

Brandon R. Schrand

THE BONE ROAD

I.

It is July 2006, and I am driving down a washboard road in one of the most barren and remote stretches of southeastern Idaho. The drive, I know, will take better than two hours as my car growls through ruts, buttonhook turns and rain-washed gullies. This is an eighty-some-odd-mile ribbon of stone-knuckled trail known as the Bone Road. I have just recently learned, by complete accident, that my father, Jerrold Imeson — a man I have known only by name, and whose face I have never seen — is dead. That he died, in fact, nearly ten years ago, of heart failure. He was forty-four. And then, I learned that *his* father, Wetzel, another man I have never met, never seen, died at forty-six of cancer. And the final blow: *his* father, Jim, died at forty-five of unknown causes. At thirty-three, I am a husband and father of two. And I am haunted: forty-four, forty-five, forty-six. I can't help but wonder where in that chain of mortality I will fall — forty-three or forty-seven? Ambushed by these findings, I am convinced, absolutely and foolishly convinced, that I will die at one of those two ages, because men in my family apparently don't live to see fifty.

And so I drive the hard, gravelly curves and ease the car over the steep rocky rises. It is ninety degrees outside. Sweat slides down my back as sunlight burns white on the windshield. A buckled plain of sagebrush and cheatgrass splattered with cow dung trails off into the hazy smudge of summer sky. Not even a single juniper breaks the sight-line on this tumbling world. The windows are down, and I grind the dust in my teeth. In the passenger's seat, a crumpled photocopy of my father's obituary floats and spins like a small stringless kite in a hot column of dust and sunlight.

BUT THIS STORY does not begin with my father's side of the family, nor does it begin in an obituary. It finds its origins in an old grainy black-and-white photograph. It features my great-grandparents on my mother's side, Bessie and Fred Moyer, crouched on a cobbled brushy plain. Chalky rocks litter

the foreground like shattered teeth. Their cabin, a single-room box with the luxury of two windows, crowds the right margin. The Tetons jut skyward in the background. It is the early 1920s, just outside Jackson Hole, Wyoming. A few years earlier they had married on the Idaho side of that jagged mountain range, not far from the Bone Road. They are pictured with their two daughters — my great-aunts Vie and Marie. Their dirty faces peer back from the photo. Bessie's mouth is clothesline-straight, her frame gaunt. Her dark unkempt hair wanders in a breeze. She is likely pregnant. Or will become pregnant soon. The photo appears to have been shot under a noon summer sun, making my great-grandfather harder to read. It is the only known photograph of Fred Moyer, this mysterious man, this cowboy whose cowboy hat throws a shadow over his face so dark, so cumulative, it erases him completely.

He is the first in my family to vanish in such a way, to slip into those lengthening shadows that stretch ever backward and yet somehow manage to coax the present. But, before he vanished, he would give Bessie six more children, making eight in all: the Moyer kids. Then, in the chill of a Wyoming morning, or perhaps on a night ruined with stars, he would bow and take his final leave, his horse cantering into a postcard sunset.

Bessie lost the cabin. That much is clear. Another photograph tells that story. This one shows a canvas tent pitched deep in a field, a small vessel tossed on a sea of lupine and spindly sweetgrass. Eight kids and a single mother make their home in that canvas tent. The toddler who sits in the foreground, squinting, nearly lost in a shallow of the field—that is George Moyer, my mother's father, my grandfather. He'll grow and ask questions about Fred Moyer. *Who was my real dad? What was he like? And, Do I look like him?* Over time he'll make a mythology of his father: the drifter, the cowboy in starched shirts, the high-plainsman who smelled of smoke and soap and whiskey.

I knew nothing of this side of my family. For us, patterns of divorce often preempt a straight or storyable lineage. Growing up in rural Idaho, I had only a vague understanding that some of my blood-kin lived on the other side of the Tetons in Jackson Hole. But insofar as understandings go, this one was no clearer than my understanding of an equinox. On my side of the Tetons, the Idaho side, our family was a composite of steps and halves and those otherwise prodded into our awkward circle by chance or law.

