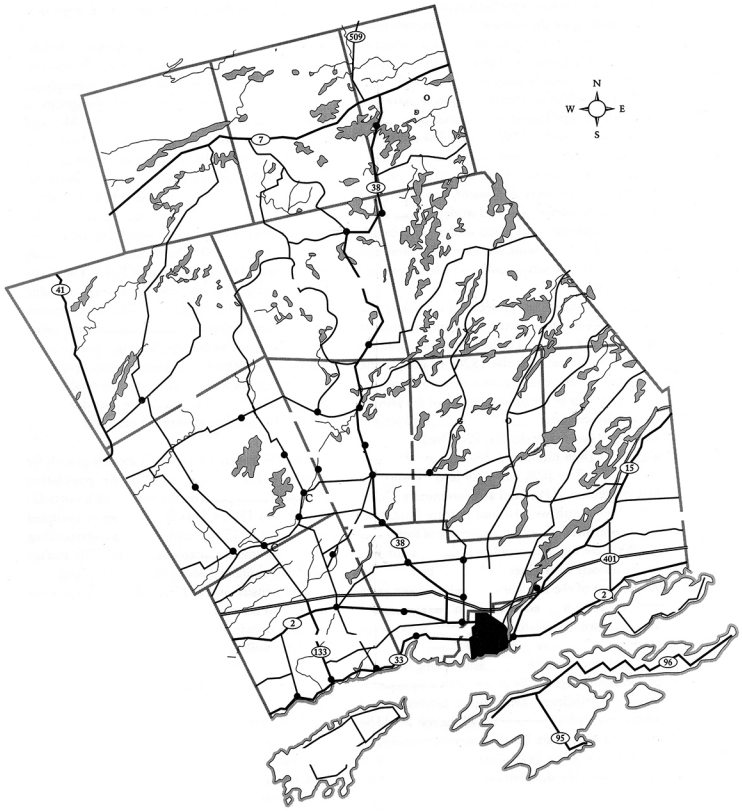
Shaped by a Benevolent Myth



Searching for Revelations (In a Matter Of Emphasis)

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My father is behind the wheel, and we are barreling through the mist of a late autumn afternoon in Ontario Canada, disturbing the dust on Highway 401. The maples, glistening a deep dark November red, create boundary lines between the road and agricultural sprawl. I've forgotten the beauty Ontario encapsulates—the winding rivers like giant snakes mating, the bright rim of the sky dangling over the metamorphic rock, and the indifferent stare of the (once) nourishing, motherly mountains. I have not set foot in this province in twenty-one years. We are returning to the dairy farm that my mother grew up on; Loch-an Brae. A site that vacillates between dream and waking—and where the ancestral architects twisted childhood stories into the silence of trauma. We merge onto Highway 38, the road that connects city to farm, and my mother begins her extraction of memories embedded within the blurring landscape:

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"My shattered and screwed up childhood followed by my terrible adolescence… That building is where I attended my second year Queens formal dinner party, and where I was almost killed.

Your Aunt and I would sing with your great grandma in that church.
Down that road, on the left, is where my grandma was born.
There are some good memories…

This is where preachers from the United States would come every summer and set up their evangelical summer camps. I always enjoyed it in some odd way, it was like the theatre for the mad—talk in tongues and permeate with 'old-time-crazy'.

That is where Ken Baker lived. He was the wealthiest farmer in the area. There was an unspoken competition between him and dad.

That is where dad told us the witch lived. It used to be this tumbled down gray shack that had a permanent smoke stream from its chimney, but now, it looks like they have become quite wealthy witches.

I babysat there as a kid for quite a few years—I'm not entirely sure why.

Evan Sander's trailer. Her dad was in the army, and she went to my school.

