

You will have to read this novel for yourself to see how a brilliant writer has found the perfect form for evoking the effects of time and place and the forces of history and nature on the lives of human beings. As the title suggests, the movement of *Twister* is as inexorable as it is unpredictable. Genanne Walsh is a writer of extraordinary powers. The work of this novel is both raw and lush with poetry. Her characters live and breathe, and in their intersections, real truths are revealed.

—**Laura Kasischke, author of *Mind of Winter***

Genanne Walsh's *Twister* is a chronicle of a small town amid the calm before the storm—but so much more. This book digs beneath the surface of place to create a kind of *Spoon River Anthology* for our time replete with secrets, truths, startling reckonings—and very, very threatening weather. As fine a new novel as you will read this year.

—**Peter Orner, author of *Last Car Over the Sagamore Bridge***

Genanne Walsh's *Twister* is a gripping page-turner, but also has that much rarer quality of transcendent, almost preternatural empathy that very few works of fiction possess. *Twister* has it. Novels often get us to walk in someone else's shoes, but only rarely to climb into someone else's skin. Walsh miraculously climbs into the skin of not just one, but a dozen characters. When I finished *Twister*, I felt the way the Old Man in the novel felt about being struck by lightning: "It furrowed me into something new."

—**Robert Thomas, author of *Bridge***

TWISTER

Genanne Walsh



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Lauren

Part I

I know what the wind knows.
Tearing across the prairie,

bits of grit riding its cold storm—
grit like coal dust, or like ashes:

*What's the difference?
There's enough love here.*

—Jane Mead

*

Sweeping over the Arctic Archipelago, puckering nipples and chapping faces across Nunavut: in Grise Fiord, Resolute, Gjoa Haven; crossing into Manitoba, freezing the top layers of Island Lake, Gods Lake, nameless ponds, dew crunching underfoot. The front gathers, pushes over Winnipeg, Grand Forks, Fargo, Lincoln, on it comes, barreling through tornado alley to meet its match: spring! A current weaves a lothario path across the Gulf of Mexico, up through Anguilla, Santo Domingo, Port de Paix, Nassau, bringing the scent of cinnamon, slums, and rotting magnolia leaves, trailing across tobacco farms, mighty rivers, strip malls, state colleges, Army barracks, drained wetlands, golf courses. Pushing west into dry Pacific air. Blowing across the southwest, arid and punishing—imagine dustbowls, cow skulls, locusts, parched earth—rolling off the Rockies, faster as it flows east. Sisters clash and mingle in the wide open skies of the continent's midpoint—dry meets damp, warmth amassed and shuddering into updrafts and squalls, rushed by the eager fingers of their cold northern lover. Thunderheads build, form, break apart, and build again, gathering strength unseen by those below. North, south, east, west, we'll put

these people to the test. Havoc's in play, the winged creatures sense it, though even the crows don't know the scope of what's to come.

Hover at the midpoint. Turn the radio dial; hear snatches of the lives below. Listen.

Crows rustle on the wires over Main Street, over Mondragon's Emporium and Dunleavy's Fine Shoes (&Shoe Repair); over The Bluebird Café and the bank and the old town square. Black feathers lift and wheel past the liquor store and a shuttered B&B, past power lines, houses, cars, and churches, over the cemetery, streets giving way to fields, farms laid out in a neat expanse: the vast acreage of agribusiness, a few sturdy family farmers holding on, green squares of corn and soy bringing order; and in the center, down the old county road, not far south of Johnson's Creek and just past the Infamous Elm, Rose's overgrown reluctant acres.

One small, tangly patch, that land of hers, the well pulsing like a heart. *Listen.*

Rose

Rose moved through the thickets with a sharp set of shears, pruning, smoking a cigar. Her dog, Fergus, dreamt and farted on the porch. All this growth and nothing to show for it. Lance would have been shocked. Her son was so good at making things grow—crops, blackberries, houseplants, hopes. There was nothing he couldn't coax into life. A good kid, her soldier boy. Smart in every sense of the word. Fergus thumped his tail. He always knew when she was thinking of his number one love.

"That's right," she said to Fergus. "Him." He scratched an ear in response. She had the sense of the sky pulling taut into a bow. No, she shook her head—a *bowl*. Overhead, a great bowl. Chipped at the edges but still functional.

Rose gave the stogie one final pull and coughed in a hard burst. Phlegm rose and Fergus lifted his head. She set her shears on the porch and peered into the well. Either the well was getting deeper or the sky darker; she couldn't see her reflection. There must be a scientific reason: cloud patterns, air molecules. Or no reason at all.

