

SCRAPPER

ALSO BY MATT BELL

In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods

SCRAPPER

MATT BELL

SOHO

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Against all those who would make us afraid

And now the answer batters the sky:
with fire there is smoke, and after, ashes.
You can howl your name into the wind
and it will blow it into dust, you
can pledge your single life, the earth
will eat it all, the way you eat
an apple, meat, skin, core, seeds.

— PHILIP LEVINE, "ASHES"

And God shall say God did it.

— INSCRIPTION INSIDE ST. AGNES CHURCH,
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

SCRAPPER

DETROIT

SEE THE BODY OF THE plant, one hundred years of patriots' history, fifty years an American wreck. The remainder of a city within the city, a fortress of squared buildings a mile long and five blocks wide. Three million square feet of interior. A century of reinforced concrete and red brick and steel crossbeams still standing despite injury, of parking lots stretched around miles of emptiness, their lights long ago darkened, their torn and opened fences made an invitation to the gutting.

See the factory roads left open to an incurious public, see the once-famous sign stuttering in broken glass across the bridge between buildings, hung high over the dregs of opposing traffic. And in each last windowpane see a letter, together reading MO_OR CITY IN_U_TR__L PARK.

See how names were not just markers but promises. See how the first name the sign had cried had been gone even longer. How in the city the advance of history displaced what it could not destroy, erase, unfinish: an American exclusion zone. There were sights here few strangers would

see again. Except in the photographs of urban explorers. Destruction porn. Except through the window of a bulldozer. Destruction.

See the unsteady structures of the plant's surface, their danger multiplying with every floor climbed above the street, every movement there a possible cascade of effect, complicating last solutions against gravity and entropy. Find the limits of bravery at the threshold of ground and underground, entrances inside the plant where if you knew where to crawl you could get beneath the piled rubble to gaze into basements, cellars, long-locked storage buried beneath factory floors, miles of tunnels for insulated electrical wire and telephone cable, copper pipes for water and steam.

Everywhere you look, everywhere see the barely imaginable past. Imagine anyway. Rewindow the walls. Patch the roof with period-appropriate tar and shingle. Whatever you make simply a confabulation, an illusion of history.

See the high discard of the room where the engines had been tested prior to installation. See the one hundred tables once arrayed here, and on every table see an engine mounted, flush with leaded gasoline and oil, running hot, each machine designed for the same task. See the engineers moving table to table in their dirty suits, grease staining their cuffs, the first generation to work under electric lights, born into the gap before the calculator, the computer, robotics. Before this room they used to test an engine by driving it until it failed. Every machine was a marvel but you could push anything until it broke.

See the room where seamstresses wove plush interiors, stitched and fitted without a sewing machine, using only human hands, human skills. A luxury made of ten thousand stitches. See the parts warehouse, four stories tall and a block long, where the company kept a spare part for every fallible inch of every model they'd made, in 1910 or 1913 or 1925, other good years. All those parts a catalog of promise. If it was broken it could be fixed. They had the parts, they had the expertise, they believed they had the will to keep their cars on the road forever.

See the newer workshops raised between existing buildings to maximize the space. As if every inch of earth were necessary to contain this industry. See the long rooms built for the first modern assembly lines, and when the war came remember how the company volunteered for the high commerce of patriotism. Then the peacetime arrival of the freeways, the newer machines the new roads demanded destined to be designed by other companies, made to devour those newest miles, carrying their drivers fast from coast to asphalt coast.

See the assembly lines at max capacity for the last time, run on this singular idea, the century's founding innovation: one man assigned one function, the fundamental principle of mass production. The promise of a car for every man and the roads to drive it on. Each man a unit of work here in the fastest-growing city in America, amid the explosion of neighborhoods, schools, theaters. Nearly two million citizens in 1950 but then fewer in every year after.

See the half-life of every man and machine and place. See

the plant closing. See the halfhearted inhabitations, the long vacancy that followed, the future lack. The slow crumble to here. Time passing, allowing failures of reinvention, squatters and thieves, until everything valuable had been carried away, leaving behind only concrete and brick and wood, the last looted structures waiting for the blow.