Searching for Revelations (In a Matter Of Emphasis)

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Charlie Wallace—and his family… He was mentally unwell and would walk from his house, up the 38, to come and visit with dad at the kitchen table.
He was supposedly one of our cousins, but we aren't certain. I don't think any of the Wallace's in the area are/were linked by blood—more so whatever misplaced pride they placed in the name.

The railroad came through here, but now it's just a walking trail. It cuts through the farm and joggers stop to try and pet the cows.

Over in that lot is where we used to stop and get gas as kids.

The subdivision, over there on the left, is where I had my first cigarette.

On the right and up a way, is where your uncle bought the new land to develop crops, wind, and solar energy. The community had a town meeting to prevent the construction—they didn't want the scenic view of the hill to be ruined. He receives a cheque each month honoring the agreement, but it's not nearly enough to cover the debt.

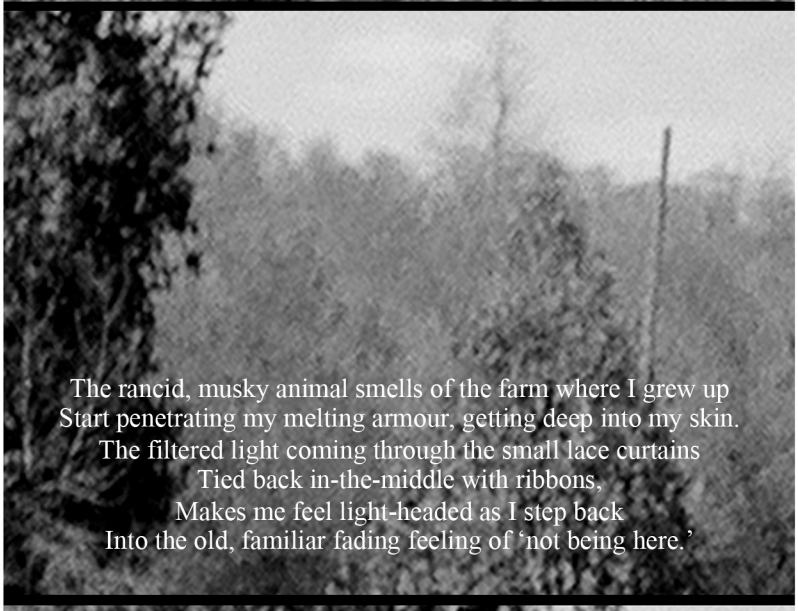
Do you remember any of this?"

"No…"

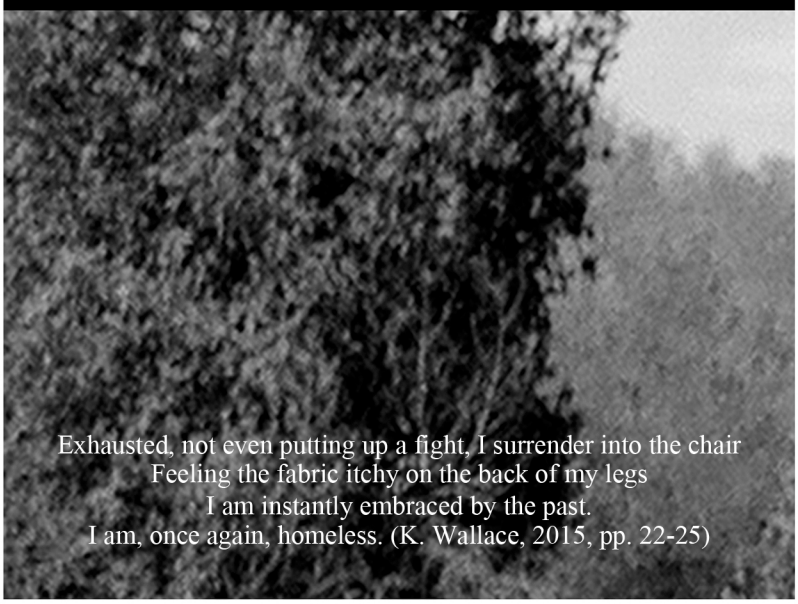
I reply…

We turn left, off of highway 38, and drive up the laneway to Loch-an Brae—all the while the moon begins to wax purple.