"Onward, into the void," she told Fergus. "Come on, let's check the mail." They walked down the long drive, gravel skittering, her anklebones clicking in protest.

"How did this happen to me?" she asked Fergus. There must be some mistake.

The well was getting deeper but the mailbox was smaller. Its little red flag was rusted upright, and faded letters spelled out her dead husband's name. *Theo*. She reached in to pull at the contents and could barely wrench her hand free. Nothing but junk. Last week there had been another letter from her stepsister, on prissy peach-colored paper and smelling of lilacs, with the careful spidery lettering of a serial killer. Rose hadn't read Stella's letter yet—it waited on the mantel for her to build a fire, so she could throw it in and watch the flames.

The mailbox held a catalog full of crap she didn't need. And more notices from the bank, the vultures. She tore the catalog and the bank's window envelope into strips and threw the pieces into the air. Shiny paper caught in the branches. Then the metal box vibrated a little—something inside wanted her attention. Fergus looked up the drive and whimpered low in his throat.

She shoved her hand into the mailbox once more and pulled out a flimsy pale blue airmail envelope that had been caught in the back seam. *Rose Red* looped across the paper, in elegant script. Next to her name was a sketch of a long-stemmed rose with a single thorn. There was no return address.

The bowl of the sky, paler than the envelope she held in her hands, contracted a bit. She cleared her throat. Her thumb was bloody, nicked in some way that escaped her, and she spread her fingers wide, considering. Something dark as pinesap had worked into her fingerprints and calluses, and her cuticles were a mess. She had no idea about the rest of her. All the mirrors in the house were covered.

In the parlor she set the new airmail envelope next to Stella's letter on the mantel, side by side. Just above hung a framed photo of her and Theo and Lance: Lance about four, skinny and stick-straight, grinning wide. Theo's left hand rested on Lance's shoulder, and the

right dangled down by his side. Theo's eyes were open wide, giving him a look of quiet surprise, like a deer in headlights. What the hell had astonished Theo all the time? She'd never figured it out. Rose sat on Lance's other side, eyes squinting against the flashbulb with a fake, purse-lipped smile, looking like a stranger, someone she'd never want to know. Most of the pictures of Lance in the early days had Stella in them, so they weren't up. Rectangular outlines remained on the wall where Rose had taken them down. The phone rang as if from a distant room, or even further. She ignored it.

In the kitchen it was hard to find a clear space on the counter or in the fridge. She shoved some dishes aside and dropped meat scraps and yesterday's leftover oatmeal into a bowl for Fergus. "Eat up." Branches pattered at the window. She picked up a dish at random from the counter and went out to empty it into the compost pile.

A faint breeze gave her pause—not déjà vu, but a similar, physical feeling of almost-but-not-quite remembering something she'd forgotten. Crows swooped across the sky. Before she could start pruning, Fergus growled and barked down the driveway. His warnings had come in handy lately, giving her a few minutes to duck out on would-be company.

Today she wasn't swift enough and a familiar voice intruded. "Rose." Not from down the drive—he'd come from the east, directly through the fields. Her neighbor Brown, the young one, Perry. He stood embarrassed and determined, clean young face slipped over his father's, the Old Man's ears holding up shiny dark hair. Genetics. DNA. A crazy thing.

"Hello, Rose. How are you?"

"Fergus," she said. "Quiet." Fergus, proud of himself for giving a warning, settled into a spot on the porch to lick his balls.

Behind the young Brown she saw a flash of yellow in the hayloft window. The girl again, Sill, Perry's daughter, sneaking in where she

wasn't wanted. Both of them—no, the whole damn Brown family—coming around individually and collectively. They didn't mean her well.

Perry shifted from one foot to the other and tried again. "How are you?" That question! She could live the rest of her life without hearing it.

Red blooms, white blooms, climbers, crawlers; heavily scented, with new buds always pushing up. They were as bad as weeds. Rose used to like them. Stella once put them in vases every morning. The trunks were young then, almost spindly. Now they were as thick as her leg. No more playing around—she took her shears and sent one flying. Take that!

"Have you thought about what I said?" he was asking. "Rose?" There was his Old Man, in the greedy eyegleam, apple not far from the tree.

"Perry." She knew how to handle him. "How is your father?"

The clean face reddened. A rough hand clenched the paper that he'd pulled from his pocket and then rolled up like a newspaper to swat a dog.

