

Harvest

by David Ackley

When the hay was ripe it stirred and rippled like water. Waves of air bent the tall grass from green to gold. Swimming in greenery, woodchucks fed and fattened on the crop until the busy teeth of the mower laid it quietly down in long lapped bands to be gathered and piled in the barn. After the haying the boy and his uncle harvested the woodchucks exposed in the stubble, picking them off from the barn window with twenty twos. Or in the old blue Plymouth bouncing across the cut fields they drive right to the hole the chuck diving for cover when they're still fifty yards off. In its dooryard, they wait to the tick of the cooling engine with barrels out the windows. A woodchuck always has to have another look like having to look under the bed at night expecting rats or worse. Some awful thing. Is being dead knowing that thing ? Or does dying and knowing and wanting to know all end together? A black nose pokes out of the dark, brown head slivered with white. It sits up on its back legs, one brown eye on the thing so close and too hugely there to believe with the black eyeholes of the bores staring back. They pull at the same time. Get out and stand over the carcass, his uncle toeing skin loose as a hand-down coat before tipping it with his boot into the dark hole it had dug to live in. "Killed his self," the uncle says, turning away, not seeing the boy flinch. Or maybe not caring. A lesson. Down there in the dark it would become what he once saw in a low hollow, clustered white in the shape of the small mammal they engulfed and consumed with avid tremor and the seethe of small chewing.

