

John W. Randal
BAD ANIMALS

At night Magdalene would take Lizz out to the edge of the jumbled trailer park and they'd sit, drinking warm Pepsi, and watch the luminous ash fall from the pitch black sky. Beautiful flakes of gray would cover their skin with the softness of big dusty moth wings.

The girls were smooth and lovely at that darkly glowing hour. Clean animals, bright eyes hidden by swirls of tangled hair. They'd been with Jenner for a long time-but he rarely talked to them. Jenner spent most of his time in the trailer, smoking pot in his fraying lounge chair, his eyes red, his skin continuing to pale-chasing translucency. But they didn't think about that during ash fall.

Lizz didn't have fingernails, so she always wore a pair of gloves, cuffed in frilly lace. The gloves had originally been white-but steady exposure to the ash had colored them a creamy granite. *The medicine is turning me to stone*, she liked to joke to Magdalene.

Jasper Barlow, old like Jenner, fixed the trailer park's generator when it went down (and consequently smelled forever of grease and hot, ionized metal). He had grown more and more convinced that bad things were crawling on stunted, birth-deformed limbs out in the weeds on the east edge of the trailer park. Jasper, licking an ever-present sheen of mucous from his pasty lips, said that *ugly things* were out there in the waist high grass; that he could see the glitter of their bright eyes, hear the slither of their hunching bodies. The old man's breath would come faster and faster as he preached this assertion to the girls, his twiggy hands trembling in his lap like gnarled insects. *His* fingernails were always caked with black grease. Ten perfect dark crescents.

So Lizz wore the gloves. No need for him to know. Jasper was the only one who understood the lurid internal mysteries of the generator that sat like a fat god in the power shed. And the girls liked the light.

"Can you smell the city tonight?" Lizz asked. Her irises thinned to vivid green rings as her pupils expanded. She looked *through* the shifted woods, out into the wider blackness, and beyond that too... to where the city pumped like a machine, or a heart. There really wasn't anything different to see in those deep distances but Lizz smiled anyway: prelude to storytime.

Magdalene inhaled, an almost endless tidal intake. Her eyes closed. Soft ash floating aimlessly down from the sky covered them both. After a long moment, the older girl parted her maroon lips:

"Engines... the streets smell wet from a passing rain. Tires heating against the asphalt..." And Magdalene smiled too, "Like *snakes*."

Lizz passed the Pepsi to her sister and Magdalene drank the warm fizzing liquid. Holding up her gloved hand, Lizz stared at the flakes of ash collecting on her palm. The ash didn't melt like snow, it just crumbled away into smaller and smaller specks of shimmering dust. An alchemy of disintegration.

"Snakes." Lizz said. She grinned reproachfully at Magdalene.

"A man is smoking-his woman hot with beer. Someone bled, not long ago. Sex smells in an alley." Magdalene shook her head, "Animals."

"Us, maybe," Lizz contradicted. "Not them."

Magdalene doesn't even shake her head. It's an old argument. Old as God. She takes another sip of the Pepsi. Then she checks for any observers, before licking her lips with both tips of her tongue.

Yellow light bulbs are hung on patched electrical cords around the trailer park; they form artificial constellations around the scattered rectangular homes. The ash fall tapers off in about an hour, as it usually does, its glimmering blanket swiftly crumbling and fading away. The girls go back, wending around the trailers. They can hear TV from some, talking or crying from others. A few folks are sitting on rusted cars or on the weathered concrete steps to their homes.

Jimmy Horus has a jar full of lightning bugs that he shows them. The little insects glow with every color of the neon rainbow. It's been a long time since they were just that cold ghostly green-yellow. The girls squat and stare into the jar. Dots and flickers of bug-light shift and swirl in Zodiacal patterns. Lizz shows the boy how to punch holes in the mason jar's lid-so that the lightning bugs can breathe.

"But what do they eat?" Jimmy asks, his smeared little hands splayed around the cool glass. "They don't have mouths. Look, they don't!"

"No," says Magdalene, "They don't have mouths."

"But how they eat then?"

Magdalene sniffs the lid. She purses her lips and closes her eyes for a long sensuous moment. Then she smiles:

"They eat heat. They soak it up with their wings. That's why they hang in big clouds around the tops of the mill chimneys."

Jimmy's eyes are big, glimmers of reflected color flickering in those brown depths. The girls leave him staring into his jar of light.

"I like him."

"He's going to be a man someday. I can smell it in him... like a stew."