A few years ago Lance had set fire to a bag of steer manure—just for fun and high spirits—and left it smoldering. *Barnburner*, Old Man Brown had called her son, and threatened legal action even though the thing had only smoked, harmless. *Never*, she'd said to Lance. *Promise me, no matter what happens to me, you'll never let the Browns have this land.*

"... My father," Perry was saying, "he's mellow, Rose, since the lightning. He was hit out on the east acres in '97. You remember?"

"Of course." The bowl flickered overhead, restless. She remembered. She shook her head, noticing a few new shoots already sprouting. Up in the hayloft, that yellow flash again. Fergus licked himself on the porch, rhythmic and soothing. Brown the Younger was still red, still talking, his voice lower now, like gravel. Did he know where his daughter was? People go missing all the time.

“I can offer you a fair price,” he said. “And with Lance—” Fergus stopped licking and raised his head. Rose snatched the paper from Brown’s hand and tossed it into the well. She turned and slammed into the house, Fergus close at her heels. Brown retreated.

Something clattered in the pantry, probably the mice trying to get to her bag of rolled oats. A shoot busily worked its way up the kitchen drainpipe, blooming in leggy insistence from the sink. She grabbed an old boot lying by the door and hurled it toward a gray mass—got you!—but missed, cracking open one of her jam jars. Goddamn it. Lance loved her preserves. He was always underfoot in the kitchen, the first place he came after school, eating her out of house and home. A hollow leg, that’s what Theo used to say.

Why did the chicken cross the road, Ma? Not waiting for her to guess. *To lay it on the line.* He’d grabbed a thick slice of bread, knife dipping into the jam. She’d swatted the dishtowel at him and he swiveled out of the way, reporting that he’d seen Stella in town and then pausing for her reaction. His t-shirt had had a rip near the neck. Strange, the details you remember. What had she said to him that day?

She left the jam jar where it lay shattered, went to the mantel, and considered the airmail envelope—but instead picked up Stella’s letter. The peach envelope, unstamped, had appeared in the mailbox like all the others from Stella. God, what a pain in the ass her stepsister was. Stella’s spindly purple ink looked like crisscrossing lines on a map of underground streams. It took a while to decipher: *Dear Rose, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think about you and our Lance so often, and it is my deepest wish that you will let me come visit. Rose, we are still family, much as you might like to forget—I have forgotten. I would. If you didn’t keep reminding me—We need to talk—*

Rose threw the crumpled letter into the cold fireplace and blew her nose into the hem of her skirt. An image came, burning into the back of her lids as she clamped them down: she and Stella sitting

and rocking on a porch together, fingers busy making something, flying in a blur, a bright yarn stretched between them and mist rising through the branches above. *Stop it, Stella!*

Rose had a tall cup full of premium old pens on a shelf in the kitchen, with a few cheap ballpoints rolling around, leaking on everything. She took a ballpoint and a paper grocery bag and went to sit on the back porch, her feet propped on the rickety stairs, the brown paper crinkly on her knees.

*Listen, Stella. He's not yours anymore—*She wrote a few lines and scribbled them out, ink smearing, and started again an inch down. *Listen, Stella. I am much too busy to visit with you. My roses are shooting up gangbusters. Lots of pruning, like always. There's corn to manage and I don't have—Plus, the well is acting up, and Fergus needs his shots. A new well may need digging.*

Stop bothering. However, have this jar of sour berry chutney, I found it in the pantry and thought of you.

Your stepsister, Rose.

P.S. Stop it, Stella.

P.P.S. The Browns are circling.

A patch in back of the house still smelled like Stella. She'd seeped into the ground like spilled oil. Flowery perfume that cost too much, bought on credit. Dandelions dappled the green with splashes of bright yellow. They used to put Lance's little blow-up swimming pool in this spot and sit with their drinks and watch him splash around. The two of them, her and Stella, sunk in lawn chairs, watching Lance. Black hair with a straight part, red hair sticking up—that was them. White marble legs next to ruddy freckled legs, ice cubes clinking in old-fashioned glasses, lime wedges, red toenails, calluses. Sister sister, mother mother. Blood. But not quite. What were they? Lance: little birdwing boy, in the blue circle of his wading pool. Did he see it, splashing around in that plastic tub, his face

already full of piss and vinegar—a fountain cherub come to life and making the most of it. *Look*, he'd yelled, *watch me!*

The softness of the air, the softness she saw in Stella's gaze, watching Lance, the softness in her own bones in that one lit moment. The pink and gold light of dusk fell, covering the branches and brambles, still manageable back then, covering them, their skin, eyes, hair. The grass under their bare feet reached up, soft and scratchy. "Fireflies," Stella said, running her finger along the rim of her thick-cut glass. *Watch me!* Lance spat upward like a fountain. They'd laughed hard, encouraging him. He pissed a loopy arc over the edge onto a blackberry bush and they were laughing too hard to stop him or say much other than, "Lance!" and "Boy, you'd better . . ." The light was too beautiful for anything more, and fading by the minute.