See the steel beams holding but the roof fallen in, wide banners of tar paper hanging between the beams, their black tarps flapping in the wind. Watch the walls for signs of life. See the word SKY written in sky-blue spray paint, in a pretty cursive long untaught. Painted names photographed but uncounted, curses everywhere, in modes both artful and artless. The new pride in slurs, their late variants. See cartoon eyes staring, an orgy of distended genitalia, cars and crowns, pitchforks and skulls. Context is king but what if the context were demolished. Every facade a surface flattened, readied for the image and the word, a conversation coming down: BAD TEMPR written in consistent font, leveled stenciling. STRUGGLE BUGGY across the fluorescent glow of a starlet's eyes, the perforation of her mouth. A pasted optometrist, a gloved hand. SLEEP written in bubbled lettering and below it the same word in a simpler script, a subtitle or a translation. GREEDY LITTLE BASTARD scrawled in white paint below a stairwell, the phrase YOUNG WILD AND FREE arced so high its writer must have had nothing left he was afraid to lose.

Read the walls, and hear on the wind the other names of the dead: Welch, Rainier, Elmore, and Marquette, all extinct. Scripps-Booth, Viking, LaSalle, extinct. Sunbeam, Humber, Singer, extinct. The ancient unremembered, the more

recent dead: Imperial, Valiant, Eagle, extinct. Edsel, Merkur, Oldsmobile, Geo, every one of them extinct or nearly so.

Saturn, Mercury — they named a car after a god, but only after they killed the god.

Hear the name Packard, whispered closest to where you stand.

Now see an early dusk beginning, its reddening glare recasting the plant's brick and rust in deeper reds, brighter orange. See across the golden glare a distant plume lifting from one far corner of the plant. The plume nothing but dust, loosed from the buildings and the dirt.

See the plume lit too as it finds its upper limit. See its heights starting to collapse even as new billowing supports its base.

See the dust and the dust's cause: scrappers somewhere in the black avenues of the plant, taking their own last chance.

See history rising by their hand, the dust of a century cast into the air, mote by uncountable mote, becoming a dark tower twisting from the ruin.

See each particle a part of a whole disturbed, see the exponential increase of surface area wherever an object was broken down, the way a thing split might ignite faster than its inert whole. All the broken mess of steel and wood and brick rising, each particle alighting, each floating particle eventually coming to touch another, each touch a whisper of contact.

See how in its minute softness each contact makes a microcosm of agitation, together becoming a million tiny

firestarter universes rasping, chafing, scraping smaller than sight. All these particles no longer separated by even one matching bead of distance—all these millions of spaces collapsing and reopening and collapsing again—and into every such space a lick of oxygen moves. See the impossible silence of atoms touching atoms. See the cold mathematics of their possibilities, the way air is also fuel, how every contact carries the potential for heat, wanting only a sufficiency of friction, a single arc of electrostatic discharge—the dust could get in your lungs and kill you three decades from now or it could choke you dead today or it could explode without warning—and when one pair of rubbing particles ignites, the whole cloud goes, a booming conversion of matter to energy, the rumble and the blast filling the air with black sound.

See the entire plume becoming a pillar of flame leaping into the sky, looming high over the plant. See how in its hunger the fire pulls some portion of the sky back down, the back pressure sucking the fire out of the air and into the shivering building at the base of the flame, past the trucks and chains used to tear down the steel, past the wheelbarrows meant to carry it away, back over the scrappers crying out, as in every reachable room the quickening fire finds every other bit of fuel, every wooden thing hung thick with nettings of cobwebs and more dust, dust everywhere set in motion until a second blast ignites, thrusting new heat and pressurized air against the bounds of the building, concrete and mortar and brick shattering, steel warping, every surface radiant, until the walls burst, until the imploding

pressure pulls down the ceilings and collapses the floors, until the crashing structure traps within it every man who came to tear it down, to take it away, every man but the lucky last. And if there is a better motor to thank than fear then as the last man flees into the fugitive night he thinks he doesn't know its name.

PART ONE:
THE ZONE

1

WHEN KELLY SAVED THE BOY he was not yet again living any real life, just wallowing in the aftermath of terrible error. Later he would say he'd lived that year by his hands and by his back and by his shoulders and his wrists and his legs and his knees. The year of the body, he'd say, showing his opened fists, the thick white blistering of his calluses — and forget the head, never mind the heart. After the collapse began he'd barely thought, barely spoken, tried for a time to slow his thoughts to silence, or else to bury them with effort, exhaustion. He'd worked past the pains he'd known, found deeper places to lodge a throbbing, but then in the zone the incompleteness of every building became an inkblot for the subconscious. Whatever was missing would be supplied.