"A stew."

They giggle back to the trailer.

As I passed along the sear and dusty way to Abolition, MS, I came upon a gray man, kneeling by the side of the razor-straight road. He was rubbing ashes in his hair, great fistfuls of smooth gray, from a pile on the ground. I could not discern what language he wailed in.

Magdalene touches the tips of her pink tongue to her lips and closes the book, and her eyes, for a moment.

Jenner has fallen asleep in his lounge chair-white tee-shirt glimmering in the dark of the living room. He doesn't even snore; he just goes out. One day, Magdalene knows, Jenner's skin is going to be whiter than his shirt... or anything else in the world. So white that it goes away, and the hard-eyed man with it.

In the bedroom that Magdalene shares with Lizz, a tiny TV is playing a static-laced black and white movie called *Frankenstein*. The story makes Magdalene think of all the stuff the labs spilled in their race for a Wet War that never happened-and of Ventus. She can identify with the dreamers who built that bright ring in the sky. The desire to Travel, to go somewhere Else, that she understands so very well.

They had hoped to fold a small piece of space in the dark pupil of Ventus. An elegant origami trick that would also let them move through a slice of time-back before the bio lab mistakes, or maybe further into future, to when things had settled down. That dream had died hard, in treachery and in a golden flash. For a brief moment it was as if time had been traversed: midnight shifted to morning-glow. Then the explosion faded and the debris, and exotic radiation, poured down.

Magdalene imagines all the people sleeping in their perfectly faded buildings in the city. Now dreaming long dreams to fizzing satellite TV-the promise of escape forgotten years ago. Perhaps they weren't even afraid anymore. Her graceful hands caress the worn cover of the book.

Milius Harlow: Travels in This Altered Land.

"Perfect buildings," Magdalene breathes. "Bathed in perfect light."

"I want to go there... to sleep there, breathe there. In the heat and light."

Magdalene flushes, opening her eyes and fussing in her bed. She didn't know Lizz was still awake. "Go to sleep."

"One of the Umbral boys has this big red rusty truck that he drives into the city," Lizz whispers. "He'd take me. His eyes are sweet."

Magdalene stares hard at her sister, vaguely illuminated by the TV's ghostly flicker. Their room is small, mostly filled with tattered books they find in the dumps, or that others have given them. Jenner has even tossed the girls a few battered paperbacks, a textbook or two, and on rare occasions, a hardback novel. These stand as tokens of his better moods.

"Don't you talk that way, Lizz," Magdalene says, her low words hissing slightly. "Don't be STUPID."

Lizz says nothing. Magdalene's hands are tight on her book.

The younger girl turns away from her sister and snuggles back into her worn covers. "He likes me."

"Go to sleep," Magdalene says.

Everything is quiet. Her fingers relax on the Harlow book. Jenner gave her this one. It is Magdalene's favorite. Jenner's eyes had almost been apologetic when he'd flopped the book onto Magdalene's bed that autumn. The girl's mother (a slim, feverish woman who spoke often of God's love but who never went outside during daylight) had just died. The woman had been pregnant when she'd met Jenner. For some reason Magdalene could not fathom, the grim-faced man had stayed with Lizz and Magdalene's mother.

Jenner never talked about it.

Magdalene had been born first, the swelling in her mother's belly lessening but not fading. Three months later, Lizz was born.

Magdalene thinks that Jenner never forgave their mother for giving birth to Bad Animals, instead of real people. But he never told. At least he didn't do that. Everyone knew what sometimes happened to Bad Animals.

She remembers the little antlered boy that she and Lizz had found out in the gloomy, moss-hung woods one summer. His small body was so smooth and still, arms out-flung, legs crooked in a motionless run. His

narrow chest feathered with hunting arrows. It looked almost posed, artistic... lovely in a horribly quiet way. Silent and empty, surrounded by reverent greenery, the boy called to mind a martyred saint. Perfect now in death.

Magdalene blinks, looking over at the sleeping shape of her sister.

"We're not Bad Animals," Lizz murmurs, before slipping into dreams.

Magdalene says nothing. She opens Harlow's book again, and strains to read in the TV's glow:

She is so small that I carry her out to the dusky beach. And shrinking still. We walk. She is warm, in the crook of my arm. Oh baby. That is what I call her. And that is what she is. Now.

We're all God's creatures.

Milius Harlow had roamed the country, documenting the new world—even as one of the emergent viruses turned his brain into a violet jewel. That gem was now in the Smithsonian, glittering silently behind glass.