I was fourteen when I first met my grandfather, George Moyer. He showed up on our doorstep one summer day about a year after my step-grandfather, Lynn, had died. Although I had no blood-connection to Lynn, he was the only grandfather I had known, and to me, a boy desperate for a discernable past, genetics sometimes seemed incidental, a technicality. On alternate days, however, I would wish for such a technical connection to Lynn and ferret around in the genealogy hoping that our spidery pedigrees would meet somewhere in the tangle of progeny. Once I even asked my grandmother, Beth, if there was a chance she was related to her husband, Lynn. She laughed: “We both come from Mormon families with polygamy back there somewhere,” she said, waving her hand at the past. “I suppose anything is possible.”

It felt wrong to have George — this stranger — emerge from the past and extend his leathery hand. Our living arrangements only made it more strange: We owned and operated a café, bar and hotel, a three-story brick citadel in the center of Soda Springs. We all lived there, on the ground floor, in apartments partitioned off from one another — my mother and stepfather in Number 2, the smallish corner unit, and, after Lynn died, I with my grandmother in Number 1, the more spacious manager’s apartment.

When George showed up, he was many things: progenitor, nomad, cowboy, myth, ex-lover — a story materialized. He was passing through, he said. On his way to nowhere in particular. This man, this box-jawed drifter, whistling around the country, bedroll slung over his shoulder.

“Brandon,” my mother said that day. “I want you to meet your grandfather, George.” We shook hands. I in my long hair and heavy metal T-shirt, George in his boots and cowboy hat and leather belt with *G-E-O-R-G-E* stamped in its hide. “Pleased to meet you,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Same.”

But it wasn’t the same. And he wasn’t my grandfather. Nor was he just another wanderer who had a room upstairs in our hotel. He was something else. I couldn’t make sense of it, my grandmother’s ex-husband living upstairs in our hotel. My grandfather Lynn had just died, and here was this man in his stead. “Isn’t it weird?” I asked my grandmother one day.

She touched a lighter to her cigarette, took a drag and said, “A lot of people stay here. Why the hell is he any different?”

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THAT PART OF her life — those scant years through which she stayed married to George — is walled off from discussion. Photographs of her during that period show a petite young woman with gentle features and Ava Gardner hair. Although they had met in Soda Springs, she and George took an apartment in Jackson Hole, where he served as town marshal. At night, when George scraped his boot-heels along the plankboard sidewalks casting his last dollar into the wind, my grandmother — then pregnant with my mother — attended to my aunt, her three-year-old epileptic daughter, and worried about how they would afford to heat the apartment come winter.

The worries only compounded, and eventually, after my mother was born, Beth gathered her two daughters and a few suitcases, stubbed out her cigarette and crossed the Tetons once again without looking back.

Back in Soda Springs, she worked as a waitress at a local diner, where she served patty melts and Iron Ports. That is where she fell in love with Lynn Beus, the well-to-do sheep rancher. The two eloped to Elko, Nevada, and idled back under the sunrise a married couple. He brought four children to the marriage, and she brought two, making six in all: the Beus kids.

II.

MORE OR LESS a northwest-southeast route, the Bone Road connects the biggish city (by Idaho standards) of Idaho Falls to Highway 34, an undulating ribbon on the eastern edge of the state that rises north into Tin Cup Pass, wags down into Gray's Lake — an expansive wetland and refuge for whooping cranes — and then crosses into Wyoming at the base of the Tetons and continues on into Jackson Hole. Or you can angle south and go to Soda Springs. Put a straightedge and pen to a map and connect the towns of Idaho Falls, Jackson Hole and Soda Springs, and you create a perfectly symmetrical upside-down triangle, with Soda Springs as its bottom point. These are the three points of my origins, and the Bone Road bisects this triangle in a jagged gash. This is why I am out here: to explore the intersections — though none of these places is my destination today. Going nowhere in particular, I am looking for a place to camp, roadside, in this brushland. I am out here because I have convinced myself that all I need is to be situated in the right geography and I can make

sense of the absences in my life. It's wishful thinking, of course, but I am overwhelmed with the need to run, and running into an empty landscape seems like the right idea.