The farther he moved toward the center of the zone the more the neighborhoods sagged, all the wood falling off of brick, most every house uninhabited, the stores a couple thousand square feet of blank shelves, windows barred against the stealing of the nothing there. Paint scraped off concrete, concrete crumbled, turned to dust beneath the weather. Wind

damage, water damage. Fire and flood. Before the zone Kelly had never known rain alone could turn a building to dust. But rain had flooded the Great Lakes, ice had sheered the cliffs of the state from off the land, shaped the dunes he'd dreamed of often after he'd left the state. The streets here were empty of traffic and in some neighborhoods the grass overran the sidewalks. He parked his truck, got out, walked the paved lanes instead. On trash days he could tell whether a house was occupied by whether or not a container appeared at the curb. There were other methods of determining inhabitation: the sound of televisions or radios, the presence of cut grass. But some men cut the grass for their neighbors to hide how they were the last ones living on their block. A way of pretending normality, despite the boarded windows, the graffiti, the other front doors never opened. Despite the absolute absence of other cars, other human voices.

Mostly it was easier. Mostly there was no question where there were people left behind. The only questions he had to ask were about opportunity, risk, metal.

Whenever Kelly entered an uninhabited house he understood he entered some life he might have lived, how the emptiness of every room pulled him inside out. A furnishing of the self. He opened the front door and the house ceased its stillness. If it had ever been inert it wasn't now. No structure was once it held a human consciousness. In the South Kelly had worked construction, had seen firsthand how a house un-lived in wasn't a house. It was so easy to awaken a place. The way a doorknob awoke a memory. The way the angles of a room recalled other rooms. There were blueprints etched across his

memories, and in some houses those memories activated: the bedrooms of his parents, the bedrooms of his parents' friends. An angle of light like one he'd lain in as a child, reading a book on birds. The deep dark of a basement, the other dark of an attic. How the fear of the dark hung at the lip of a basement stairs, how it hesitated at the foot of any stairs leading up, toward whatever was below or above the house, outside its public space.

With his smartphone he could check the prices of what he salvaged: the amounts offered changed day to day but he couldn't wait days to sell what he'd dug. At the salvage yards the workers weighed the truck loaded and then they weighed the truck empty, paid him a price multiplied against the difference. The salvage men photocopied his ID, took an inky thumbprint. This was a legitimate business, they said. They asked where he'd gotten the scrap and he lied. They asked again and he took a lower price per pound.

Whatever the salvage yards wouldn't take he took to other men, brokers running scrap out of a backyard or an idle warehouse. There was no trouble with space. There was space everywhere. The unofficial yards kept unofficial hours. You could show up in the middle of the day and find the place deserted, show up at midnight and find three guys playing cards, getting high, cutting scrap. They paid a fraction of the price, the price of no questions asked. Whatever was suspect they'd break until it was sellable. There were scrapyards where no one asked these brokers questions, contractors who would mix the questionable stuff with more honest trade.

Once he'd arrived to find a man cutting a copper statue with a power saw. The man shirtless, skin gleaming, working without eye protection, a stub of a cigarette clamped in his mouth. The statue's arms sawed at the elbows. The head on the ground. The saw working its way through the torso at a steep diagonal. The kerf of the cut wide like a wound from a sword. Then the smashing the hands with a sledge. Then the mutilating the head into unrecognizable shards.

Broker: a ridiculous word for such a man but everyone self-justified. Everyone wanted to be more than what they were.

The salvage men reminded him: it wasn't the function they sold but the form. It didn't matter if he broke a broken refrigerator. What mattered was getting it to the truck without straining his back. There was more steel and iron than anything else but they paid the least of anything. A hundred pounds of copper pipe paid more than double a truckload of steel. Same for copper wire, copper cable. You could ransack the rooms of a house but the best stuff was hidden behind the walls. It wasn't the metal that held the house up but you wouldn't want to live there with it gone.

Kelly could picture the city's glory days but it took a certain imagination. On the television in his barely furnished apartment he watched a blonde reporter say the collapse was still in progress but now it was down to the aftershocks. Sometimes the news interviewed one of the left behind. Once this man or woman had been an autoworker or a grocery clerk like anyone else. What mysteries they were now, the blonde reporter said, these unemployed men and women with their forlorn streets, their locked doors nested behind locked doors.

Why didn't they leave, if things were so bad.

Why didn't we understand why, if we had homes of our own.