Rose remembered that day over others, over times they'd laughed harder or said more. Certain moments hold you in their palm. And later, when a different moment shakes you in its fist, it's that moment you were cupped in so gently that you think of. You have to bear them both. All the time between them falls away and they press together, intricate sketches on two sheets of onion paper held together up to the light. See what new shapes they make? See the people, now and then? Happy sad. Love hate. God shakes and tosses, yells, *Snake eyes!* It's just how it goes.

Rose touched her forehead. Enough of remembering. What had that ever gotten anyone? Several dozen freshly picked dandelions were in the apron spread across her lap. She began to knot the flowers into a chain. That far-off phone was ringing. *He's not yours anymore.*

The truck remembered the drive to town, even if Rose didn't. She'd done it a hundred times, a thousand—foot on the pedals, hands on the wheel. The dandelion chain dangled across her dash, and the paper bag letter to Stella waited in her pocket. She would

deliver the flowers. Then she'd take the letter to Stella—why waste a stamp?—along with the jar of preserves that was now jammed against the seat seam under Fergus's butt.

The landscape didn't match the ache in her head; everything was flat and pale. "No way around but through," she told Fergus. He didn't hear—his head hung out the truck window. At the side of the road Old Man Brown's Infamous Elm tree loomed, the only thing in her field of vision that had any weight to it.

Some time later, Fergus's panting quickened as the truck slowed. Rose pulled off the interstate into an empty parking lot. Swaths of green dotted with white stones stretched out in unnatural perfection, and she felt a gut tug toward the overgrown thickets of home. As she cut the gas, the engine sputtered and sighed. Her breath caught. A flag on a pole hung slack in the windless air. The dandelion chain had slid off the dash onto the seat beside her. How dare she refer to those yellow weeds as flowers—what was wrong with her? Some sort of bird cawed.

Driving home after, Rose felt a niggling, a gnawing, as the buildings of town—Mondragon's, Dunleavy's Shoes (&Shoe Repair), liquor, bank, gas, The Bluebird Café, her father's decrepit shuttered B&B—erased themselves. Her wheels turned over and over, spooling everything behind them into grayness. She patted her empty pocket.

In Mondragon's she'd tucked the letter to Stella and the preserves onto a shelf next to a bag of rice. Stella had been nowhere in sight, but the husband had been there, all right. On the floor below the passenger seat was a shopping bag full of items that she didn't want and hadn't asked for. Ward Mondragon had insisted, and shoved the bag at her so urgently she'd had no choice but to take it. A man full of dough and confidence, he was kind to everyone because he could afford to be. He'd hung a framed photo of their empty-eyed president

on the wall behind the register, a place of honor. "Please, Rose," he'd said, escorting her out of the store, leaning through the truck window and patting Fergus on the head. *Do you see the sky?* she'd meant to ask him, but Fergus had flattened his ears and looped his tail around his haunches. She'd started the engine. Ward Mondragon's panicked voice rumbled in her head; he used to know how to handle people in all sorts of weather.

"Stupid," she said to Fergus. "I shouldn't have gone." Fergus ignored her, head out the window, enjoying the loft of his ears.

The house was where she'd left it—scruffy, and fretful in its own way. She had the sense of a three-dimensional shape folding itself into something else. The truck engine still rumbled; the faulty gas line had kept going even after she turned off the key and slid out. Wait. Did she have the key? She looked at her empty hand and then down at her legs. Her knees were grass-stained. *Gravestained*. Two indentations pressed into freshly laid sod; that flimsy string of dandelions draped over a cold stone. She sank to her knees next to the truck, heaving one quick, hard cough—nothing came up. When had she last eaten? Fergus watched with interest, and she shoved him away. Cold spread out and radiated; her knees ground into dry gravel. Letters and numbers swam in front of her eyes, meaningless.

