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Opening extract from

The Knife of Never Letting Go

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1

THE HOLE IN THE NOISE

THE FIRST THING you find out when yer dog learns to talk is that dogs don't got nothing much to say. About anything.

"Need a poo, Todd."

"Shut up, Manchee."

"Poo. Poo, Todd."

"I said *shut it.*"

We're walking across the wild fields southeast of town, those ones that slope down to the river and head on towards the swamp. Ben's sent me to pick him some swamp apples and he's made me take Manchee with me, even tho we all know Cillian only bought him to stay on Mayor Prentiss' good side and so suddenly here's this brand new dog as a present for my birthday last year when I never said I *wanted* any dog, that what I *said* I wanted was for Cillian to finally fix the fissionbike so I wouldn't have to walk every forsaken place in this stupid town, but oh, no, happy birthday, Todd,

here's a brand new puppy, Todd, and even tho you don't want him, even tho you never asked for him, guess who has to feed him and train him and wash him and take him for walks and listen to him jabber now he's got old enough for the talking germ to set his mouth moving? Guess who?

"Poo," Manchee barks quietly to himself. "Poo, poo, poo."

"Just *have* yer stupid poo and quit yapping about it."

I take a switch of grass from beside the trail and I swat after him with it. I don't reach him, I don't *mean* to reach him, but he just laughs his little barking laugh and carries on down the trail. I follow after him, switching the switch against the grass on either side, squinting from the sun, trying not to think about nothing at all.

We don't need apples from the swamp, truth to tell. Ben can buy them at Mr Phelps' shop if he really wants them. Also true: going to the swamp to pick a few apples is not a job for a man cuz men are never allowed to be so idle. Now, I won't *officially* become a man for thirty more days. I've lived twelve years of thirteen long months each and another twelve months besides, all of which living means I'm still one month away from the big birthday. The plans are being planned, the preparayshuns prepared, it will be a party, I guess, tho I'm starting to get some strange pictures about it, all dark and too bright at the same time, but nevertheless I will become a man and picking apples in the swamp is not a job for a man or even an almost-man.

But Ben knows he can ask me to go and he knows I'll say yes to going because the swamp is the only place anywhere near Prentisstown where you can have half a break from all

the Noise that men spill outta theirselves, all their clamour and clatter that never lets up, even when they sleep, men and the thoughts they don't know they think even when everyone can hear. Men and their Noise. I don't know how they do it, how they stand each other.

Men are Noisy creachers.

"Squirrel!" Manchee shouts and off he goes, jumping off the trail, no matter how loud I yell after him, and off I have to go, too, across the (I look round to make sure I'm alone) *goddamn* fields cuz Cillian'll have a fit if Manchee falls down some *goddamn* snake hole and of course it'll be my own *goddamn* fault even tho I never wanted the *goddamn* dog in the *goddamn* first place.

"Manchee! Get back here!"

"Squirrel!"

I have to kick my way thru the grass, getting grublets stuck to my shoes. One smashes as I kick it off, leaving a green smear across my trainers, which I know from experience ain't coming out. "*Manchee!*" I rage.

"Squirrel! Squirrel! Squirrel!"

He's barking round the tree and the squirrel's skittering back and forth on the bark, taunting him. Come on Whirler says its Noise. Come on, come get, come on, come get. Whirler Whirler Whirler.

"Squirrel, Todd! Squirrel!"

Goddamn, animals are stupid.

I grab Manchee by the collar and hit him hard across his back leg. "Ow, Todd? Ow?" I hit him again. And again. "Ow? Todd?"

"Come *on*," I say, my own Noise raging so loud I can

barely hear myself think, which is something I'm about to regret, you watch.

Whirler boy, Whirler boy, thinks the squirrel at me. Come get, Whirler boy.

"You can eff off, too," I say, except I don't say 'eff', I say what 'eff' stands for.

And I really, really shoulda looked round again.

Cuz here's Aaron, right here, rising outta the grass from nowhere, rising up and smacking me cross the face, scratching my lip with his big ring, then bringing his hand back the other way, closed as a fist, catching my cheekbone but at least missing my nose because I'm falling into the grass, trying to fall away from his punch, and I let go of Manchee's collar and off he runs back to the squirrel, barking his head off, the traitor, and I hit the grass with my knees and my hands, getting grublet stains all over everything.

And I stay there, on the ground, breathing.