I naively walk into the old farm kitchen,
Now inhabited by my brother and his family,
Trying to stay intact.
Already fading, I scan the light, dusty blue of this well-worn room
And my eyes rest on the bulky, overstuffed
Aged, blue-and-light-brown-plaid chair in the corner.



The rancid, musky animal smells of the farm where I grew up
Start penetrating my melting armour, getting deep into my skin.
The filtered light coming through the small lace curtains
Tied back in-the-middle with ribbons,
Makes me feel light-headed as I step back
Into the old, familiar fading feeling of 'not being here.'



Exhausted, not even putting up a fight, I surrender into the chair
Feeling the fabric itchy on the back of my legs
I am instantly embraced by the past.
I am, once again, homeless. (K. Wallace, 2015, pp. 22-25)

The Silence That Words Get Lost In
(Like the Back of a Hand)

■ ■ ■

We have now been walking the fields for a handful of hours. The overcast sky and light drizzle have set a somber mood. The relic of the original farmhouse looms behind us. To walk the fields my mother says, is what someone from the city would romanticize. The farm is vastly different from my last memory associated with it:

> My mother, father, sister, and myself had stopped to visit, when I was seven, before we left to travel the world and ultimately lay our roots in Australia. I was playing with my youngest cousin on the swing-set, just behind the farmhouse, and perched on the green hill that the laneway winds up like a lazy snake. It was during an Ontario summer; extremely hot and muggy, you could feel your arm sift through the air as if it were in a block of slowly melting butter. The grass had a brilliant shine—as if out of a 1950s Sears catalogue, the barn(s) an erect and authorial tranquility, and the laneway a crisp and prosperous aura (secreting out of the freshly paved asphalt).

The barn's shoulders are no longer straight, the silos sunken, and there was never the birth of a son. The laneway, as wide as bereavement, has returned to the earth—a subduction of time and hope. The fields are no longer nourished by familial pastoral care and coupled by the mass exodus of prosperity has left them a delicate, burnt umber. My mother has been recollecting stories of her (not so) distant childhood while I've been frantically trying to photograph everything in sight, checking that the GPS map-app is transcribing our (now digital) journey, and trying to learn how to visually re-invent—when I really should just be listening. We have stopped at a rock fence that sprawls from the cowshed and deep into the rippling fields. It was originally erected in the early 19th century to map out imperial plots for settlement. This is how settler colonial bureaucracy began the establishment of barriers to erase and displace Indigenous ecologies; what would soon become a continental wound cut into the earth.

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"This is the best part of the farm, walking in the woods away from everyone,
no one could touch you, look at you.
As a child, I did not really think of Olive as a real person. She was not 'home' so to speak.
I made my first home away from home here, away from mum,

The Silence That Words Get Lost In
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otherwise, I would have died.

I would play with my younger cousin out here,

and make leaf furniture for our acorn families in their villages under the trees.

The adults would interrupt our private world and my aunt would thank me
for looking after him,
and I would look at her like she was crazy because before he came along,
no one spoke my language or understood the magic of play, the way he did.

When I wasn't with my cousin, I was alone or busy with your aunt losing the cows and getting yelled at by Dad—the red cows, oh, they are so sweet and beautiful.