When I first started out from Idaho Falls, I was disappointed that the road remained paved for several miles before it lopped into gravel. Now, though, I see what I had expected: a sagging cattle chute long ago abandoned to tangles of mustard weed and purple stands of Canadian thistle; cakes of cow dung the size of pie pans along the road; jackrabbits darting in and out of basalt crags; dust in the air and stones on the road. I pull over at a fork in the road, get out and spread my map over the car hood. The wind tugs at its corners. Grasshoppers pop through the brush in erratic arcs. I look around. Insect life adds a ratcheting song to the day and rides on the wind. The map proves useless, so I fold it away and get back into the car and take the right fork, hoping it's the correct one.

III.

MY GRANDPARENTS, BETH and Lynn, the newlyweds, used to drive the Bone Road, taking the long way from their Soda Springs sheep ranch to Idaho Falls to buy replacement parts for a combine, say, or a new clutch for their John Deere tractor. Long before I entered this world, they would drive this very road on harvest days roaring with sun or when the sky was bruised with thunderheads and the air sick with field chaff. They would clamber into their boxy orange-and-white International pickup and take to the road, feeling the truck-bed shudder over hot stones. There, in the cab, on the sticky-hot black bench seat, they passed a pint of Black Velvet back and forth, slopping it now and again down their chins. My grandmother's dark hair was no longer movie-star long but cut short and practical like a boy's, and she sat in jeans and boots and a western shirt. My grandfather looked like Dean Martin, except for his jeans and boots and shirt with its pearled snaps.

Soon they would reach Bone, Idaho, and its solitary bar with an aisle of groceries attached and a gas pump out front like an armed sentry at attention. There they would spill out of the truck with dust fresh in the air, step inside, order cold beers and listen to Johnny Cash on an old dented Arvin clock radio.

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After an hour or more of sharing cigarettes and wiping their foreheads, they would drop their empty cans into the smoldering trash barrels outside and climb back in the truck. Lynn would release the emergency brake, draw a low gear and drive the road west through the last of the sunlight. My grandmother would smoke and flick ash into the miasmic whorls of dust along the Bone Road. By the time they returned home to their sheep ranch, it would be dark, and they would be drunk, their breath rotten with whiskey. They would do this for years: driving that distance, bisecting that landscape and the shadows of generations it held, living out some splintered version of the story we have come to know as the American West.

IV.

I HAD ALWAYS imagined closing the distance between my father and me by making a simple phone call. More than once I would find myself at a gas station along a rural highway thumbing through a water-warped phonebook, scanning the *I* column for Imeson, Jerry. More than once my wife and two children waited in the car, their faces shadowy behind the windshield and striated sunlight. More than once did I abandon the possibility of dialing his number, rapping at his door, offering my hand and saying, “I’m Brandon, your son.” But still I imagined the scene of our reunion: the two of us at a table in a diner having coffee. Laughing. Telling the stories of who we were and who we had become. This is the mythology I have made.

Pleased to meet you.

Same.

And it would be the same. Or, at least, that is what I have told myself.

Every so often, throughout my childhood, I would approach my mother when my stepfather, Bud, was out of earshot and ask the same questions: *Who was my real dad? What was he like?* And, *Do I look like him?*

Invariably, she would pull an ashtray near, knock a cigarette from a pack, and begin the story — again. It always went the same way, as though it had been recorded and looped back to me. She left Jerry when she got pregnant. They were young. It wouldn’t work. But he insisted that they try to make it work. So they lived together for a while after I was born. He found work in Reno painting houses for a living, but then he broke his leg skiing and was out

of work, and that is when she left him for good. *He was a nice guy. He never hit me. And he adored you*, she would say.

I would nod and stare at my tennis shoes. *So do I look like him?*

Oh, yes, and you have his sense of humor.

This was the story handed down over the years. I had it memorized, and still I would go back and ask my mother to tell me the story of Jerry Imeson, hoping that another detail might surface in the retelling. I must have spent hours in the mirror studying my reflection as if it were a map, tracing my jawbone with my index finger, searching for clues that would lead to a man whose face I could never fully know.

And so, too, would I puzzle over my birth certificate, which names me not Brandon Imeson but Brandon Russell Moyer.