Aaron stands over me, his Noise coming at me in fragments of scripture and of his next sermon and Language, young Todd and the finding of a sacrifice and the saint chooses his path and God hears and the wash of pictures that's in everyone's Noise, of things familiar and glancing flashes of–

What? What the forsaken–?

But up flies a loud bit of his sermon to block it out and I look up into his eyes and I suddenly don't wanna know. I can already taste the blood where his ring cut my lip and I don't wanna know. He *never* comes out here, men *never do*, they have their reasons, men do, and it's just me and my dog only ever but here he is and I don't don't don't wanna know.

He smiles down at me, thru that beard of his, smiles down at me in the grass.

A smiling fist.

"Language, young Todd," he says, "binds us like prisoners on a chain. Haven't you learned anything from yer church, boy?" And then he says his most familiar preaching. "If one us falls, we all fall."

Yes, Aaron, I think.

"With yer mouth, Todd."

"Yes, Aaron," I say.

"And the effs?" he says. "And the geedees? Because don't think I didn't hear them as well. Your Noise reveals you. Reveals us all."

Not all, I think, but at the same time I say, "Sorry, Aaron."

He leans down to me, his lips close to my face, and I can smell the breath that comes outta his mouth, smell the weight of it, like fingers grabbing for me. "God hears," he whispers. "God *hears.*"

And he raises a hand again and I flinch and he laughs and then he's gone, like that, heading back towards the town, taking his Noise with him.

I'm shaking from the charge to my blood at being hit, shaking from being so fired up and so surprised and so angry and so much hating this town and the men in it that it takes me a while till I can get up and go get my dog again. *What was he effing doing out here anyway?* I think and I'm so hacked off, still so raging with anger and hate (and fear, yes, fear, shut up) that I don't even look round to see if Aaron heard my Noise. I don't look round. I don't look round.

And then I do look round and I go and get my dog.

"Aaron, Todd? Aaron?"

"Don't say that name again, Manchee."

"Bleeding, Todd. Todd? Todd? Todd? Bleeding?"

"I know. Shut up."

"Whirler," he says, as if it don't mean nothing, his head as empty as the sky.

I smack his rump. "Don't say that neither."

"Ow? Todd?"

We keep on walking, staying clear of the river on our left. It runs down thru a series of gulches at the east of town, starting way up to the north past our farm and coming down the side of the town till it flattens out into a marshy part that eventually becomes the swamp. You have to avoid the river and especially that marshy part before the swamp trees start cuz that's where the crocs live, easily big enough to kill an almost man and his dog. The sails on their backs look just like a row of rushes and if you get too close, WHOOM!, outta the water they come, flying at you with their claws grasping and their mouths snapping and you pretty much ain't got no chance at all then.

We get ourselves down past the marshy part and I try to take in the swamp quiet as it approaches. There's nothing to see down here no more, really, which is why men don't come. And the smell, too, I don't pretend it don't smell, but it don't smell nearly so bad as men make out. They're smelling their memories, they are, they're not smelling what's really here, they're smelling it like it was then. All the dead things. Spacks and men had different ideas for burial. Spacks just used the swamp, threw their dead right into the water, let

'em sink, which was fine cuz they were suited for swamp burial, I guess. That's what Ben says. Water and muck and Spackle skin worked fine together, didn't poison nothing, just made the swamp richer, like men do to soil.

Then suddenly, of course, there were a whole lot more spacks to bury than normal, too many for even a swamp this big to swallow, and it's a ruddy big swamp, too. And then there were no live spacks at all, were there? Just spack bodies in heaps, piling up in the swamp and rotting and stinking and it took a long time for the swamp to become swamp again and not just a mess of flies and smells and who knows what extra germs they'd kept saved up for us.

I was born into all that, all that mess, the over-crowded swamp and the over-crowded sematary and the not crowded enough town, so I don't remember nothing, don't remember a world without Noise. My pa died of sickness before I was born and then my ma died, of course, no surprises there. Ben and Cillian took me in, raised me. Ben says my ma was the last of the women but everyone says that about everyone's ma. Ben may not be lying, *he* believes it's true, but who knows?

I am the youngest of the whole town, tho. I used to come out and throw rocks at field crows with Reg Oliver (seven months and 8 days older) and Liam Smith (four months and 29 days older) and Seb Mundy who was next youngest to me, three months and a day older, but even he don't talk to me no more now that he's a man.

No boys do once they turn thirteen.