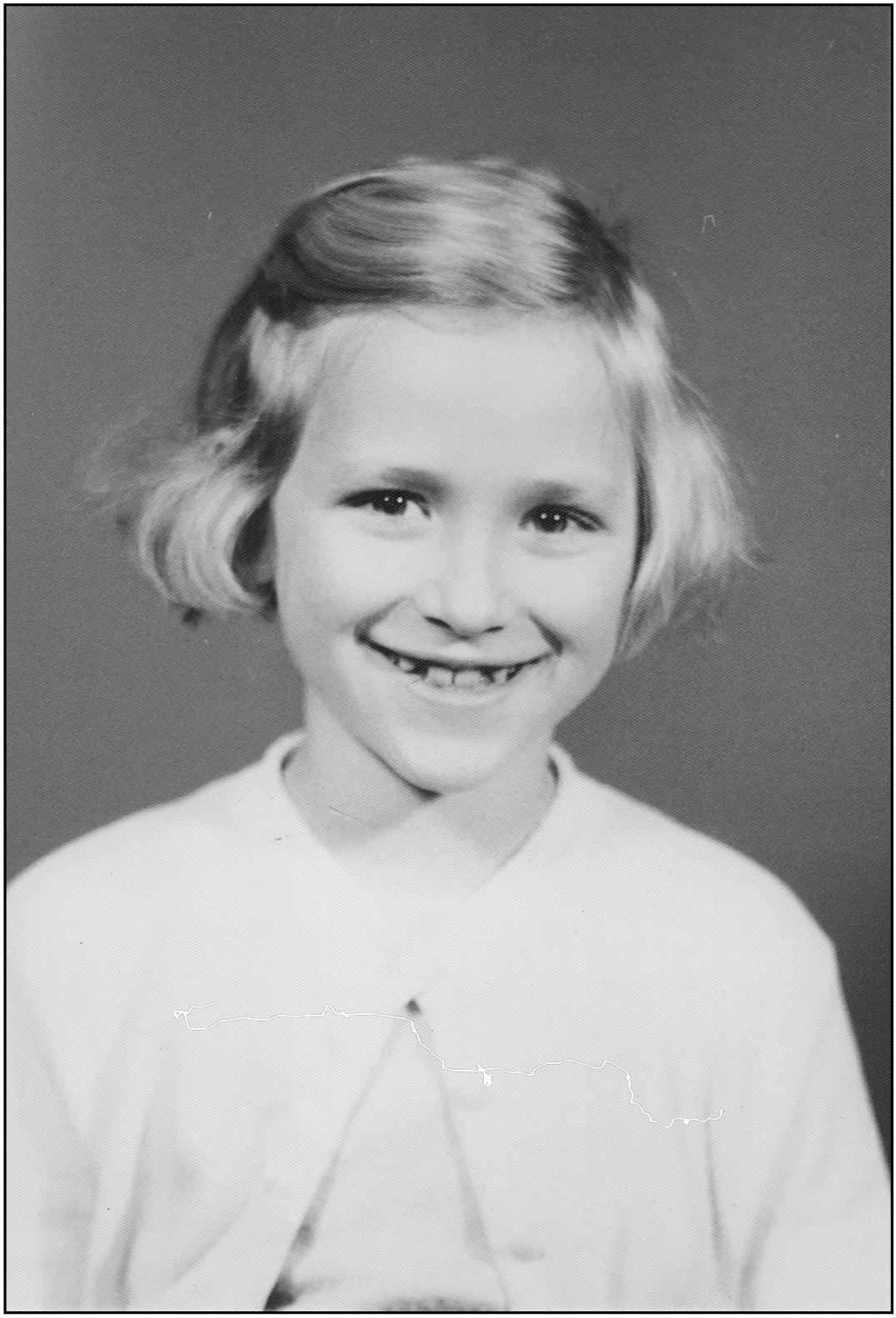
I used to write poetry when I was younger. I would hide my poems in a tin box, between the cracks of the rock fence. I would spend hours writing them in secret, and when no one was looking, quietly run out of the house to hide them away. I wonder if they are still there, somewhere in-between.

Growing up,

I learned to make myself small."

Tired of opening secrets as translucent as memory, we turn towards the farmhouse and begin our journey home, following the line my mother's voice has etched through her private territory of childhood ache—feet rustling through the overgrown greenery, avoiding puddles and congealed mud—headed towards bottom drawers, plastic bags, and half-eaten onions.