But the man's books lived on. *Travels* was his most famous work.

So much had changed in the world, and things were *still* changing. The wreckage of the Ventus Gateway still glowed in orbit, raining strange energies onto the earth below. It was a ring of glittery rubble that you could sometimes see in the night sky. The artistry that the Wet Labs had unleashed also roamed the streets and forests of the new world—as well as far more intimate cellular landscapes.

Harlow had fallen in love as he traveled, documenting the changes (and his own gradual ossification). Her name had been Calliope—a Bad Animal.

Magdalene sits in a tire swing, reading his book:

A cool drink of water, as she kisses me. Her tongue hot and slippery-wet between my lips. And I keep thinking: A cool drink of water. Wet.

Love and doomed romance shimmer in Magdalene's mind. The cold grace of predestined tragedy. She sighs. Milius and Calliope. Above her, white puff clouds roll in deep azure. The trailer park chatters with activity: kids laughing, battered radios playing tunes. The arm-thick rope that connects the tire swing to the tree under which she hangs creaks slightly, as Magdalene sways in the loop of black rubber. The sunlight is warm on the back of her slender neck.

The whistle of one of the nearby mills unintentionally announces the breathless arrival of Lizz. Her cornsilk hair swirls around her flushed face, vivid eyes aglitter. "Thomas Umbral and some of the other boys have a bunch of pop pods. They're going to light them off over by Wilson's. Come on, Mag!" Her gloved hand stretches out excitedly.

Magdalene sighs and closes the Harlow book. The mill whistle wails brightly, scaring flashy pin-wheel birds from the tree-tops. The older girl hops out of the tire swing and takes her sister's hand. Lizz leads Magdalene to the weedy lot that lies empty behind Wilson's trailer. A bunch of kids are there, including Thomas Umbral, who smiles openly at Lizz, raising a deeper flush on the girl's cheeks.

Jimmy Horus waves to the sisters. He is still clutching his jar of light. The glow of the bugs is a washed-out rainbow during the day, needing night to fully shine.

"Hey! Hi, Lizz and Magdalene!" the little boy calls. Magdalene smiles at him.

The kids are all wearing tired-looking clothes: faded jeans, old tops washed many times, sneakers sometimes wrapped with tape or decorated with colored markers. Thomas Umbral and his tall brothers favor fairly clean shades of deep blue, and subsequently stand out in the jumble of paled fabrics. Sissy Strath sits on a crate, looking tired and hot. Some of the other girls are giggling and drifting here and there, eyeing the boys. Not Sissy. Her two-year-old, Malcolm, tugs insistently at her sleeve and the worn girl meets Magdalene's eyes—with a look that speaks volumes about the sad alleys of life.

"They have lots," Lizz says, releasing Magdalene's hand and pointing her gloved finger.

A jumbled pile of rocket-shaped plant pods, each about five inches long, sits on the upturned lid of a plastic garbage can. Despite herself, Magdalene is impressed; the boys must've gone pretty far into the shifted woods to collect that many pods. Some of the younger kids still look a bit scared—as they try to strut before the giggling girls.

The whistle ends its screamed declaration. Scattered like armored mushrooms all across the state, mills prepare to pump medicinal ash into the waiting sky. They say that the ash suppresses chimeric mutations. Sober-faced biologists are constantly tinkering with the proportions and composition of the silvery gray substance. The recipe for the ash seems to mutate as rapidly as the creatures it is intended to quell.

Magdalene stares at the lush edge of the shifted woods. *Does it keep you calm?* she wonders. *Or are we the ones being treated?*

The thick elaborate greenery doesn't answer her thoughts, though those vivid trees and whispering swirls of foliage seem to return Magdalene's gaze. A watchful breeze stirs the shifted forest that surrounds the trailer park.

Bad Animals are in here, the sound seems to vaguely hiss.

Magdalene shivers in the day's heat. Staring at the artfully bizarre forest, she shakes her head at the fact

that the boys would go in there just for pop pods. The news continually warns about the extremities of life found in places like the woods. Along with everyone else, Magdalene had watched the footage of the vast, internally illuminated air fish, birthed from that forest in Pennsylvania. She'd seen videos of the blood roses forming and re-forming just under the still, algae-streaked surface of a swamp in the Everglades, watched firefighters pumping great streams of ash at thousands of static worms, as the glimmering creatures ate the metal from power lines in Houston.