Inside a rotting duplex, he opened a refrigerator long unplugged and pulled its bulk away from the wall, found a carton of milk dated more recently than he'd expected. A house stayed intact as long as it had inhabitants but after they left the decay began. Wires lost their hum, pipes went dry. Doors and windows could be covered or replaced with plywood but their protection would not last and then the inquiries of thieves exposed the inside of the house, then the upper floors filled with wind and rain, the changeable weather of the Midwest. Soon every carpeted room turned to mold and rot, roofs fell through, the rats and cockroaches had their way.

A howl of wind came banging through a front door, the repeated slamming of a thrown bolt against a doorframe shivered his skin. He knew it wasn't human voices that held back the fall of cities. It wasn't any number of people sharing a room, wasn't the presence of family meals. Everywhere he went he saw the quiet creep of falling down, falling in. A contest of wills, the agonies of architects against the patience of nature.

Opened to the elements the inside of a house smelled mostly like the outside. There was everywhere more emptiness than he'd imagined. The surface was void of anything valuable and so he had to go deeper. There were inferences to be drawn from the locations of outlets, junction boxes. A house changed after he saw its walls as containers. He began

to understand the arcane layouts of the worlds behind walls, learned to find the bathroom before he went looking for the pipes. He opened the walls with a sledge and the older the house the more copper he found. He wrapped his gloves around the jacketing of wires and leaned back, leveraging his weight toward the snap. Or else he took a hacksaw to a piece of pipe, catching it before it fell into the wall.

He kicked through a plaster wall and after he withdrew his foot he found the remains of a squirrel nestled against the studs. Tiny skull, tiny feet, all the clamber long ago gone out of it. He cradled the bones, walked slowly toward the back of the house, the bouncing screen door he'd left open. Halfway there he caught himself in the last arc of a busted mirror. What was he doing here. What jumble of bones and the past was in his hands. What was he doing and why.

Outside another house, he found a broken window, cleared the glass to grant access to the interior. The house's first floor skewed back a couple of decades, gave off a story of wood paneling and thick carpet, avocado appliances. The furniture was mostly gone except for a sagged couch propped against the front wall of the living room, its seats facing in, and in another room he found a busted dresser, missing its drawers. He thought it was possible to underestimate how many people had lived in each room, the distance between the ideal and the necessary. Kelly had grown up in his own bedroom but his father had shared his with two brothers. His grandfather had been born in a one-room house, home to nine brothers and two parents, the ghosts of three miscarriages and a stillborn daughter. Theirs was a family of men, no women

except the ones they were born to or married. And of all the men in this family it was only Kelly who had never married, never bred.

He worked within the zone during the day where he could and at night where he couldn't. In the deep dark of unlit streets there was less chance of being disturbed but the need for light gave away his position. He wore a headlamp strapped around his forehead but the light meant others could see him moving. Sometimes he thought he saw shapes swarming outside the windows. If he heard a voice call out in the darkness, then he paused where he was. If he heard two voices he shut off his headlamp and let the darkness reshape his pupils. He didn't have much imagination left but what imagination he had he thought he could do without.

After the fire, the ringing he heard in his ears never went fully away, but it got worse when he did too much, worked too hard, pushed himself inhuman. Sometimes in the dark he stood still and listened to it sing.

He didn't carry a weapon, didn't keep one in his truck. If he bought a gun he would always know where it was and one day he would use it. But often there was a tool in his hands, a hammer perhaps, and even if his hands were all he had it didn't mean they couldn't be used to defend himself, to fight back, to hurt in turn.

At the hospice shop the newest clothes went the fastest. He pledged anew his old loyalties to the state's teams, showed his allegiance with t-shirts in team colors. He thought he'd

kept up while he was away but if he recognized a name on the back of a shirt maybe the player had been retired for years. The oldest shirts were three for a dollar fifty and if one fit he bought all three.

If he had to buy his soap at the hospice shop he worried it was the soap of the dead. Some weeks he could afford better but he'd traveled to the city with a new frugality and he was determined not to chase it away. He walked the shop, wondered whose life the photo frames had contained. He wasn't ever in a hurry. He had to hustle to do enough work but it hardly took his whole week. He thought he would like reading a book inscribed with someone else's marginalia but when he got the book home he found he didn't need the voices of more ghosts. That was already what reading was.

This was his year of diminishment. Less was all there was. Even where there were people left there wasn't any of the commerce people needed to make good. He bought his cereal in the same place he bought his beer and the two choices were flakes with sugar, flakes without. There was hardly anything fresh on the shelves anywhere. At best a bowl of apples next to the cash register, a couple bananas under the cigarettes, beside the lotto tickets.

He didn't believe in luck but he believed in bananas.