Why not Imeson?

Because, Brandon. Because it wasn't going to work, out and because we were young.

Instead of Imeson, my mother gave me *her* father's last name. He was George Moyer, I was Brandon Moyer, descended ultimately from Fred Moyer, the shadowy man in a cowboy hat in the black-and-white photograph snapped under a noon summer sun.

V.

I HAVE BEEN driving about thirty minutes when I see the sun-bleached skeletal remains of a deer alongside the road. I get out and take a look. It has been picked clean. Turkey vultures, I suspect. A larger animal, like a mountain lion, would have dragged it off the road and into the cover of brush. For a moment I stand over it in the press of heat, and then crouch to study the remains, the material whose very presence validates the thing's absence. Like a photograph. Like an obituary. Or a death certificate. Leg bones at right angles, arrowed hooves. The spine and its delicate curve. Some of the vertebrae have broken away into an archipelago of bone fragments in a small sea of sand. Junegrass pokes through the basket of ribs. Ants have made an overpass out of one of the vertebrae, and their red bodies, en masse, give the gray-white bone a surge of color. The head is gone. That part has been packed away by a scavenger or, I think, by a taxidermist. After a few moments, I leave the carcass and get back into the hot car and round a crook in the road.

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During the westward migration of the nineteenth century, trail-weary travelers often inscribed on sun-washed bones messages meant for the settlers who were still days behind them, and placed the fragments — a jawbone, say — along the rutted wagon road. Most messages were simple: *William & Dora & children safe. Will stop in John Day.* Others were instructional: *Fresh spring water 1 mile east.* Still others were cautionary: *Beware the rattlesnakes.* Word maps. One-way dialogues.

Out here, human contact and communication are scarce, illusory, even now. Bone, Idaho was one of the last points in the United States to receive telephone service. It is a place defined by its isolation. If Bone, Idaho shows up on a map — and it does, albeit infrequently — the Bone Road seldom appears, a fact for which I am unendingly grateful. Part of me — the foolish part — wants this road to be mine. But you can no more hoard distance than you can gather shadows and cast your name upon them.

VI.

TWO DAYS BEFORE I set out on the Bone Road, I was in the special collections archives at Brigham Young University when I learned of my father's death. I was on a grant conducting research on an obscure nineteenth-century travel writer named John Codman, an Easterner who had made a summer home in the western hamlet of Soda Springs. After hours of painstaking sleuthing, I decided to run some keywords through a database of census records for southeastern Idaho. My queries, however, returned very little that I didn't already know about John Codman. I was tired and my eyes burned and my back ached. When I noticed that special collections would be closing in ten minutes, I decided to lob another keyword into the same database, just to see what I could see.

I typed IMESON.

When I hit enter, a ghost swam up from the milky screen and extended its hand.

The death record told me that Jerrold Imeson had died at home of heart failure on May 8, 1997 in Shelley, Idaho. It felt like part of me had just spun off its axis. I was decentered. Destabilized. Panicked.

Then the other ghosts appeared. His father, and his father's father.

One minute you're doing good work. You're a grant recipient. You have two children. You have your whole life ahead of you. And then, the next minute, you're confronted with a familial, cyclic pattern of mortality that leaves you by turns paralyzed and paranoid. You think you might die right there in the archives. You're wrong, of course, but you think you know things.

I never would have guessed that, while I was looking for one dead man, I would find three more in his place — three more whose blood cartographies led directly to me. This genetic connection was not incidental, and was not, in my mind, a technicality.

The death record also listed the newspaper in which the obituary was printed, but BYU did not have the Idaho Falls *Post Register* in its collections. Shelley, Idaho was a small farming town just eight miles south of Idaho Falls, just eight miles south of where the Bone Road begins. I searched all the university libraries in Utah but to no avail. The closest library that carried back issues of the *Post Register* was Idaho State University's, in Pocatello, a city just down the road from Idaho Falls. I would go the next day: hit the library, get the obituary, drive north to the Bone Road and camp that night.

VII.