Far more haunting, were the stories people in the trailer park talked about at night: things they'd seen hovering at the edge of the forest... or heard from within. Shapes in the deep green, pale limbs glimpsed briefly among glassy-black, elaborately thorned tree trunks. The oddly-modulated sounds-sounds that might have been voices, whispering from the emerald gloom.

Magdalene shivers again and goes over to sit with Sissy, while Lizz floats around Thomas Umbral like a slow motion butterfly.

"Hi Sissy," Magdalene says. "How have you been?"

The girl smiles at Magdalene and sighs. "Um, okay. How 'bout you, Mag? It's nice out today, isn't it? I mean," she inhales, looking up at the wide deep sky, "I mean it's so *open*. You know?"

Magdalene nods. Both of them watch little Malcolm scamper around with the older kids. Thomas Umbral bends and carefully plays the small flame from a plastic lighter over the base of one of the pop pods. The violet colored tube is propped up on some rocks and faces skyward. As the fire licks smoothly around the pop pod's base, the color brightens and the pod swells. Thomas steps back grinning. Lizz's eyes shine as she watches him.

A sudden boom shocks the lot. Everyone shouts and laughs. The pop pod jets up into the vivid air on a thin line of smoky white. From high in the sky comes a sharp crack, as the pod bursts.

"That's as high as it goes..." Sissy Strath murmurs, her face turned to the clouds. The boys fire another pod. Sissy's eyes are shimmery, like the surface of a lake at dusk. The forest sighs and groans.

"Pop pods, eh?" Mr. Lucien's boarder says.

The tall man strolls into the vacant lot, craning back his head to watch the latest pod jet into the sky. Fat old Grant Lucien rents part of his trailer to travelers. The tall man is the latest to pass through, on his slow way to parts unknown. He is a kind looking gentleman, Magdalene thinks. His name is Jonas. She blushes as he lowers his gaze from the sky and smiles at her. Another pop pod streaks into the air.

"Sometimes I feel trapped..." Sissy Strath breathes, her words barely audible.

Magdalene doesn't hear her.

The latest pod explodes, deep in the sky. And the children cheer.

Jonas stays, watching the pop pods rocketing into the heavens, talking with the kids... and looking, from time-to-time, at Magdalene. That kind smile flickers at the dark-haired girl again and again.

Thomas Umbral laughs and says something Lizz, who sticks her tongue out at him.

They set-off pop pods all afternoon, until the sky sinks its colors into the earth and the light begins to deepen toward twilight. The last one goes up with a barely-visible arc of smoke-but it explodes, far above them, in a cloud of glittery sparks.

"Did you see *that* one, Magdalene?" Jimmy Horus exclaims, running excitedly toward her as fast as his stubby legs can carry him. Magdalene smiles-then jerks to her feet as the boy stumbles. Jimmy's jar of light slips from his sweaty grasp and shatters on the ground. The boy gasps and stops still, staring down at his sneakered feet... where glass and neon fireflies glimmer and flash. He starts to cry.

Magdalene rushes to the child and comforts him. Specks of flickering light drift up around them both, like tiny neon souls floating toward heaven, as the lightning bugs flutter away. "It's okay, Jimmy," Magdalene says, "You can always catch more-I'll help you."

"I know..." the boy says, "But one... died. Look." Jimmy sniffs his runny nose. "I killed one." His face is twisted and sad, eyes wet. Magdalene looks down. There, on a shard of heart-shaped glass, is a small smear of incandescent blue... and a tiny smashed body.

"It's okay, son," Mr. Lucien's boarder-Jonas-says. He pats Jimmy on the head. "It's just a bug." The tall man looks into Magdalene's eyes and smiles.

Over by the edge of the lot, Lizz and Thomas Umbral are talking... and smiling quite a bit, as well. The rest of the kids pay little attention to Jimmy's accident. Sissy has already gone home with Malcolm.

"But why'd it have to *die*?" Jimmy Horus snuffles, looking down at the fading smear of color.

Magdalene stares at Lizz and Thomas, worry tightening her lips. She keeps hold of Jimmy's hand, to prevent him from investigating the broken glass any closer. Thomas Umbral is showing Lizz his rusty red truck, which is parked near the empty lot. Lizz laughs at something the boy whispers.

"All things die eventually," Jonas says.

Ash falls in dreamy swirls from the evening sky, like great glimmering flakes of soft gray snow.

September on the calendar. Silence on the walls. Steeping the room in impending stillness. And quiet.