A new twelve-pound sledgehammer was forty dollars, replacement handles fourteen. A pipe cutter cost twenty dollars, tinner snips thirteen. A heavy cable cutter might run one hundred ninety. He could make any purchase worth it but he had to be sure. He was never sure. The locking toolbox for the truck had cost three hundred dollars but his tools were

safer there than in his apartment. His truck became his most necessary possession: an all-new chassis the better year he'd made the purchase, a multidisplacement V-8 under the hood. Live axles for maximum longevity and durability. Inboard dash navigation, maps swinging with the sweep of overhead satellites. An anxiety of attractive credit terms, secured with a down payment of wages earned and a loan guaranteed by the promise of more paychecks which had not come.

He bought a lamp, a folding table, a pair of unmatched chairs. His bedroom was small, his bathroom smaller. There were just the two rooms. There was more room than he needed. He bought dishes and utensils and a glass and a mug, took them home to the kitchenette barely hidden behind a thin wall. He had to listen to the refrigerator cycle while he tried to sleep. The apartment sat on the first floor of a converted motel, with other apartments on both sides, behind and above. During the day he had to listen to two children crisscross the floor above him for hours. As if running were so novel an activity they might never quit. At night he heard the laughter of loud men, the anger of shrill women, the frustrations of both sexes. A cheap apartment meant living in a cloud of your neighbors, their sounds and smells, the obscene evidence of their activities. He had to turn the television up at least as loud as his neighbors or he couldn't understand the shows. Often the nightly news became a lesson in lip-reading but he watched until he'd seen both the weather and the blonde reporter, smart in her pantsuits.

The floor was the only quiet surface and so sometimes he lay down upon the scratchy wear of the carpet to put one ear

and then the other to the ground. Trying to hear how hearing nothing sounded.

The city was bisected by a freeway reaching from north to south, eighteen hundred miles running head to heel across the country. There weren't any mountains in this part of the state but there were mountains on this road, farther off in either direction. The road knew the ocean. It knew the greatness of the lakes. The road could take Kelly to Canada or the Deep South or the Atlantic coast. The road could take him home, to a small town two hours north, named for a tree sharing its name with a poison.

Last he'd heard everyone he knew there was still around, except his parents and the other assorted dead. The last time he visited was for his mother's funeral. All the faces in the church were so old but they were mostly the same faces he'd grown up among. The swishing movements of suit and skirt, of standing and kneeling and standing and sitting in a half-empty church. He'd seen his mother lowered into the ground but hadn't watched the ground close. The woman he'd been with had wanted to see where he grew up but he'd asked her not to come. They weren't married but they lived together, owned a house down south. There wasn't anything to be ashamed of but he didn't want to answer any questions. He didn't plan on ever going back again so better to tell his aunts and uncles he was alone.

He had some cousins there, a few lost friends. There wasn't any juice left. If he went to them it wouldn't be as their relation but as the stranger he'd become. If there was one thing

he needed the zone to teach him it was how to be alone again. Unquestioned and uncharged.

When he awoke disoriented in the strobing dark of the apartment he opened the phone's map to watch the satellites locate him exactly. First a series of shrinking circles, then a blue light pulsing atop the city. The hated screen, so brightly assuring. This is where I am, he would whisper. This is what I am doing. It was so clean a fact. If the noise in his building or the ringing in his ears wouldn't let him sleep he lay on his mattress, watched documentaries on the television. There he rediscovered the life on other continents, the wilder world beyond raccoons and squirrels and whitetail deer, the ordinary menagerie of the midwestern states. On-screen, elephants mourned their dead and buried the bones, an alligator waited in a pit of drought and mud for thirst to make the meat stupid. A dung beetle pushed a ball of shit across a desert. You did what you had to do. You organized your life, moved every action into categories and compartments of time and type and task, you looked at your life and you knew who you were: this was worldview, ideology, what you had of either, who you were, who you'd been. Today he was this person, speaking these words, concerned only with this narrow sliver of experience, whatever could be had within the confines of the zone.

There had once been a magnificence to these streets and the evidence of those times was still there, in the zone, in edifices to ideas that had not endured. On many days Kelly saw the endurance of the beautiful, the way the slow degradation of

acid rain and other weather could make the zone more lovely, not less. He entered churches where painted crosses faded from the walls, where wind howled some days through stolen stained glass, while on other days birds flitted between the iron braces left behind. The braces waiting for the theft. The pews remaining but the organ pipes long gone. Dust and smatter everywhere, a city's silt fallen, unswept, a manifestation, the refuse of long-ago prayers. The birds, nesting in the rafters. American gods, American temples, all the evidence anyone needed to indict the temporariness of American belief.