On the front porch she set down Ward's bag and opened the door. Somebody had been there. The air was different. Currents of it eddied and flowed in new directions, dust swirling in corners that Rose hadn't noticed, in the parlor, the old sewing room, even the staircase with its creaky boards. It wasn't Stella, she was almost certain. Stella wouldn't cover her tracks so well. The antique hand-shaped sconce on the wall near the cuckoo clock gave her the finger, or looked like it did.

The kitchen shocked her a bit, with its newly clean counters and sink. Her chair was pushed back from the table. A pencil rolled along the baseboard and dropped out of sight. She knew she should

go collect the bag from the porch. But the front porch felt like another country. She had a feeling that as she walked through her house new rooms opened in front of her and the old ones closed off behind, locked forever.

“We’re living in a funhouse,” she told Fergus. He was next to the fridge, lapping from his water bowl. Rosehips pattered against the kitchen window. Under the sound of the ringing phone, she heard her own heartbeat. “Or a house of cards.”

They were in the front yard again, pruning. Fergus thumped his tail. A prickling made her turn around. There he stood, as crooked and shadeless as his damn tree: Old Man Brown. Looming on her land, white-haired now, leaning on his cane. His eyes still wanted to eat the world.

Don’t say it, she thought. But he did: “How are you?”

She clutched her shears and scanned the bushes for more blooms.

“Rose.” He sank to one knee, sighing, “What’s going on? You’ve gotta prepare yourself. I know what Perry’s angling for. I’m here to tell you—”

Don’t talk to me about what to look out for, Old Man.

“. . . Hear me out. I know Perry will try again. He’ll keep trying. He’s like me, Rose. Like I was . . .”

“There’s nothing—” her voice croaked and she stopped. Then started again. “There’s nothing to be done, Sherwin.”

The Old Man stood awkwardly and stepped forward. He held out a coin, glinty in the gray light. “Rosie, damn it all. Can’t you tell there’s weather coming?”

A faint reverberation came from the well. The bucket groaned and swung as Rose turned back to work, and the snip of her pruning shears matched it for rhythm. Out on the road, the leaves of the Infamous Elm fluttered.

Rose put some coffee on to brew, strong and muddy, in need of that zooming feeling. She filled a pot with water, set the flame on high, and dropped in three carrots and an onion. “It may boil down to something interesting,” she said to Fergus. Her eyes stung. Fergus nosed the screen door leading to the backyard, asking to be let out. “Hold on,” she breathed, then opened the door and watched as Fergus went under the blackberries and settled into a tight ball next to a small, mounded patch of dirt, nose resting on his tail.

“I have to lie down,” she whispered. But Fergus was too far away under the brambles; his ears didn’t even flicker. She swung the door open to call to him, and he stood and shook himself. Bramble shadows nipped at his paws as Fergus trotted toward her. The air was too still and the light was all wrong for early afternoon. Rose stepped onto the porch, peering overhead. “Do you know what’s wrong?” she asked. Fergus circled around her and sat, unblinking.

Inside, carroty sludge burred on the stove. Her head pounded. There was plenty of time before dinner. She took the blue airmail envelope from the mantel, traced her finger across its sketch of a single rose and thorn, and slipped it into her pocket. She went to lie down in the sewing room. A tall stack of canned corn hovered in the corner, and she peered behind it to find plant shoots creeping up the wall. Sneaky little bastards, always trying something new—she knocked over the cans and lopped at the shoots. She’d pry up floorboards, crawl into the back of closets, shake down the pantry. *Whatever it takes.* Fergus was curled up, asleep again, yelping softly. Such a deep sleep, it would be so good to surrender. She gave in and lay down, shadows fleeting across her eyelids.

Rose, Rose, Rose. She tossed and turned. Scratchy thorns pattered out odd rhythms on the window. She reached deep into her apron pocket and threw her pruning shears into the well, but when she leaned over to watch them fall, she heard another name: *Lance.*

Rose snapped awake with a coffee hangover, feet hanging off the edge of the twin bed. At some point the letter had fallen out of her pocket. Fergus had a paw on it. He watched Rose guardedly, his ears pointed toward the door, tail twitching. "Okay, okay." Rose grunted to her feet.

A thrumming came from the front of the house. The well was still going, with its blackness and strange noises and no frogs. The Brown girl yelled from her hayloft window. Rose had her shears in hand; the shoots called and swayed. "There's never an end to the work to be done," she told Fergus.

The Brown girl kept calling, wanting her to pay attention to paper airplanes that flew into the brambles, caught on thorns, and cluttered under Rose's feet. The girl was offering paper to Rose, as if Rose needed any more messages, ever. She picked them up, took the bucket down and peered over the edge of the well, leaning so far in she could feel the stones vibrating deep in her belly. The blackness felt dense. It wouldn't be that bad to just slide in. The darkness could hold her.

