SOMEWHERE NEAR PAYNESVILLE, MAYBE

I might’ve been ten. Or it’s possible I wasn’t born yet. Or I could’ve been fifteen at the oldest. It’s not an elegant story, so don’t get your hopes up.

Central Minnesota is flattish, maybe rolling at the most. But there are a lot of trees and so when you’re driving it feels kind of cloistered. Around 1980, some old trucks still functioned—trucks from the 1930s, with the rounded hoods and bug-eyed headlights. Though the trucks still ran, there was nostalgia already for them. Men in their forties had been born in the heyday of these old trucks: their dads drove them and their grand-dads (if their grand-dads drove at all).

I was around ten, when a man’s car broke down on a highway near Paynesville, about an hour from my hometown of Little Falls, where my parents live to this day. This other man’s name was also William, and when his car broke down outside Paynesville, which is a real town and not selected for symbolic resonance (i.e., “Painsville”), some men picked him up in an old truck. My father owned two old trucks—a 1939 and a 1940-something. Those trucks were *old*. There was a high-pitched whining, grinding sound when they ran, and a chug and hesitation to the engine. You could practically feel the sputtering of ignition as fuel was delivered to the pistons by some old pump. You could definitely *smell* the oil and dust when you sat on the decomposing cab bench with your father to go haul firewood. If you were like me, you felt the smell was weird. The whole experience felt weird—full of unspoken disappointments and hopes, riding in the radio-less truck with your father across the central Minnesota landscape.

But it’s this other William in this other truck this day. I might’ve been playing Dungeons & Dragons, or tromping through the frozen river marsh in a snowmobile suit and a hat with a facemask, occupying my private world. But this other William, who was a man of my father’s age, had broken down and been picked up by men in a truck, and on their way south from Paynesville, they came upon an old sow in the road. Fell off a stock truck, they think. Its back was broken and it struggled on the frozen highway. William would later describe it swiveling, “a pink lazy Susan turning on the yellow line.”

I still appreciate the human crudeness of that expression. It’s not *right* to think such a black-comic thought but it’s not like you can help it. Thoughts come at you. Later, I would meet a friend of this other William who would say “there’s no glory in being born. No shame in it either,” and that feels right to me. Some things I can control, maybe, but sometimes it feels like life comes at me and through me. If I ever grasp it, I know it will pull free again.

So, what does one do when one comes upon a broke-backed old sow in the road? Well, William was not in charge of the moment. He was a stranded traveler riding in an old truck. Had he seen horror movies? Scary things were popular then, but I don’t know if this William would’ve been susceptible to a cultural trend. Would he have been afraid for his life in the moment that farmer, or that wood-hauler (I later met a man who classified central Minnesotans as either “stump-jumpers” or “rabbit-chokers,” but I don’t know the defining characteristics of the classifications) brought his truck to a grinding, sputtering halt along the shoulder and reached back for his shotgun? Probably not. I feel as if the goodwill of people was easier to rely on then, but that may be nostalgia. Already there were serial killers in America. Have there always been serial killers? Were there serial killers, for instance, in Athens? Jerusalem?

(I don’t know why I think out of situations so frequently. What am I trying to escape? The end of any thought is death,
maybe—if you reach the end of a thought, you get the game over screen and the Casio keyboard jingle plays.)

I don’t know what Other William was feeling when the truck driver, in an act of mercy, carried his shotgun out onto that highway and blew that broken pig’s head off. He would later write that its “face said everything I’ll ever say until I’m either dead or alive as that sow at that moment wanted so badly to be.” And what’s odd about it is that I do believe that animals feel pain. I don’t believe that they want to live, or fear death, or that a pig understands a shotgun. We have the words agony and terror, and those may best translate that pig’s final conscious moments.

So maybe Paynesville was a selected detail. Maybe this took place outside of Spicer or Osakis, or Sebeka, or Backus. Maybe none of it even happened.

My life went on and I had no awareness of this incident. Years passed, however many. Like other obedient children of my generation, I went to college. I went to the University of North Dakota and eventually took a class from this nice Irish hippy-Buddhist-humanist English professor who assigned regional poems. One was called “Old Sow in the Road,” by Bill Holm. Before then, I assumed authors only lived in Los Angeles or New York. I assumed they wrote romance, mystery, fantasy, and horror. No one would write about a pig, a truck, and a highway near Paynesville. When I read the poem, I thought of my dad’s old trucks, all the weird feelings, the unspoken things. My dad grew up on a farm but left it for a bureaucratic job that he hated. He kept these old trucks, and when he drove in them with his son, who just screwed around all day and begged for an Atari, there was regret and despair involved.

I began to understand that everyone’s life is profound. And that sometimes meaning can’t be explained. A lot of times, we’re just in awe. “[E]verything / I’ll ever say until I’m either dead / or alive as that sow at that moment / wanted so badly to be.” Inadequate language. Speechless in the temple. Something. Life elapses through us, as energy elapses through all structures that assume and relinquish form within the brief flash of light and warmth we call the universe. I would later know a religious scholar who would say, “there is an ecstasy in life unfolding over billions of years.”

I wanted to write my own poems, which was interesting, because I hadn’t written creatively. Within a year, I had written the first draft of one of the poems that would be published in For Better Night Vision, my first chapbook. It was called “The New Development”—a man wanders among some half-finished houses on the outskirts of a central Minnesota town. Cheaply built places, on lots subdivided from pasture. The developers were calling it “River Hills.” Writing it, I felt many lives and dreams associated with the place. I felt generations passing.