He walked shredded schools lacking students but not piles of serviceable desks, ran his hands along the spines of books left behind, the previous fictions of history. Stories no one wanted to steal. Bottles of printer's ink lined glassless windowsills, glowed in shafts of sunlight, colored vacant offices blue and red and black and superblue. Locker rooms lay unlocked, the locker doors removed, the opened walls spilling onto gym floors made of century-dead trees, the wax scuffed with shoes and time, tagged with layers of spray paint.

He wandered the rows of emptied houses and overgrown yards, roamed grassy blocks beneath bare-socketed streetlights. In every structure he entered he found some objects trashed and some he could sell and also some rare and better and less-valuable objects, objects abandoned by accident, chance's castaways. Soon he lifted some new bauble from nearly every site, folded a broken-spined paperback into his pocket, ripped a single pencil-marred Ave Maria from a hymnal, pocketed a child toy's heavy as lead, a bent-tined fork kicked behind a counter. He brought home some objects he

planned to use and some he wanted to look at and in his apartment he chose a cupboard meant for dishes to store these more-useless thefts, an exhibit of his travels in the zone, of what relics had called out in the places he'd been, the bleak houses of the blackout city.

Kelly thought the world wasn't full of special objects, only plain ones. Nothing was assembled special, nothing and no one, but the plainest objects could be supercharged by attention, made nuclear by suggestion. He could pick up the same object in two different houses and in one sense a completely different thrumming. What he wanted was anything loved. When he couldn't remember anymore where he had taken something from, then he threw it out. Making emotion last wasn't the objects' first power but it was the power he wanted most. Anything he took from someone else's life wouldn't work forever but if he kept acquiring more maybe the feelings might remain, transferred across the overlap.

The fall sun shining on the waving grass, the hardy scrub of trees spreading across vacancies. Everywhere he took something he tried to leave something else behind. The unexpected juxtaposition of nature and ruin. Metal for memories, memories for metal. There was so much he wanted gone. There was such a sprawling untenanted city in which to dump it. And in the falling streets he discovered the great perseverance of the people who remained. Their faces shined in the light wherever he saw them, on porches or in driveways, outside liquor stores and bars. He wasn't their neighbor but he saw their beauty. They looked crazy with grief. The great glory of their sadness. The way it would last and last. He needed to eat and there

wasn't any work but what was he taking from these people. Nothing, he told himself, they had not already lost.

To leave the edge of the zone for its center was to abandon the present for the future and wherever Kelly went he thought he might be the last person to see these sights. Others would come with bulldozers and excavators—or else with arson and theft—but they wouldn't see how he saw, moving carefully through these rooms and hallways, staring out these windows, marveling at the way you could see the lit skyline of the inhabited city from the endless dusk of its unlit neighborhoods. There were still some progressions in play but he saw how the zone had moved beyond time. Or at least outside of the time marked by digital clocks, smartphone calendars. Inside the zone events moved along paths solar, lunar, seasonal; new geological epochs marked by strata of waste, eras identifiable by the brand names left inside cupboards, by the industrial design of unpowered appliances. A preview of what the world would look like during its coming decline. Kelly pretended he carried the last human gaze door-to-door, window to window, exploring the first outpost of a culture pushed past repair. It could be destroyed but could it be fixed? All the better futures might not arrive. He didn't think his was the final generation, but perhaps the last might already be born.

What did this mean for him, for the good man he had tried and failed to be?

In some houses he found handwritten notes. He found one taped to the cracked plaster across from the house's front door: WE'RE LEAVING IN THE MORNING. And then the date the last

inhabitants left, not so long ago. In the back of a child's closet he found a scrawl of crayon reading I'LL BE BACK FOR YOU, written to the house, to whatever the child thought a house was. Sometimes there was an animal living there still. The animal was always a cat. What did these cats eat? Where did they sleep and piss and shit? Sometimes it wasn't hard to see. The skeletons of mice. Shit in one corner of a room, the smell of piss everywhere.

The cat following Kelly from room to room, rubbing its body against his boots.

Names everywhere. On the houses. In the asphalt. Carved into trees, fences, doors.

I LOVE YOU HOUSE, one note read.

I BUILT THIS HOUSE WITH MY HANDS, said another.

GOODBYE.

I'M SORRY.

WE HAD TO LEAVE BUT THIS WAS HOME.