Nothing grows but shadows, painful memories fed by fear.
I look around thinking I may find a corner that could shelter
Or a small oasis, not yet discovered.
Who knew that rocks could hug or
Seedlings could grow out
Of our chests?
Here in this place,
fresh life springs out of painful,
bloody cracks. (K. Wallace, 2015, p. 53).



An Electric Atmosphere (As If They Were Meant to Meet)

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My second cousin was a well-known Canadian poet. She wrote poetry like nothing I have read before—profoundly plain, radically real, mundanely mystifying; of the everyday, of women, children, the home, and of Loch-an Brae. My mother tells me she was the family storyteller, the bard, and that she told the tough stuff: the secrets the Wallace family (and so *many* others) hid from the outside world: familial abuse. After she passed at the age of 40, my great aunts attributed her cancerous jaw to the telling of family secrets. She speaks of two geographies at play within (settled) place:

The men know the land and weather,
who owns it and for how long,
what to prepare for when you can.
Being men, they have access to maps
and county records, almanacs.

Their wives know it differently.
Not just who married who
but what it was like and why,
how the kids turned out in the end.
This may be gossip,
but that doesn't make it unimportant.
You can't have your daughters' marrying men
who beat their wives, raising children
who will tear all over the countryside
making fools of themselves.
"What's bred in the bone," my grandmother said,
"comes out in the flesh." (B. Wallace, 1985, p. 12)

We are sitting around the kitchen table, surrounded by maps, county records, and almanacs, and deeply seeded in an armchair journey into the depths of my mother's and uncle's collective childhood memories:

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"Grandpa was a psychopath and beat the women and boys. He never spoke of his father, just assumed it was always that way. Dad hated him and when he got the house, he had to split the ground floor down the middle: James and Edna on one half and Wartman and Olive on the other—they got to listen to James's beat Edna at night. Olive had a good childhood, from what I gathered.

An Electric Atmosphere (As If They Were Meant to Meet)

■ ■ ■

I don't understand how she turned out the way she did—people just didn't know about Olive."

"She must have been abused."

"Please, that makes me feel sick."

"The house was always a trap. You were never allowed to play, and when we would see the workers leaving the fields, we would all scream: "the men are coming!" and run back to the kitchen. I was constantly dissociated."

"Do you really think you were? I remember asking Olive if she could help us with homework one night and she replied: "ask your father, he is the teacher in this family". She was the goddamned teacher; he was a farmer who barely finished school. She was a horrendous chef and would bark orders for us kids to go directly to bed if we wouldn't eat the food. There was one dinner with brawn, and God knows I couldn't stomach that, so, that was that and I went to bed."

"I threw up at the table… I had a breakdown at Queens [university] and attempted suicide. I had no self-esteem. I think it had to do with mum's words: "you should have never been born", or the underlining mantra of: "you should have been a boy". Dad sent me to Calgary, to see Edna, because I sat on that wicker chair by the kitchen table for two weeks completely severed from any form of reality."