And it's September, and a tangle of falling days.

Waves are pulling back from the wet sand. Revealing.

Magdalene shuts the book with a sigh. An unopened can of Pepsi sits by her side. Lizz is flushed and out of breath when she finally rushes up and plops down beside her sister.

"You're late," Magdalene says.

"I was with-

"-Thomas," Magdalene finishes, sniffing disdainfully. Trickle of disintegrating ash whisper down the older girl's pale face. Grains of ever-shrinking gray sand.

"Don't be jealous, Mag," Lizz says. "You could have boyfriends too."

"He's not your boyfriend."

Lizz's face flushes. She gestures with her delicate, gloved hands. "We have fun together. His eyes are sweet for me-I see it in him. You can smell, Mag, but I can see. And I see *that* in Thomas."

"You see what you want to," Magdalene replies. "And what you want makes you stupid and careless."

Lizz turns to her older sister, her eyes wide. She points a gray finger at Magdalene: "We just *sit* here, in the dark, with Jenner. Hiding. *Pretending*. Jenner pretends that he doesn't have the Fade virus... and when he can't pretend that, he pretends he doesn't care. We pretend that we're real *people*." With a gust of breath, Lizz gestures to the ashy trailer park.

"For God's sake, Magdalene-*the only way you can be real is to stop pretending*. We have hearts, we have souls. We're true, we're *alive*, we're-

"Bad Animals," Magdalene says. Lizz stops. Magdalene looks at her sister, as fluttering flakes drift down upon them. "We're Bad Animals, Lizz. We're part of the changes in this world." Putting her book aside, Magdalene reaches out and takes her sister's hands in hers. "A lot of real *people* don't just dislike the world's changes-they *hate* them. *And we're part of those changes*. So they hate *us*, Lizz."

"No," the younger girl replies. "No... not all of them. Not even most of them."

"We hide, like there is something wrong with us, something real people should be afraid of-like the shifted forest. We could live in the city, in the light and heat and *life* that fills that place. I want to see that. I want to live like a real person. *Because that's what I am*. And Thomas knows that."

Magdalene stares intently at her sister. "Don't do something stupid, Lizz. *Please*."

And the ash falls.

Something in the full and silent night wakes her.

Lizz's bed is empty.

With a choked gasp, Magdalene sits up. She tosses aside her covers and pads over to sister's rumpled bed. Yes. Empty. Magdalene's face twists and she looks around the room helplessly. She can't wake Jenner and tell him. He barely suffers them now-what if he knew that Lizz was... was *risking* herself like this? What if he finally kicked them out of the trailer? What if he *told*?

The visions swirl hungrily in Magdalene's racing mind. God. She remembers Thomas Umbral smiling, joking, and showing Lizz his crimson truck.

"You stupid, *stupid*-" her mind says *Bad Animal*, but her lips speak the word, "-girl! You stupid little girl..."

Blinking bright and sudden tears, Magdalene hurries into her clothes. Her hands are shaking. Barely breathing in the darkened bedroom, the tall girl unlatches their window and awkwardly climbs out of the trailer. *Maybe they haven't left yet*.

The night seems immensely wide and deep, a vast breeze-laden sea of obsidian air that shifts and murmurs over the slumbering trailer park. Shadows make the familiar shapes and forms of their home seem strange and darkly *different*.

Magdalene runs swiftly, her feet making no sound in the night grass. Thomas Umbral's rusted pick-up truck is gone from its spot by the vacant lot. Magdalene utters a moan of despair. She runs out to the slim dark road that bends past the trailer park and heads into the city. That blank gray-black expanse of asphalt is utterly quiet and empty. Thick, moss-hung trees loom overhead, creating a whispering tunnel.

You can't go into the city like a real person, Magdalene pleads to her missing sister. *We can't just act like real people. Don't you think I'd like to? Don't you think I'd like to see the world and not just hide here like an... an animal?*

"Don't you think I want to be real, too?" Magdalene says to the blank road. Her face twists as tears fall from her eyes. She clenches her hands at her sides. "You selfish *bitch!*" she hisses, crying.

Cones of pale light, like the glow cast from the irises of some genetically-shifted forest creature, sweep out of the blackness behind her and slide over the road, illuminating Magdalene. With a little gasp, she turns, swiping at her watery eyes. The car slows as it pulls up beside her. Its darkly burnished metal shines like the shell of an insect.

Jonas rolls down his window and leans out. Smiling.

