THE DIRT EATERS (novel-in-progress)
BOOK III: THE CONFUSIONS

In February of 1919, Bernhard took a train from Eau Claire to Wheeless, Oklahoma, changing three times, once in Chicago, again in St. Louis, and finally in Oklahoma City. He had spent a bitter five months in Eau Claire, employed at a wholesale grocer in the Schlegelmilch building on South River Street, running the coffee roasting machine. While another young man fed sacks of green beans into the roaster, he turned the crank to agitate the beans, then stirred the beans with a wooden paddle. A still bean is a burnt bean, the owner said. Bernhard kept his ear above the beans to listen for the subtle pop of the first crack; the skin on his cheeks tightened and stretched from the heat. The thick smoke before the second crack stung his eyes and clung to his hair, and when he emptied the drum onto the cooling table, the chaff crepitating, the beans hissing, his eyes watered. He still smelled of it at night, sleeping in a workingmen's hotel that reeked of men from the lumber mills sweating out their alcohol. The hotel was run by the Lutheran Church, and before every meal, men in the house were forced to slur through their prayers. Something about sin, something about forgiveness, something about salvation. Bernhard slept on a canvas sheet stretched between two beams on top of his shoes, lest they get stolen with his remaining money, which he had folded tight and tucked into a loosened gap between the sole and the heel. Bernhard could no longer smell coffee without thinking of desperation. He sent a telegraph to his uncle: *Am desperate. Will do anything.* He might have lived like that indefinitely; after Prohibition passed, coffee sales tripled, and he found himself working twelve hours at a time. But the next month, after the city had nominally closed the saloons, his uncle replied: *Have secured work in the fields for you*. And it took nearly all the money he had earned, along with what his mother had buried in the root cellar, to purchase the ticket, almost fifty

dollars, which he sheepishly unfolded before the ticket agent, the thin bills sticky and moist from his feet.

And now, a year later, Bernhard found himself, once again, on the train platform at Wheeless, a whistle stop for the MK&T. The air smelled of burned oil and metal shavings, and the ground beside the tracks was blackened, as if scorched, with drippings from the trains. A small weather-beaten station house stood to the side of the tracks, a metal rotating sign on a pole to signal passing trains to stop. Bernhard, waiting for a new arrival to the ranch, passed the time talking to the station master, who slept on the floor of the station house. The railroad had given the station master a small pocket watch, which he wound regularly and slipped in and out of his jacket pocket. The company's engraving had nearly been rubbed smooth, but he liked to make a show of standing on the platform and checking the time when the passenger trains came through once a week. Visitors to Wheeless were few, but every May, a flood of young workers arrived from Pueblo, from Dodge City, from Amarillo, and, in October, the flood receded, leaving the fields razed and the abattoirs slick with gore. For a month, the station master said, the area smelled of ice from the refrigerated cars loaded with cattle carcasses, great marbled lumps that looked as though they'd been carved from Red Rock Canyon. Men arriving in early spring—when the ground was still hard with cold—were a rarity. The train tracks reminded Bernhard of a slingshot pulled taut, hurling people across the country, and he remembered the sensation of his body flying through space. He had stayed up late into the night, when the other third-class passengers, arms crossed, had slumped in the hard, wooden seats. Looking out the flat glass window, he had the sensation that the was moon following him, like a terrible memory, reappearing on either side of him each time the train curved. Dark, indistinguishable shapes in the landscape—trees, hillocks, escarpments—fled its unforgiving glow. He didn't know where

that strange imagining had come from, but it haunted him into the next morning when he saw the great bluish ribbon of the Chicago River. The buckthorn trees disappeared from the windows on the other side, and the car darkened with buildings rising skyward. Passengers stirred, gathering their belongings in their hands. Bernhard had one bag, a linen sack that had been folded over, hemmed and seamed until sturdy; in it, a single change of clothes. In Oklahoma, he would want for nothing more.