Which is how it goes in Prentisstown. Boys become men and they go to their men-only meetings to talk about who

knows what and boys most definitely ain't allowed and if yer the last boy in town, you just have to wait, all by yerself.

Well, you and a dog you don't want.

But nevermind, here's the swamp and in we go, sticking to the paths that take us round and over the worst of the water, weaving our way round the big, bulby trees that grow up and outta the bog to the needly roof metres and metres up. The air's thick and it's dark and it's heavy, but it's not a frightening kind of thick and dark and heavy. There's lots of life here, loads of it, just ignoring the town as you please, birds and green snakes and frogs and kivits and both kinds of squirrel and (I promise you) a cassor or two and sure there's red snakes to watch out for but even tho it's dark, there's slashes of light that come down from holes in the roof and if you ask me, which you may not be, I grant you that, to me the swamp's like one big, comfy, not very Noisy room. Dark but living, living but friendly, friendly but not grasping.

Manchee lifts his leg on practically everything till he must be running outta pee and then he heads off under a bush, burbling to himself, finding a place to do his other business, I guess.

But the swamp don't mind. How could it? It's all just life, going over itself, returning and cycling and eating itself to grow. I mean, it's not that it's not Noisy here. Sure it is, there's no escaping Noise, not nowhere at all, but it's quieter than the town. The loud is a different kind of loud, because swamp loud is just curiosity, creachers figuring out who you are and if yer a threat. Whereas the town knows all about you already and wants to know more and wants to beat you with what it knows till how can you have any of yerself left at all?

Swamp Noise, tho, swamp Noise is just the birds all thinking their worrisome little birdie thoughts. Where's food? Where's home? Where's my safety? And the waxy squirrels, which are all little punks, teasing you if they see you, teasing themselves if they don't, and the rusty squirrels, which are like dumb little kids, and sometimes there's swamp foxes out in the leaves who you can hear faking their Noise to sound like the squirrels they eat and even less often there are mavens singing their weird maven songs and once I swear I saw a cassor running away on two long legs but Ben says I didn't, says the cassors are long gone from the swamp.

I don't know. I believe me.

Manchee comes outta the bushes and sits down next to me cuz I've stopped right there in the middle of a trail. He looks around to see what I might be seeing and then he says, "Good poo, Todd."

"I'm sure it was, Manchee."

I'd better not get another ruddy dog when my birthday comes. What I want this year is a hunting knife like the one Ben carries on the back of his belt. Now *that's* a present for a man.

"Poo," Manchee says quietly.

On we walk. The main bunch of apple trees are a little ways into the swamp, down a few paths and over a fallen log that Manchee always needs help over. When we get there, I pick him up around his stomach and lift him to the top. Even tho he knows what I'm doing, he still kicks his legs all over the place like a falling spider, making a fuss for no reason at all.

"Hold still, you gonk!"

"Down, down, down!" he yelps, scrabbling away at the air.

"Idiot dog."

I plop him on top the log and climb up myself. We both jump down to the other side, Manchee barking 'Jump!" as he lands and keeping on barking 'Jump!" as he runs off.

The leap over the log is where the dark of the swamp really starts and the first thing you see are the old Spackle buildings, leaning out towards you from shadow, looking like melting blobs of tan-coloured ice cream except hut-sized. No one knows or can remember what they were ever sposed to be but best guess by Ben, who's a best guess kinda guy, is that they had something to do with burying their dead. Maybe even some kind of church, even tho the spacks didn't have no kind of religion anyone from Prentisstown could reckernise.

I keep a wide distance from them and go into the little grove of wild apple trees. The apples are ripe, nearly black, almost edible, as Cillian would say. I pick one off the trunk and take a bite, the juice dribbling down my chin.

"Todd?"

"What, Manchee?" I take out the plastic bag I've got folded in my back pocket and start filling it with apples.

"Todd?" he barks again and this time I notice how he's barking it and I turn and he's pointed at the Spackle buildings and his fur's all ridged up on his back and his ears are flicking all over the place.

I stand up straight. "What is it, boy?"

He's growling now, his lips pulled back over his teeth. I

feel the charge in my blood again. "Is it a croc?" I say.

"Quiet, Todd," Manchee growls.

"But what is it?"

"*Is* quiet, Todd." He lets out a little bark and it's a real bark, a real dog bark that means nothing but 'bark!" and my body electricity goes up a bit, like charges are going to start leaping outta my skin. "Listen," he growls.

And so I listen.

And I listen.

And I turn my head a little and I listen some more.

