

: *She Named Him Michael* :

HEATHER ROUNDS

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Fruita, Colorado, 1945

Seedlings gained strength beneath her. She felt her bones ease. She did not know how they could sprout but she did not question.

The *how* did not matter.

A bird passed. She saw it come to the shape of a circle. The shape led to her absence. She, too, dreamed while awake.

The Days of the Farm

In those days the farm had three people, two women and a man, and like all other people, they consisted of bones, each of which had a name—bone-names these three would never know. One of them had 206 bones, one had fewer and one had more. They grew sugar beets and raised chickens. The names of their bones made no difference.

In those days everything existed, endless without beginning or end and the minutes mostly stayed calm, until sleep and waking met the next morning.

Then in the morning it would all begin again

As it had the day before. Even the day the World's War finally ended.

There came a minute that it ended and those three on the farm had no idea. It ended far away, beyond their porch, beyond their field, beyond route 340, beyond the lip of light that lined the Great Valley of Colorado.

It ended and in that minute a floorboard on the farmhouse's porch

creaked. The smell of cut cantaloupe began fading. All three were still awake and one of them rose from a rocking chair and another cleared their throat. Stars began to emerge. Earth turned with worms and the velvetleaf weeds nudged toward the roots of the recently planted sugar beets.

In those days it always began again.

In those days and even before and after

Under the farmland, inside the lip of light that rounded the Great Valley, beneath the dry junipers and pinions, rested 1500 pounds of Supersaurus bones. With no muscle, no fat and no dreams, the bones stayed put. They offered the earth no noise, though around them earth's noise sometimes rolled over and through them. Unable to witness their own shape—their length or width—these bones remained at peace.

For this, some would call these old bones lucky. One of the three on the farm, the woman whose head sat small under tight curls, would have called them lucky if she had known they were there for the calling.

Also before

There had been four on the farm. But the youngest son of the woman whose head sat small under tight curls had gone to help take France back from Germany and got lost in a maze of Normandy hedgerows. A burst had fallen, pushing him into a trap of brush and down there he lost all breath and shape.

Ever since, the woman whose head sat small under tight curls spent most minutes in the house's smallest room with a bed consisting of iron and linen. She did not always know how to handle the minutes, but still the minutes came for her as she lay among the iron and linen. The minutes pinned her and she could hear a ticking.

It had not always been that way.

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Claire, the daughter-in-law of the woman whose head sat small under tight curls, lived on the farm, too. Claire had never lived beyond the town, never seen beyond the lip of light rounding the valley, but her eyes often went up and she could name any bird that passed: ash-throated and gray flycatchers, bald eagles, blue herons, pinion jays, and peregrine falcons. Looking ahead, she could trace the strange shapes in the earth as far out from the farm as her eyes let her go. She had eyes that caught light the way an Alpine Buttercup holds its yellow. If she had learned the names of her bones she would have done her best to remember those names.

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Claire first met her husband, the third person of the farm, the oldest son of the woman whose head sat small under tight curls, at the furthest distance she'd ever gone, on a plain at the edge of the Great Valley.

He saw the way she held her head up to the sky of birds and how her eyes caught the light. He aimed his grandfather's Civil War Colt full of black powder toward a bird, then twirled it away, said he just liked jokes. She said *please no*. He leaned for her heart and reached for her breast. The cold wind rolling over the plain jerked their knees, leaving the two face to face, rocking left then right, arms folded, hands tucked. A sensation burned from their stomach to their skin. *I'm sorry* he whispered. She nodded. The lip of light lined the valley as the sky went dark.

His voice, her name, things came falling.

This all happened slow over the course of many years. Claire came to think of those years often.

What else Claire came to think of often

The youngest son of the woman whose head sat small under tight curls.

There was a cluster of minutes she remembered most. Some minutes just days before he left for France.

She found him lying in the field. When she approached he looked up and said *did you know you can dream while awake? This is who I am. I see beautiful fruit in the valley of this place. I see roses growing through the walls at the fence line of every home that will be. The vineyards will grow endless. I walk through the fence lines of roses and I am so small.*

Claire bent down and cupped his head. He was so small.

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In those days of the farm, Claire's husband came to think of the tilled earth and wondered how to make his sugar beets grow stronger. He saw velvetleaf weeds rooted at his every edge. He longed to blow away the weeds with flamethrowers too expensive to own. He thought of control. He thought of how to make something wilt and die. He thought of the tractors he did not own. He thought of how to imprint his fist on the velvetleaf weeds. He thought of split second kills. He thought of splitting the seconds. He thought of splitting the kills. He thought of all the cracks and the velvetleaf weeds. He thought of how he limped with his shotgun foot. That's what they called him—Shotgun Foot—having shot his foot as a child. Because of his limp he never saw the hedgerows of Normandy, France. He never got lost in the world.

