about

the garden. They know about it because they've had time enough to dig through their own memories, and may have just found a garden there as well.

It's odd how an idea can get in your head and squirm around trying to make room for itself until it's pushed everything else out. That's what's happened to me. It was the next day after Dad's funeral when the idea first came up. I had just handed Mom Dad's dip can, complete with the engraved silver top I had found laying right beside it in the dirt. She held it tight at first, then rolled it over and over in her hands, tears rolling down her face. "What could he have been thinking?" she whispered lucidly, a voice uncommon for her during that time. And I don't really think she was asking me either, but still I answered quietly "I don't know," and never really thought about it again for sixteen years, until it became all I could think about. That simple question she asked that day so long ago is probably more than partly responsible for the story above. It's funny how it all works.

Something else worth mentioning here is that me and Mom were never as close as I think we could have been in the years following Dad's funeral. We weren't even as close as my friends and their moms were. Maybe she thought "Daddy's little girl" didn't have room for her anymore, but had she asked she would have found I had plenty of open space. Plenty. My heart then was just like the country I was growing up in. And it's not that she wasn't a good mother or anything, don't get me wrong, it's simply that I don't think she ever honestly tried to live again. She really never let go of that last dip can, and she should have, she really should have. I think even now she blames herself in some way for what happened, for something that was in no way her fault nor could she have even prevented.

There's just so many roads a family can take after the funeral. Sometimes I'm sorry we took the one we did, me and Mom. The one that wasn't wide enough to walk together.

As you might can tell, it wasn't all that easy for me, growing up the only daughter of a

widow. Sometimes I'd get pretty lonely and maybe a bit scared. It's times like that when I'd always find myself out in the middle of what used to be Dad's big dryland field just the other side of the bridge. I say 'used to be' because a few months after the funeral, Mom put the field into CRP, simply because there wasn't anybody to tend it like it needed. The job of planting the grass once and shredding it every year was left to Uncle Dale, who didn't ever get around to planting until it was too late for the grass to get a solid foothold. So the field then fell into West Texas' unpredictable hands, and within two years the whole half-section was covered in a soft blanket of sunflower weeds as deep as my knees and stretching off to the horizon in every direction. The old timers at the gin said they'd never in all their days seen sunflowers take over that way, it was almost like somebody planted them there.

I think somebody did.

Yeah, I still miss my Dad, who wouldn't? But when I go out into his big old dryland field and stand there alone with everything he's left me, I've found that I can sometimes feel the strength of the land rise up through my legs, can sometimes feel the life swirling under my feet and all around. I've even found that sometimes, if I listen close enough, I can hear the land's almost imperceptible call, reverberating across the open fields of my father's heart. And during these timeless moments out there, when I'm in touch with something so much more lasting than myself, I come to understand that my father's kind are truly made from dirt. Through and through. Good rich dirt.