There's a hole in the Noise.

Which can't be.

It's *weird*, it is, out there, hiding somewhere, in the trees or somewhere outta sight, a spot where your ears and your mind are telling you there's no Noise. It's like a shape you can't see except by how everything else around it is touching it. Like water in the shape of a cup, but with no cup. It's a hole and everything that falls into it stops being Noise, stops being *anything*, just stops all together. It's not like the quiet of the swamp, which is never *quiet* obviously, just less Noisy. But this, this is a shape, a shape of *nothing*, a hole where all Noise stops.

Which is impossible.

There ain't nothing but Noise in this world, nothing but the constant thoughts of men and things coming at you and at you and at you, ever since the spacks released the Noise germ during the war, the germ that killed half the men and every single woman, my ma not excepted, the germ that drove the rest of the men mad, the germ that spelled the end for all Spackle once men's madness picked up a gun.

"Todd?" Manchee's spooked, I can hear it. "What, Todd? What's it, Todd?"

"Can you smell anything?"

"Just smell quiet, Todd," he barks, then he starts barking louder, "Quiet! Quiet!"

And then, somewhere around the spack buildings, the quiet *moves*.

My blood-charge leaps so hard it about knocks me over. Manchee yelps in a circle around me, barking and barking, making me double-spooked, and so I smack him on the rump again ('Ow, Todd?') to make myself calm down.

"There's no such thing as holes," I say. "No such thing as nothing. So it's gotta be a something, don't it?"

"Something, Todd," Manchee barks.

"Can you hear where it went?"

"It's quiet, Todd."

"You know what I mean."

Manchee sniffs the air and takes one step, two, then more towards the Spackle buildings. I guess we're looking for it, then. I start walking all slowlike up to the biggest of the melty ice cream scoops. I stay outta the way of anything that might be looking out the little bendy triangle doorway. Manchee's sniffing at the door frame but he's not growling so I take a deep breath and I look inside.

It's dead empty. The ceiling rises up to a point about another length of me above my head. Floor's dirt, swamp plants growing in it now, vines and suchlike, but nothing else. Which is to say no *real* nothing, no hole, and no telling what mighta been here before.

It's stupid but I gotta say it.

I'm wondering if the Spackle are back.

But that's impossible.

But a hole in the Noise is impossible.

So something impossible has to be true.

I can hear Manchee snuffling around again outside so I creep out and I go to the second scoop. There's writing on the outside of this one, the only written words anyone's ever seen in the spack language. The only words they ever saw fit to write down, I guess. The letters are spack letters, but Ben says they make the sound es'Paqili or suchlike, es'Paqili, the Spackle, "spacks" if you wanna spit it, which since what happened happened is what everyone does. Means "The People".

There's nothing in the second scoop neither. I step back out into the swamp and I listen again. I put my head down and I listen and I reach with the hearing parts of my brain and I listen there, too, and I listen and listen.

I listen.

"Quiet! Quiet!" Manchee barks, twice real fast and peels off running again, towards the last scoop. I take off after him, running myself, my blood charging, cuz that's where it is, that's where the hole in the Noise is.

I can hear it.

Well, I can't *hear* it, that's the whole point, but when I run towards it the emptiness of it is touching my chest and the stillness of it pulls at me and there's so much quiet in it, no, not quiet, *silence*, so much unbelievable silence that I start to feel really torn up, like I'm about to lose the most valuable thing ever, like there it is, a death, and I'm running and my eyes are watering and my chest is just crushing and there's no

one to see but I still mind and my eyes start crying, they start crying, they start *effing crying*, and I stop for a minute and I bend over and Jesus H Dammit, you can just shut up right now, but I waste a whole stupid minute, just a whole stinking, stupid minute bent over there, by which time, of course, the hole is moving away, it's moved away, it's gone.

Manchee's torn twixt racing after it and coming back to me but he finally comes back to me.

"Crying, Todd?"

"Shut up," I say and aim a kick at him. It misses on purpose.

1

PRENTISSTOWN

WE GET OURSELVES outta the swamp and head back towards town and the world feels all black and grey no matter what the sun is saying. Even Manchee barely says nothing as we make our way back up thru the fields. My Noise churns and bubbles like a stew on the boil till finally I have to stop for a minute to calm myself down a little.

There's just no such thing as silence. Not here, not nowhere. Not when yer asleep, not when yer by yerself, never.