Far before this

Before the youngest brother got lost in the hedgerows, before the Supersaurus bones settled deep at peace in the valley, before the sugar beets and the velvetleaf weeds—the shape of the mountains began to change. The air chipped and bit at the rock and moved with the wind. Ice ground the edges of the earth and polished the jagged cliffs and made the Great Valley round.

The woman whose head sat small under tight curls came to think often of how the air slowly chipped and bit at the rocks beyond the Great Valley. She thought of how rock moves with wind, too slow to see. She

thought of the ice that once ground the edges of the earth and how polished the jaggedness of the cliffs had become. She thought of gravity and of everything wind can move. She thought of the mazes of Normandy's hedgerows. She thought of the gravity and her youngest son. She thought of everything wind can move. She thought of the minutes and could hear the ticking. She heard the changing of shapes. Sitting there then and beyond the then of each minute in those days of the farm, she watched out the window, where dark collected.

**Shapes Claire had seen in the cracks of the earth at one time
in her life or another:**

A cat on a tree branch
Abraham Lincoln's hat
Hope
A rose bush
A baby head
Several popsicles
The fine jaw line of the youngest brother

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The farm did not include children, but the farm stayed loud with small things: insects, some cats and some chickens. Claire kept these small things close. She would have liked children, too, but inside her she could grow no more bones and a wind scoured her depths. When she tried to make bones, only blood came.

It came up from the dark and joined the water at her edges and streamed away.

The stream

The blood first appeared to Claire's edges on that damp day when it seemed she could never walk back from the edge of the cliff, when she sensed she could grow no more bones.

Shotgun Foot watched Claire walk to the cliff's edge.

He said *maybe you just don't eat right.*

She did not look up. She focused on keeping her balance.

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A day came, not long after the World's War ended, when the woman whose head sat small under tight curls rose from her bed, went to the kitchen, turned to Claire and said listen. Claire stood at the sink, watching the water drain. Outside it began raining. The chickens stood still and rain dropped from their feathers.

The woman whose head sat small under tight curls said *listen*. The gravity chipped and bit at the rock. The velvetleaf weeds toppled under the strong rain. Under everything, the Supersaurus bones lay still and dry.

From the kitchen window Claire saw Shotgun Foot. He limped up from under the rain. He lifted himself up. The lip of light on the Great Valley was a cold blue beneath him and the stars spun in place.

Listen said the woman whose head sat small under tight curls.

Listen to how quiet the chickens get in rain.

The woman whose head sat small under tight curls walked to the porch. The rain ticked and she looked beyond its ticking. Shotgun Foot came up and put his arms to her small shoulders. She was so small and he felt the smallness under his hands.

Where have you gone he said.

The ticking she said.

He told her *not now*.

Night, then the rain, the wind, another day

None of them knew, but once the ancient ice had melted and there became a Colorado Sea—more water than they had ever seen. The Rocky Mountains were small and grew slow in those days. With their growth a fire erupted, the rocks and the sea shook. The sea left shale and sand that turned to stone. Then the sea receded and a long plain opened from the mountains to the sea. Under this plain lay the Supersaurus bones. On this plain stood the farm, where days always came again. The days always turned to nights and back to mornings. Sometimes the rain and the wind would come and mix with the purple tinged stalks of the velvetleaf weeds. The weeds flung seeds everywhere, crowding the young, green tops of the sugar beets sitting in their rows. Sun always came back after the rain. The velvetleaf weeds were denser by the minute.

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On the plain, under the sun, Claire bent to each velvetleaf weed. One by one she took the purple tinged stalks and flung them far, she pulled the roots above the earth. She spent the days this way and the velvetleaf weeds were denser by the minute. She often thought of the youngest son. When she thought of him it made her yank yet harder. She left the dirt wrinkling into tiny hills when she yanked the roots. She thought of him in the distance, standing under the lip of light. She saw the fine of his jaw, she flung the roots even further.

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Shotgun Foot thought of the youngest son—his brother—less often than he thought of the sugar beets, the velvetleaf weeds or Claire. He stood on the plain and felt the velvetleaf leaves edge him. They squeezed the moisture from the earth. They squeezed him and flung seeds. It seemed impossible to catch up. These days he traced his wife as she moved in the field. She was so much smaller. He wondered if she did not eat right. Still, she framed some minutes completely. He watched Claire raise her

head to a sky of birds. He limped deep into the field. It seemed impossible to catch up. A chicken approached and pecked some seeds. It chipped at a heart shaped leaf.

