

Josh Weil

FROM RIDGE WEATHER:

It was the hay bales that did it. The men and women who knew Osby, the ones who nodded to him from passing trucks or said “Hey” while scanning cans of soup in the Mic-or-Mac, they would have chalked it up to him missing his father. But they would have been wrong. The few who knew him a little better, if they had noticed Osby’s usual quietness grown heavier, that he stuffed his hands in his sweatshirt pocket a little more often, they would have figured it for an adjustment, a re-balancing of the weight of a life that suddenly contained one instead of two people. They would have been wrong, too.

Hay bales? It didn’t even make sense to Osby.

Later, of course, when the memory of old Cortland Caudill had receded to the horizons of their minds, people would have felt that sadness still hanging off of Osby. But it probably would have seemed pretty normal to them. In a place like Eads County, people sometimes get like Osby did. They’re scattered all over the valley, hidden from each other by the old ridges and thick woods, by log walls of age-sunk cabins, new ranch house bricks, paint-peeling clapboard and trailer home siding so thin the propane bill is twice what it should be, never mind the electricity for the glowing space heaters that struggle in each room.

FROM THE GREAT GLASS SEA:

Always the island had been out there, so far out over so much choppy water, far beyond the last gray wave, the groaning ice when there was ice, the fog when there was fog, so distant in the middle of such a huge lake that, for their first nine years, Nizhi—that church made of those tens of thousands of wooden pegs, each one as small as a little boy’s finger bones; those woodshingled domes like tops upended to spin their points on the floor of the sky; the priests’ black robes snapping in the wind, their beards blowing with the clouds, their droning ceaseless as the shore-slap waves—might have been just another fairy tale that Dyadya Avya told.

And then one day when the lake ice had broken and geese had come again, two brothers, twins, stole a little boat and rowed together out towards Nizhi ...

“Into the lake,” Dima said.

“To hunt the Chudo-Yudo,” Yarik said.

“Until they found it.”

“And killed it.”

They were ten years old—Dmitry Lvovich Zhuvov and Yaroslav Lvovich Zhuvov—and they had never been this far out in the lake, this lost, this on their own. Around them the water was wide as a second sky, darkening beneath the one above, the rowboat a moonsilver winking on the waves. In it, they sat side by side, hands buried in the pockets of their coats, leaning slightly into each other with each sway of the skiff.

“Or maybe it came up,” Dima said, “and crushed the boat.”

“And they drowned,” Yarik said.

“Or,” Dima said, “it ate them.”

They grinned, the same grin at the same time, as if one’s cheeks tugged the other’s lips.

“Or,” Yarik started.

And Dima finished, “They died.”

They went quiet.

The low slap of lakewater knocking the metal hull. The small sharp calls of jaegers: black specs swirling against a frostbitten sky. But no wood blades clacking at the rowboat’s side. No worn handles creaking in the locks. Hours ago, they had lost the oars.