WALLACE STEGNER ONCE told us that the West was a place settled — or unsettled, depending on your view — by boomers and nesters, the cast-abouts and dwellers. As a fifth-generation Westerner, I need to look no further than my own family to see that observation played out in fact. My great-great-grandparents had thirteen children over twenty-six years, no two born in the same place. Some, like my great-grandmother Bessie — the one crouched in the photograph, born in the back of a wagon in the middle of Teton Pass — were born between places. In bisections, intersections, on the move. Others didn't survive childhood and were buried in prairie sod (but only after howling, ten-drilled fires burned for three days over frozen ground to thaw the earth enough to receive an interring shovel). And so there are those forever fixed in a place with wheatgrass and wind above.

I have often wondered to what degree my own family has typified or embodied the old mythologies of the American West. I wonder, too, if we have shaped these mythologies, cast them before us in an unwitting rite of promulgation, or

if they have shaped us. Was Fred Moyer aware of the role he was playing? Was he happy to oblige the cowboy prophecy, the spell of rugged individualism? Is the endgame of the Marlboro Man to canter and cry, *Westward ho!*, and to be, in the words of Johnny Cash, “as gone as a wild goose in winter”? And if so, what does that endgame suggest about legacy and inheritance? How am I to understand these men, this myth that seems to eclipse my own life? Because for me there could be nothing worse than recapitulating old stories and patterns, than living in the shadow of generations.

VIII.

MY MOTHER, WHO was born in Jackson Hole, where her father paced the streets with a gleaming star pinned to his shirt, grew up in Soda Springs and met Jerrold Imeson in Idaho Falls shortly after her high school graduation. She and Jerry and two other feckless couples all shared a trailer house on the edge of town. There they all partied late into the nights and sometimes well into the tepid light of dawn. But when the sickness from the swelling in her stomach took her to the bathroom in the mornings, she stubbed out her cigarette, said so long to Jerry and moved back to Soda Springs, taking the Bone Road home.

I was nearly three years old when my mother started dating Bud Schrand, an electrician who liked to drag-race his purple Dodge Charger up and down Main Street in Soda Springs. Like so many young men in Soda Springs in the 1970s, Bud was an out-of-towner picking up work at one of the many local mines. A boom was on, which meant that Soda Springs would draw droves of far-flung men and their pastless, cantering ways before the inevitable bust would spit them out into unknown country, penniless and a little more broken for their time. Meanwhile, my grandparents, Lynn and Beth, had turned over their sheep ranch to the eldest son, moved to town and bought the hotel, café and bar in which we would all eventually live. It was a place that fed and housed these aimless men, and Bud Schrand was one of them — the hot-rodder who tipped the bartender, my mother, a little too much and whose wink came a little too easily. They married a few years later, and he became the only father I knew, so I took his name and keep it today.

Still, it wasn't my official, legal or documentary name. About the time my grandfather, George Moyer, showed up to live with us, I applied for my Social Security card. Because Soda Springs is a small town, and because my family

was well-known, I wasn't asked to show any kind of identification at the courthouse where I applied. When I filled out the forms, I wrote Schrand — never considering Moyer, my given name, or Imeson for that matter — and no one questioned it. A few years later, when I registered for the Selective Service as Brandon Russell Schrand, I was shocked to receive a nasty letter from the same commission informing me that Brandon Russell Moyer had yet to register and that he had better do so immediately if he knew what was good for him. “What should I do?” I asked my mother.

She thought for a moment and shrugged. “You better send it.” So I was registered twice during the Gulf War. Suddenly, I was two people. But I was also three people. I was Brandon Schrand. I was Brandon Moyer. I was Brandon Imeson. These three names somehow triangulated the sum of me. “Don't worry, though,” my mother said, exhaling a drag from her cigarette. “If they reinstate the draft, I will drag *both* of you to Canada in a heartbeat.” We both laughed, knowing full well that she meant it, and I was thankful.

IX.

AFTER I LEFT the parking lot at BYU, I began my drive north to track down the obituary and decided to call my mother. I was frank, and my voice was unsteady and jagged. “Jerry is dead,” I said. “Died ten years ago.” She was silent at first. Then she stammered. Then she broke. “I had no idea,” she said. “No idea at all.” She started crying. “I am so sorry.” The past had flooded the present, as the past is wont to do, and she was adrift in its waters. I told her I would call back, that I needed some time to think. But only half an hour passed before my phone rang. She was racked with this strange and sudden grief. “We need to talk,” she said. “There are some things you should know.” She paused and then added, “I haven't told you the whole story.”