So many days rolled out just like that

Listen said the woman whose head sat small under tight curls.

She lifted herself out of the linen and iron of her bed and crossed the kitchen and the porch. She found them out in the distance. *Listen* she said, but she could not say it in a voice they could hear. She could not decipher their shapes. *It's so heavy* she said. *Listen to how heavy*. She returned to her bed.

There came a ticking.

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He felt her smallness inside him. She was so small. A wind scoured her depths. She walked distances along a stream.

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He took the chicken pecking seeds at his feet and raised it to the block of wood. Inside him he saw her at the stream, watched how her blood met the water and swirled away. He thought perhaps she did not eat right.

Claire could not watch such blows. Her head went toward the horizon. She waited for the lip of light.

He raised the ax above the block of wood, above the chicken. He saw a sag in the lace of her wedding slip now used for curtains. He saw her move like a lullaby. He saw how her blood met the water and swirled

away into the stream. He felt the chicken under his hand, let his arm fall with the ax. A sting came, a ringing came, and darkness. So much darkness and Claire came through the ringing. Her voice grew.

Listen she said.

The chicken was still there, headless, gurgling and fumbling. It pecked for the ground and could grasp nothing. Claire cried and the chicken fumbled toward her cry.

Listen she said.

The chicken came to her foot and gurgled. She bent close to the gurgle. Her smell, if the chicken could have said it, was of buttermilk.

The chicken fumbled toward the lip of light growing in the distance.

What now Claire wondered out loud.

Enough said Shot Gun Foot.

He picked up the headless chicken and dropped it in the dark of the barn. A cat ate its head.

Supersaurus weighed 100,000 pounds

Or ten bombs.

Or 20,000 chickens.

Or 10,000 cats.

Or 1250 women with heads sitting small under tight curls.

Endless lips of light rounding a valley.

Hardly anything of a star.

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Sometime between sleeping and waking, before it began again, Claire stood in the kitchen, saw the water and blood meet. The stream grew across the floor of the kitchen like a crack in earth. It moved beyond the front door. Outside, black sand lined the stream. She followed the stream and it took her under the lip of light that glowed the barn. The lip of light hung above a darkness collapsing at her edges. The darkness moved fast. She felt wind scouring within her, chipping her into a shape she could not see. Opening the barn only darkness but she heard the chicken's gurgle. She shut the door.

At dawn Shotgun Foot could see the velvetleaf weeds at his edges, glossed in morning's dew. They locked to the heel of his boots. He flung them back. He watched as they grew right back and glistened, denser by the minute. He felt the rumble of the weeds. A vibration. The seeds flung. A gurgling and Claire humming. All sound from the barn. He opened the door and the headless chicken fumbled from Claire's lap. He took it under his arm and placed it in the truck.

How

Shotgun Foot drove the headless chicken beyond the farm, beyond route 340, beyond the Great Valley of Colorado.

He drove it to the veterinarian, who placed it on the steel table. Its claws scratching. It gurgled. The veterinarian knew nothing.

How could he the veterinarian said.

Shotgun Foot drove the headless chicken further, to the university. The professors placed him on a white table. It gurgled. Its claws scratched the smooth white.

How the professors explained—

The chicken lost his head but kept his jugular, windpipe, a clot where his blood stayed corked, a brain stem attached to a spinal cord, his reflexes and impulses batting up and down. He lost his crow, but could gurgle. He had an ear.

Shotgun Foot drove the headless chicken to the farmhouse, past route 340, past the Great Valley of Colorado.

How hummed Claire.

The night could not retain its shape.

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The woman whose head sat small under tight curls remained in bed that day and into the night. She thought about the iron that made up the bed and how it was the iron living in the sun and endless other stars and black sand lining many streams, the chlorophyll dotting the cells of the velvet-leaf weeds beyond her small room. As the minutes pinned her, she saw it running through small and distant shapes. Suddenly she could see Claire, a softness clogging the air beyond the iron.

Quick said Claire from the distance.

Though it chipped at her bones, she rose from the iron and linen and moved toward the kitchen. From a drawer she took an eyedropper. She filled it with water, grain and corn and handed it to Claire.

Claire found the headless chicken trying to balance on its wooden perch. Below, several headed chickens collected and chattered. Claire swept the headed chickens away and placed her hand under the headless chicken. She squeezed the chunky liquid down the hole where the head should be. The water, grain and corn swept the sticky mucus down the windpipe, kept away the choking.

She named him Michael.