His train pulled into the Monroe Street Union Station. He didn't remember much of the station itself, apart from the thick marble columns spanning the length of the waiting area and the dense crowd therein: Negro porters calling out to one another, Chinamen selling hot peanuts in paper cones. Their scent made him salivate, and he wanted nothing more than to fish out a nickel and gobble down some nuts, but the money, he told himself, might save his life one day. A woman, seated on the carved wooden benches, locked her eyes onto him. She wore a Drecoll coat of green velvet, the bias-cut collar covering her entire neck, and a row of speckled horn buttons down its entire length. Her bags were leather, a uniform loamy color, as if cut from a single swath of flesh. She sat serene. At first, he thought he might have been in the way; that she was observing some person behind him. But, when he walked from one column to the next, she let her eyes follow his movements. Her expression remained unreadable, and he somehow felt both conspicuous and tiny under her scrutiny, as if he were an atlante. For a moment, he imagined that she was the moon itself, given human form, and that she had not abandoned her pursuit of him, and would follow him until the ends of the earth, if need be, for reasons that were hers alone to know. But then the conductor announced the departure of the Chicago, Santa Fe and California Railway to St. Louis, and he left her to her mysteries, still feeling her gaze upon him, even after the train had long left the station.

Basinski was the new arrival to Wheeless, a stout, sturdy worker, Bernhard thought, a Polack gnarled with muscle, a grim history etched into his skin. Purlie, the foreman at the Dufresne Ranch, had given no other details about Basinski, and so Bernhard was surprised when only one passenger disembarked at Wheeless: a young man, tall but pudgy in his mid-section, dressed in a tweed waistcoat and linen pants, holding a worn satchel whose leather had flaked away to reveal its stained canvas lining. Basinski's fingers were long and thin, like wisps of smoke, and he shifted his bag from hand to hand every few steps. Sometimes, he clutched the handle with both hands and tilted his body back to keep the bag from dragging on the ground. The walk to the bunkhouse from the station was six miles, two hours at a leisurely pace, but it might have taken longer if Bernhard hadn't offered to carry Basinski's bag.

The Dufresne Ranch stretched across 2000 acres of Panhandle plainland, a dry expanse stretching to the edges of the horizon. The emptiness felt punishing, the land intermittently spotted with black walnut and redbud, the trunks out of place, like a few wisps of hair on a bald man's head. The trees marked where people lived, houses sheltered in their shade, and when a homestead failed, the trees soon followed. The ranch owner, Randall Dufresne, built a home on the eastern edge of his property, the Big House, Purlie called it, that went unused—odd to have a house you didn't live in. Bernhard had never met Mr. Randall, as Purlie called him, but he imagined Mr. Randall's face to be no different than that of his house: obscenely big, gleaming and imposing. The shuttered windows looked like a row of browned teeth, and the columns supporting the portico, white and curved like fangs. The bunkhouse where Bernhard and the other workers lived reflected their own faces: the boards weather-beaten and greyed, warped, cracking in places. Rot had started to eat away at the bottom edge of the timbers. Purlie said he'd fix it later, but later got further and further away. Pocket gophers had burrowed their way

beneath the house, a series of animal-sized caverns beneath them, and at night, Bernhard sometimes heard the hiss of ground shifting beneath him. Rattlesnakes, maybe. There were twelve full-timers, and during the winter, they pulled their beds into an arc around the woodstove. They took care of the cattle once the cowboys and gauchos had ridden away, and took care of the fields once the farmhands had scattered to the winds. In spring, when the seasonal short-timers arrived, they reset the beds into military-straight rows. All of them, to a man, had been reshaped; *Bernhard* had shortened to *Bernie*, and furthermore to *Bern'd*, a single mouthful, and finally, to *Toast*. From across the fields, they called his new name until he'd almost forgotten he'd been someone else.

Bernhard passed Mr. Randall's house while walking with the other workers to the small church in Wheeless for Sunday services, an hour's walk each way. Sunday morning, they bathed, waiting in line for the galvanized steel tub in order of seniority. By the time Bernhard's turn came, the water was gritty, murky. For a year he'd been the newest arrival, but with Basinski that would change Bernhard wondered how Basinski's name might be shortened. *Bass* felt off, since his voice was light and breathy; *Ski* felt similarly off, since he was far from athletic. *Sink* seemed the most appropriate: Basinki seemed always on the verge of collapse. But, as Bernhard later discovered, Basinki was how his parents had been addressed—surname only, as was proper when addressing servants. They had worked as domestics in the Dufresne house in Dallas, a mansion that, in Basinki's telling, had endless rooms filled with finely-wrought furniture, souvenirs from overseas trips, opulent fabrics. His father had been the butler, and his mother attended Mrs. Dufresne and her two daughters, and he'd been *The Young Basinki* since he was born, and had only graduated to Basinki when his parents had contracted the flu at the end of September. When they died, Mr. Dufresne had told him that he was too young to take over his