"Hey. Hey, Mrs. . . . Rose are you okay?" The girl yanked on her skirt until Rose hoisted herself up. Sill looked like the Old Man and Perry around the eyes, but was otherwise mousy and forgettable, soft chin and shaky hands. The girl pointed at the paper she'd flown at Rose—she wanted something, she trembled with want.

"Spit it out," Rose said. The sky rumbled.

The girl said something Rose couldn't hear, and her eyes were like eyes she'd known forever—searching and old, demanding what Rose couldn't give, posing a question she would not—

"A storm's coming," Rose snapped. "Get home." Words munched along the eaves of the house. Sodden clouds lumbered overhead. (*Whether the weather is hot, whether the weather is cold . . .*) As the girl's yellow t-shirt receded from view, the hayloft she spent so much time in leaned after her like a lover. (*. . . Whether you like it or not.*) There never was a less silly girl.

Rose waved the letter after her, shooing her off. The letter: there it was in her hand, with its light blue envelope. *Rose Red*. The only message that mattered. Fergus paced a circle on the porch. Rose threw it into the air and it came back on the wind, smack across her eyes. Okay, then. She sat on the porch steps and kissed the envelope's sealed flap. Here we go.

It opened under her fingers like a linen napkin at a dinner party. Everything fell quiet. She looked at the heading. It was dated a long time ago: months. She'd been warned about this, when they'd sent her his things. She'd been warned about a lot—the closed casket, the pieces of him, seams pulled apart never to be resewn. His things half-filled a duffel bag: fatigues, combat boots, some drawing pencils, a knife, strange binoculars that saw things blurry, letters from the Brown girl. Things from a man's world. But he wasn't a man. Just a boy.

Dear Ma,

I hope you and Fergus are doing good. I am okay here in [REDACTED]. Things are hard sometimes and I wish I was home sometimes, but [REDACTED] very important work, they say. [REDACTED] then we had a meeting and I thought how funny that was. Funny strange, like you'd say. The food is crap and I still miss your cooking. Yesterday I ate [REDACTED] how do you like that? The guys in my squad call me [REDACTED]. There are [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] stuff you wouldn't believe, even though I'm sitting here writing it so you know it must be true. I'm thinking about the end of [REDACTED], they say it's [REDACTED]. Have you seen Aunt Stella? If you do, Ma, tell her I have a new one, say that [REDACTED] I hope to see you and the farm soon. Has Sill been visiting you? I sent her some emails that she says she'll pass on [REDACTED] break down and get a computer? Well, I better go, we got [REDACTED] before morning. Write soon and I'll get it sooner or later.

Love, Lance.

Below his name he'd drawn a sketch of him and her, standing side by side in front of the porch. Her hair always looked wild in his drawings—but good, like real hair. He was good. The clouds, the rumbling at the edges. She couldn't hold it off. Stupidstupidstupid. Fergus poked her with his snout. *No.*

Rose slammed her back onto the porch, trembling and choking, her chest in a vise grip. The sun dropped from the sky and the only warmth came from Fergus's breath. Wind came ripping through the yard and Rose couldn't tell where her house ended and the storm began. Fergus scrambled backward and disappeared off the edge of the porch.

"Fergus. Fer-gus!" Wind tunneled through her chest and took her voice, whipped it up into the growing fury. Her yells disappeared in the voiceless roar. Things she'd screamed and things she should have screamed. *Lance!* She shifted weight onto her hands and knees, feeling the hard porch boards reach out for her, catch her skin and let go.

Something glanced off her back. The roof? *Oh, no, I'm not that easy.* Colors blurred past—odd shapes—furniture? animals? She held on to the screen door and couldn't get herself through, couldn't stop looking back. The sky was emerald. A clump of dirt blew into her face. *Ashes to ashes,* the wind screamed. *Lance!* The screen door buckled and shuddered under her fingers and then snapped; she was sucked backward with it. But the wide frame lodged momentarily between the posts on either side of the porch steps and Rose flung her right arm out to grab the porch beam, dragging herself toward it, clutching, trying to pull the wood into her chest. *Hold on, hold on.* The house trembled, wanting to let go, she could feel it talking to the storm.

Then a tremendous crack: wood split, the floor groaned. Something came at her—a hard, black shape—and darkness fell with quick, relentless grace.