THE NEXT DAY I found myself on the second floor of the Idaho State University library scrolling through a roll of microfilm, hurling myself back in time, blinded and dizzied by the gray blur of newsprint, by the way the machine rushed the past into the present and squared the present with the past. I still had no conception, no mock-up, of what Jerry looked like. But then I found it, the obituary page, under this heading: “THE WEST.” It was dated Saturday, May 10, 1997. There it was. His photograph, no larger than a postage stamp.

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Here was my father at long last. Here was this image, this face that was no longer a face but a death mask. I studied the man in the picture. A mop of longish dark hair. A high forehead like mine. A cocked, toothy smile. His cheekbones resembling half-moons, like mine. He wears a western-style shirt, flannel perhaps, with pearled snaps. His gaze was fixed not on me, the viewer, but on something just outside the frame. His face had been cropped out of a larger photograph, one I suspected to be a family portrait. I scanned the obituary for the details, but I read too fast and missed things and had to circle back to the beginnings of sentences so I could get the narrative straight.

He had married in 1993.

He had three children.

I am not named in the obituary as one of them.

Their names are Travis, Joshua and Nicole.

I am an only child.

Now I have three siblings.

The four of us: the Imeson kids.

I printed the obituary and read it again. It trembled in my hand. It occurred to me just how little of my background I knew. You think you know who you are, and then you pay a quarter for a photocopy and your whole world becomes double exposed. You discover that you yourself have been cropped out of a larger picture. You suddenly feel strange in your own skin. You have three names, two names, one name. You are half of who you thought you were.

WHEN I LEFT the library, obituary in hand, I drove forty miles north to Shelley, Idaho to see where Jerry had lived. I wanted to see the half of who I wasn't. From there, I would drive eight miles and turn off on the Bone Road.

Shelley, Idaho is a land of sweeping alfalfa fields and surging irrigation lines. It is a land crisscrossed with canals, a desert made plentiful, a wild land subdued at the behest of the yeoman's dream. It is small and flat, a green patch on the Snake River Plain. It is a backwater with a golf course and ranch-style homes and trailer houses. Lawns are overly large, and every house has a pickup truck.

As I entered Shelley and pulled into a gas station, I knew I had done this before. And I was doing it again. Another roadside service station. Another

water-warped phonebook. I flipped to the *I* section and found the listing. I wrote down the address, bought a bottle of water and drove a couple of blocks until I found it: a corner house on the edge of town where neighborhoods end and fields begin. The house was older, built perhaps in the 1930s, and in disrepair. The paint was milky green and peeling in places. The painter who never painted his house, I thought. Or the painter who died leaving his home to the scouring high-desert winters. A station wagon — likely broken-down — squatted in a patch of weeds in the front yard. Near the car a dog found shade under a pine — to which it was chained. A bicycle lay by the front steps. I wondered who it belonged to: Travis, Joshua or Nicole? In the side-yard I spotted another broken-down car, this time a Camaro or Trans Am, I wasn't sure which. Its hood yawned open, and its flat tires were sun-cracked and shot. Around back, two more cars just like it sat abandoned to sun and sky. Other than the dog, I saw no sign of life. And so I parked across the street and stared. I took pictures with my cell phone. I tried to imagine what the inside must look like, and the people — strangers, really — who inhabited that world. Then I tried to imagine his death, which, for some reason, I located in the kitchen. He is wearing the same shirt as in his obituary. He slumps. His hand clutches his chest. Things crash to the floor. There is commotion. His family turns to look. And then it's over, and he's gone. He is another to have vanished.

