

What the River Told Us to Do

We watched our father hammer and pound, into our front yard's ground, a handmade sign that said, in letters big enough for us brothers to read what it said, all the way down from where we were watching, down by the muddy river's muddy shore: HOUSE FOR SALE. We'd seen signs like this sign before, sticking up from the front yards of other people's houses, but never in the front of ours. We knew what happened to those people who hammered those signs, down into the ground out front in the fronts of their houses' front yards. After a while, those people with signs out in the fronts of their houses left away from our town and were then replaced by new people who came to live on the insides of these kinds of houses. Us brothers, we did not want to be one of those people. We didn't want our house to be that kind of a house. Our house, we did not want it—our house—to be a house with any body but us living inside it. But us brothers both knew that this, us living in some other house, in some other town, in a town without a dirty river running through it, a town without so much mud and smoke and rust—this was what our mother said she wanted for us. We'd heard her say, to our father, that it was either this house and this dirty river town, or it was her that was leaving. Us, our mother's dirty boys, we listened close: we hoped we might hear the sound of footsteps, a door opening then closing shut. Later on that day, when us brothers saw our father working on the making and the painting and the nailing together of the sign that said on it, HOUSE FOR SALE, we asked our father what was he doing, then what was it, the sign, for? We stood by and watched our father's mouth move around to make such sounds as mother and river and town. We watched him raise up his hand and point with his first finger to where the mill was sitting quiet on the river's shore. But us brothers, we didn't want our ears to hear what it was that our father was wanting us to hear. And our eyes, when we looked up river at the mill, it sitting quiet and still, what we saw was the moon rising big and white and glowing—the smokestacks holding it up. Us brothers said some words back to our father, words such as moon and mud and fish, but even these words, words that were the world to us brothers, these were sounds that our father did not hear. We watched him drop his head back down so that he could see his right hand holding his hammer: in his other he held a hand full of nails. When our father did this with his hands, us brothers did this with ours. We each of us took the other one of us by the hand and went with each

other to the river, to ask the river: what should we, us brothers, do? When the river told us what to do, we both knew it was the only thing we could do. So that night, while our mother and father both were in their room, with the lights turned off for sleeping, what we did was we climbed through our bedroom window. Only the moon and the stars were watching us as we walked out to our father's tool shed and got out his hammers and a box full of rusty, bent back nails. We each of us brothers took up a fist full of nails and a hammer into each one of our hands and we walked out back to the back of our yard, back to where there was a telephone pole back there studded with the heads of fish. Brother, I said to Brother. You can go first. Brother, give me your hand, I told him. Hold your hand up against this pole. Brother did just what I told. We were brothers: we were each other's voice inside our own heads. This might sting, I warned, and then I raised back that hammer and I drove that rusty nail right through Brother's hand. Brother didn't even wince, or flinch with his body, or make with his mouth the sound of a brother crying out. Good, Brother, I said. I was hammering in a second nail into Brother's other hand when our father stepped out into the yard. Us, our father's sons, turned back with our boy heads toward the sound of our father. We stood waiting to hear what it was that our father was going to say to us brothers next. It was a long few seconds. The sky above the river where the steel mill stood—like some sort of a shipwreck—it was dark and quiet. Somewhere, I was sure, the sun was shining. You boys remember to clean up before you come back in, our father said to his boys. Our father turned back his back. Us brothers turned to face back each other. I raised back the hammer. I lined up that rusted nail.