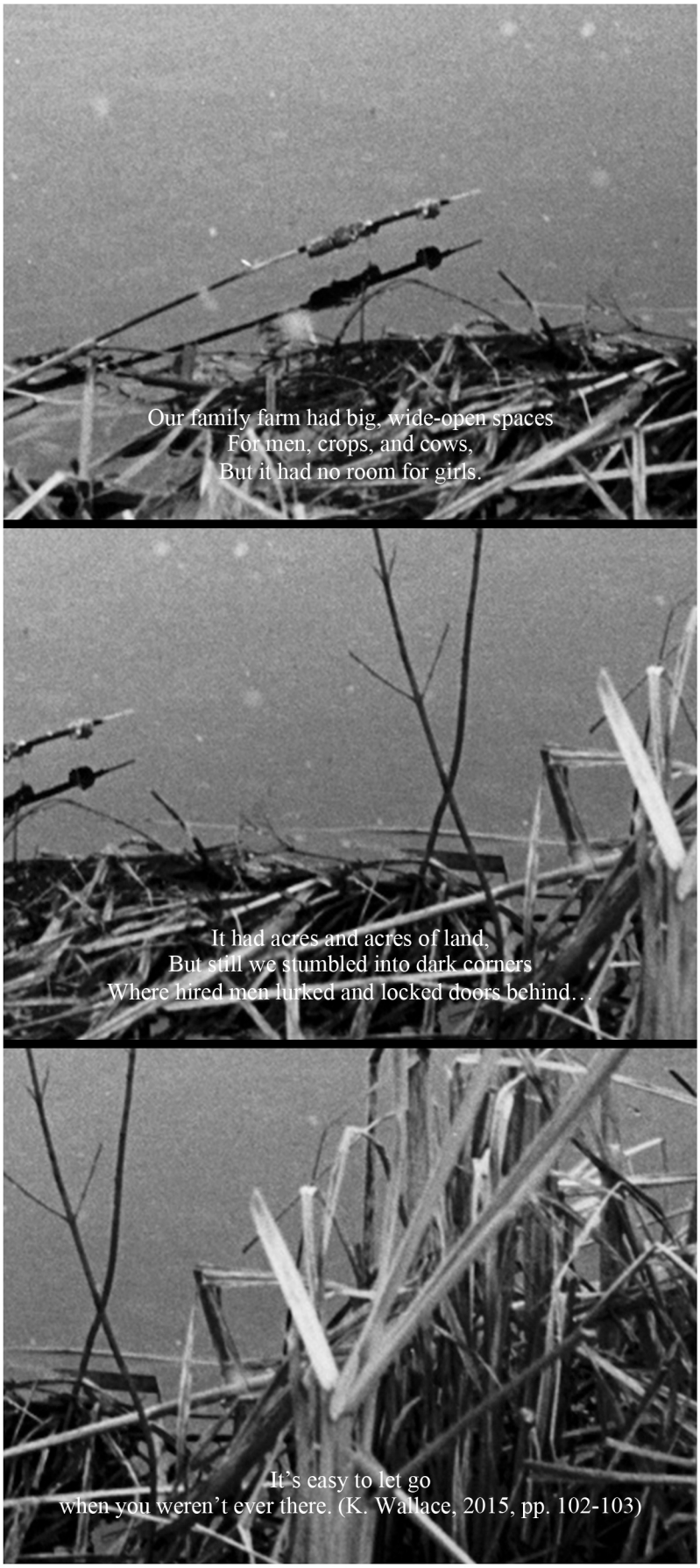
"I just stayed out there (on the land). I didn't see half of it. I find it so disturbing that your childhood was so dark. I don't remember this black shit."

"It's our parents who didn't see us. It was their job. Mum couldn't view us as real people. She couldn't connect. It was all about her feelings. After mum died and the funeral was over, Velma and I tried to figure out why we didn't get along anymore (as sisters). She is stuck in what happened to her on the farm. She can't let go of certain stories—Dad would just get in those blackout rages. He was just kicking her, and you jumped in and stopped it—if it wasn't for you…"

"He was a big strong guy—I don't think a kid could stop him."

"You did though."

And I begin to wonder, as the ciphers of the past unfold, is it a violation to make stories into objects?


Our family farm had big, wide-open spaces
For men, crops, and cows,
But it had no room for girls.
It had acres and acres of land,
But still we stumbled into dark corners
Where hired men lurked and locked doors behind…
It's easy to let go
when you weren't ever there. (K. Wallace, 2015, pp. 102-103)

References

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Wallace, B. (1985). *Common Magic*. Oberon Press.

Wallace, K. (2015). *There is No Need to Talk about This.* Sense Publishers.