I circled the block and then parked again in front of their house. I was taught all my life not to stare, but that was all I could do. I was peering into the *what-could-have-been* of my life and testing it for familiarity. I imagined myself living there. I projected myself into its rooms. The bedroom dark with wood paneling and shag carpet. In the backyard, with a stick in my hand. Saturday mornings when my father's pickup would sit idling in the driveway while he swung buckets of paint and primer into its bed, cigarette in the corner of his mouth. A skiff of papers and pink carbons, work orders, resting on the truck seat. Empty packs of Camels smashed into the floorboards, or pinched in the seam where the windshield meets the dash. Saturday mornings sitting shotgun on the benchseat of the truck in my flannel shirt with pearled snaps, Johnny Cash crooning on the radio.

I circled the block once more, stalking my past, tracking shadows, culling ghosts, and then, finally, drove north to the Bone Road.

X.

I AM HAPPY to see that the Bone Store is still operational. This watering hole. This wayward place. This pinpoint that likely saw members of my family pass in and out of its doors over time: Moyers, Beuses, Imesons. It's not unreasonable. The Imeson family was split between Idaho Falls and Jackson Hole, divided by the Tetons, if nothing else, and their unifying thread was this road. This shortcut. This alkali tongue. This umbilical route.

The Moyers of Jackson Hole knew the Imesons of Jackson Hole. My grandmother Beth tells a single story of Wetzel Imeson, Jerry's father and my grandfather, the one who died of cancer. "A big lanky bugger," she calls him. All arms and legs. Elbows and knees sticking out every which way. A dirt-poor man lost in the bottomland of drink but harmless enough. At night when George Moyer scraped his boot-heels along the plankboard sidewalks whistling far-off songs, he was often called to a bar to fetch a drunken Wetzel. It was a regular thing. Barmen would cut Wetzel off and point to the door, and friends would help shoo him home, but the big lanky bugger would crane his arms and legs, hooking his hands and boots into the doorjamb, and it would take three men — or George and the threat of jail — to pry him loose and send him tottering into the wild veil of starlight. My two not-yet cowboy-grandfathers in a face-off, one helping the other, each caught in a moment prefiguring the spidery DNA and the symmetry of generations to come. I have always liked that story, sad as it is.

XI.

HERE'S ANOTHER STORY. I am eight years old and living in the hotel. My mother, who had recently found herself in her own bottomland of drink (she would quit drinking soon after), staggers into the café where I have been eating lunch. Broad daylight and customers stealing furtive glances at this spectacle. She is visibly, embarrassingly drunk. She fumbles with a cigarette and can't seem to keep her purse secured on her shoulder. After a public confrontation with my grandmother, my mother snatches my wrist and drags me kicking and squalling out of the café. Outside, it is a warm day with a clear sky. She draws me down the sidewalk to the bar next door where she tries to haul me inside. But I resist. I hook my hands and feet in the doorjamb, refusing to enter. My

grandmother is behind me and yelling at my mother. Calls her a horse's ass, and threatens to get the police. Finally, I am released, and my mother slips into the darkening lengths of the barroom.

XII.

WHEN I REACH the edge of the Blackfoot Reservoir — a large, almost lung-shaped body of water — I locate a campsite along its rocky shore and pitch my tent. I take a moment and look northeast toward the Tetons. It was on the other side of those mountains that my grandfather, George Moyer, lived in a tent with his mother and the rest of the fatherless Moyer children. I resist the urge to romanticize that kind of hardship. And so I build a fire out of twisted arm-sized stalks of sagebrush. I add chunks of driftwood to the tendrils of flame, and a breeze lifts a double helix of sparks, scarf-like, into the crepuscular sky. The sun has slipped behind an outcrop. I watch the ground as the lighted terrain is driven out almost imperceptibly by a wall of shadow. The line advances as the light retreats and the planet rolls through space. My back is to the distant Tetons; their peaks have slipped into darkness. I recall the black-and-white photograph of Fred Moyer, my great-grandfather, and how his face had slipped into darkness, how it was cropped out of sunlight, out of a larger picture.

I cook some dinner — a pot of canned vegetarian chili and stewed tomatoes — and eat it with bread. It's all I've got, and I devour it. At water's edge I notice the carcass of a carp. It is not beautiful. Its pale scales resemble paper medallions, its white eye the size of a nickel. Then something moves. It's hard to make out in the failing light, but my campfire catches it. It's a toad right next to the carp. A glassy-eyed, beating-hearted thing. A wave slaps the shore. Two pelicans glide over the water. I can hear their wings knife the air.

