

*We didn't have land,
we had dirt. In our
hair, in our eyes,
between our teeth.*

and mica, collected from the fields, handheld proof that people came and went while land remained.

How could he consent to be the Scaff who walked away?

How could he bear it?

It was already hot, a hot Monday's introduction to the hot week ahead. Cooler, beneath the shed's overhang, so he re-oiled the anvil, rearranged the arrowheads. He'd tuned the combine, changed the spark plugs on the Jeep, swept out the sheds, burned the trash, and fixed the leaky water heater last week.

He could mow the yard.

He could do that today.

A few rangy weeds had shot up among the crabgrass. Sharpening the mower's blades, tightening gaskets, topping off the gas tank would use up another few minutes of daylight.

He started mowing in the backyard because there, when he glanced up, he saw fields. Mowing the front yard, he saw cars. By next summer, he'd be mowing beside cars that whizzed by four abreast. State funds had already been allocated, the widening of 178 scheduled to begin the week after Labor Day. In theory, an improvement. Mawatuck residents wouldn't be stuck in their driveways May through August, waiting for a hole in tourist traffic. Four lanes guaranteed that tractors and combines wouldn't create bottlenecks during field-to-field transfers, September and March.

But he'd take inconvenience over property reduction any day.

"If your family had thought ahead at all," Leeta complained, "they wouldn't have built so close to the highway in the first place."

But how far were Scaffs supposed to plan ahead? Highway 178 didn't even exist when the house was built.

"Not that it matters anyway," Leeta grouched. "Headlights already blaze through our bedroom windows."

"Eight feet is eight feet," he'd said, sounding even to himself like a land nut, a land fanatic.

But that's what he was.

Finished with the back, front, and side yards, he kept pushing the mower, down the field path, toward the Scaff graveyard. Mowing between gravestones was part of his responsibilities, part of his circuit, but even to fill a vacant summer's day he dreaded opening that iron gate. As loud a racket as the lawnmower made, it was never loud enough to silence exasperated ancestors.

Here he comes again, Ira. That son of yourn.

The one thinks farming's better than Christmas.

The one thinks it's fine to be money-poor since he's land-rich.

Didn't you explain to him, Ira? Didn't you set him straight? We didn't have land, we had dirt. In our hair, in our eyes, between our teeth. We had drought and hurricanes, hungry deer and sucking beetles, nature working against us, God Almighty too.

Throughout that singsongy chorus, he kept pushing, head down.

Tell him, Ira. Tell that son of yourn what's in store.

Done told him, his father said. Ain't nothing more I can do.

Except to repeat and repeat and repeat that *done told him* as grass flew like dust.

Kat Meads's novel *For You, Madam Lenin* was a 2012 *Fore-Word Reviews* Book of the Year finalist and IPPY Silver Medalist. Her collection of essays, *2:12 a.m.*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press last year. She lives in the Santa Cruz mountains and teaches in Oklahoma City University's low-residency MFA program. www.katmeads.com.

PHILIP ROSENTHAL

Visit, 2014
enamel on panel, 36 x 48 in



courtesy the artist