"Hey, hi there, Magdalene. You're up late, young lady."

Magdalene sniffs, trying to hide her tears. All she smells is that salty water.

"I saw Lizz and Thomas going into the city earlier," Jonas says. "I'm heading that way, myself-do you need a ride?"

Magdalene stares into his kind eyes. The night whispers around her.

The cop's face is a weathered house that has been boarded-up and shut away. Maybe he doesn't remember where he put all that used to live there. He silently leads them under the bright idiot flicker of the neon sign: CARTHAGE MOTOR LODGE. Over and over the words flash-fat eels of light, crusted with dead bugs. Other police are there, other flashing lights. The leather of the cop's gun belt creaks as he leads them up the stairs. His jacket smells of coffee and old pain.

The plain door to room 1745 hangs half open. A lot of police, and others, have been in there.

Jenner stops for a second and looks at her, before he goes in. He is as pale as a ghost, his eyes rimmed in watery red. The expression on his fading face is that of a confused boy who wants to run away. The cop waits in reflexive, almost mechanical, sympathy. It seems as if Jenner has something to say, but whatever it is has been so crushed-down, so faded away, that it can no longer be expressed. After a long, yearning moment, Jenner turns and lets the shabby little room draw him in.

She follows behind him.

The main thing is easily seen. The motel room contains very little and this, on the worn-looking bed, looms... overwhelming the space.

Lizz weeps, her tears like jeweled tracks beneath eyes that are almost all pupil now. Seeing everything.

"Child..." Jenner croaks, his voice ragged and fluttering away at the edges.

Magdalene lies on the bed, silent and still. Her skin is so utterly white, so pure, that it seems to glow. Except for the dusky band of violet bruises around her slender throat. But that only accentuates her quiet beauty. It's almost unreal... like snow in winter, before dawn and the touch of human hands.

She is perfect, a Madonna, dark hair haloed around her lovely face, unsullied by her cheap surroundings. Instead, her grave and silent purity makes the room around her seem fragile and ephemeral. Magdalene is the lasting element in this scene... everything else could just crumble and blow away. Like ash.

The cop is talking, his voice soft as sand: "At least now we have a good description of him. There have been others like this."

Others? Lizz wonders, slowly approaching the pristine stillness of her sister. *How could any other be this perfect, this beautiful? This still...*

Thomas Umbral stands out in the hallway, crying. He drove Lizz and Jenner here, when the cop called. After her night in the city, Lizz had come back. But Magdalene hadn't been there. Magdalene was gone.

Lizz stares at her sister. She stares until her tears blur the scene... until Magdalene is a perfect smear of pale color, in a sea of ash-gray.

Lizz runs her glove over the Milius Harlow book, opened to a passage that Magdalene had been reading. Most of Lizz's stuff is packed; it makes a small bundle. The blond girl slowly reads the passage. Then she sighs and gently touches the page.

She thought her tears had been all cried-out, but two more fall with quiet little pats upon the book. Lizz sniffs and runs the back of her hand across her eyes. Then she turns and leaves the silent room. The trailer is empty. Jenner faded completely one month ago. For a moment, a shadow persisted, then that too evaporated.

Lizz goes outside, locking the door behind her. She puts the key in the mailbox. Her battered Jeep sits in the grass, nearby. Thomas has come to say goodbye. He said he wouldn't, he'd promised her he wouldn't, actually. But here he is anyway. Lizz finds that she isn't mad at him for coming.

"Why can't you *stay?*" he asks her.

Lizz just smiles and softly kisses him. She *has* to go. They both know why. She thinks of Harlow, bumbling around the world, falling in love and writing endlessly about changes... while his brain gradually turned into a gem.

Sometimes what you want blinds you to what you need, or what you have. Life is bigger and wilder than that.

Lizz gets in her Jeep, starts the engine. With a last look at Thomas, she puts the machine in gear and pulls out of the trailer park. Out on the road, she turns right, away from the city-out toward the wide wild changes.

Holding the steering wheel with one hand, Lizz uses her teeth to pull the glove from her left hand. Then she switches her grip and removes the other glove. "Bad Animals," Lizz murmurs, as she flexes her bare hands on the steering wheel.

Changing sunlight glows upon a passage in an opened book, in an empty room:

Walking, as the heat comes up out of the ground, like a blush from skin. Like a fever. And the day is stretching terminally out, all around me. September. On the road to Abolition. The ash man behind me. Many behind me. Tangled.

Waiting.