Later, I crawl into my sleeping bag and tumble into the fathoms of dreams. The next morning I wake to the sound of clapping waves, birdsong and trout breaking the water's surface. I make coffee and walk up to the Bone Road to look both ways — east to the Tetons, that enormous jagged bourn, that great divide — and then west toward the Snake River Plain, hazy and distant and as still as a fresco. I hike back down to the shore and pull a pencil and notebook from my backpack. I pour more coffee and find a log near the water's edge. I sit and write the following:

Imeson.

SHENANDOAH

Im-eson.

Im-e-son.

I'm a son.

BY LATE MORNING, I leave the Bone Road and point the car toward Soda Springs, where I stop and visit with my grandmother, Beth. From her house I call my mother. “So tell me the story,” I say again, covering this familiar territory. And she does. There was more to their break up than I had been told. And here the story-loop becomes serpentine — spliced, revised, clarified. She tells me that, on my birth, Jerry fought to give me his name, Imeson. But she wouldn’t have it. So he stormed out of the hospital and drove off, his pickup rattling in the wind. I learn that he in fact tried to contact me over the years. More than once. But she wouldn’t have that, either.

“I wanted you two to meet eventually, but not then,” she says.

I learn other things. Stories about his drug addictions, for instance. And the consequences that accompany that kind of fractured existence. Before I was two years old, and while we were still with him, Jerry left one night and robbed a pharmacy. He went to prison on charges of grand larceny and was paroled two years later. My father, the flannel-shirted man, the drugstore cowboy. And that is when my mother left him for good.

I am both surprised and unaffected, caught between feeling grateful for more details and unsettled by the details I get. “I didn’t want you to have a bad impression of him,” she says. “He really was a good guy.” She is overcome with regret, and I try, with no success, to console her. We talk about contacting family members, Jerry’s widow, his siblings. We talk about whether or not it is a good idea to make that kind of connection, whether or not I should knock on the door and extend my hand. She apologizes over and over, and I tell her it’s okay, because it is.

XIII.

OVER THE ENSUING months I send some letters to relatives but receive no response. I write a letter to his widow, but cannot bring myself to send it. In the meantime, other details surface. My mother contacts Jerry’s cousins, cousins she had known back then, back when she and Jerry were trying to make it

work. They help fill in the picture, although the picture isn't pretty. Jerry had contracted hepatitis C — most likely from intravenous drug use — and was near death for years. The cousin who divulged this information, a registered nurse, says, "Given his lifestyle, I'm not surprised by how he died."

I BEGIN THINKING about my own lifestyle, and when I return home to northern Idaho, I schedule an appointment to get a physical. I haven't had one since high school and, at 33, I am long overdue. My doctor runs the full spectrum of tests, and I wait nervously for a week to hear the results. Finally, a slip of paper shows up in the mailbox with these words: "You have nothing to worry about."

I am relieved.

And so I take up running. I buy special shoes and socks. I stretch and take my six-year-old son with me. He rides his bike while I run alongside him. "You're doing good, Dad," he says. "I think you're faster today than you were yesterday." I laugh and say, "Thanks," and all the while my thoughts drift from the cloudy past to the very clear present. They drift from the ghosts in my family — the erasure of fathers, grainy photographs and mislabeled birth certificates — and settle instead on the stuff of today: this boy swerving on his bike beside me, my infant daughter at home, my wife.

I have become an equilibrist walking that taut line between generations, between being a father and a son. And while I run, I puzzle over things like my son's name: Mason. For the first time ever, it occurs to me that, if I place an *I* at the beginning of his name, it would read:

Imason.

I-m-ason.

I'm a son.

I see the letters in my mind's eye and experiment with their arrangement as my feet fall on the trail, seeking distance.

Mason rides ahead of me in a zigzag and hums a far-off song. The shadow he throws behind him is long and I find myself running in its pattern, out here, on our favorite running path. It's no Bone Road, but out here the messages seem clearer, and the dialogue goes both ways. And so I run straight into an afternoon sun, my face wholly lit.