I am Todd Hewitt, I think to myself with my eyes closed. *I am twelve years and twelve months old. I live in Prentisstown on New World. I will be a man in one month's time exactly.*

It's a trick Ben taught me to help settle my Noise. You close yer eyes and as clearly and calmly as you can you tell yerself who you are, cuz that's what gets lost in all that Noise.

I am Todd Hewitt.

"Todd Hewitt," Manchee murmurs to himself beside me.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes.

That's who I am. I'm Todd Hewitt.

We walk on up away from the swamp and the river, up the slope of the wild fields to the small ridge at the south of town where the school used to be for the brief and useless time it existed. Before I was born, boys were taught by their mums at home and then when there were only boys and men left, we just got sat down in front of vids and learning modules till Mayor Prentiss outlawed such things as 'detrimental to the discipline of our minds.'

Mayor Prentiss, see, has a Point of View.

And so for almost half a stupid year, all the boys were gathered up by sad-faced Mr Royal and plonked out here in an out-building away from the main Noise of the town. Not that it helped. It's nearly impossible to teach anything in a classroom full of boys' Noise and *completely* impossible to give out any sort of test. You cheat even if you don't mean to and *everybody* means to.

And then one day Mayor Prentiss decided to burn all the books, every single one of them, even the ones in men's homes, cuz apparently books were detrimental as well and Mr Royal, a soft man who made himself a hard man by drinking whisky in the classroom, gave up and took a gun and put an end to himself and that was it for my classroom teaching.

Ben taught me the rest at home. Mechanics and food prep and clothes repair and farming basics and things like that. Also a lot of survival stuff like hunting and which fruits you can eat and how to follow the moons for direcshuns and how to use a knife and a gun and snakebite remedies and how to calm yer Noise as best you can.

He tried to teach me reading and writing, too, but Mayor

Prentiss caught wind of it in my Noise one morning and locked Ben up for a week and that was the end of my book-learning and what with all that other stuff to learn and all the working on the farm that still has to be done everyday and all the just plain surviving, I never ended up reading too good.

Don't matter. Ain't nobody in Prentisstown ever gonna write a book.

Manchee and me get past the school building and up on the little ridge and look north and there's the town in question. Not that there's all that much left of it no more. One shop, used to be two. One pub, used to be two. One clinic, one jail, one non-working petrol stayshun, one big house for the Mayor, one police stayshun. The Church. One short bit of road running thru the centre, paved back in the day, never upkept since, goes to gravel right quick. All the houses and such are out and about, outskirts like, farms, *meant* to be farms, some still are, some stand empty, some stand worse than empty.

And that's all there is of Prentisstown. Populayshun 147 and falling, falling, falling. 146 men and one almost-man.

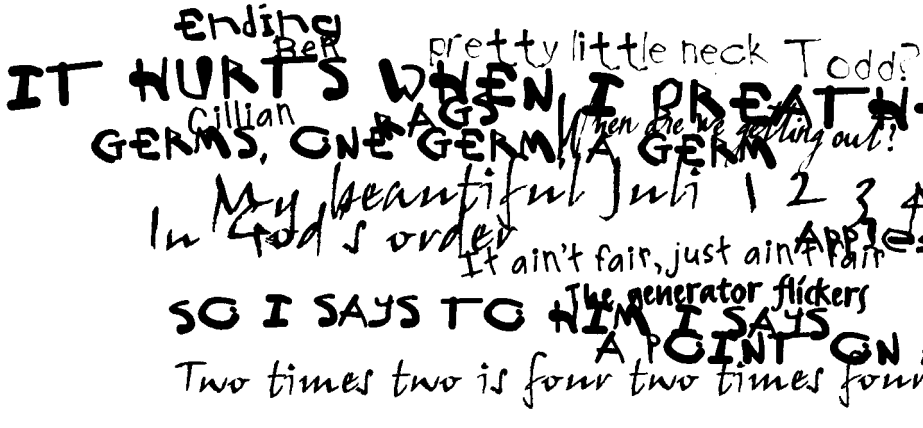
Ben says there used to be other settlements scattered around New World, that all the ships landed about the same time, ten years or so before I was born, but that when the war started with the spacks, when the spacks released the germs and all the other settlements were wiped out, that Prentisstown was nearly wiped out, too, that it only survived cuz of Mayor Prentiss' army skills and that even tho Mayor Prentiss is a nightmare coming and going, we at least owe him that, that cuz of him we survive alone on a whole big empty woman-less world that ain't got nothing good to say

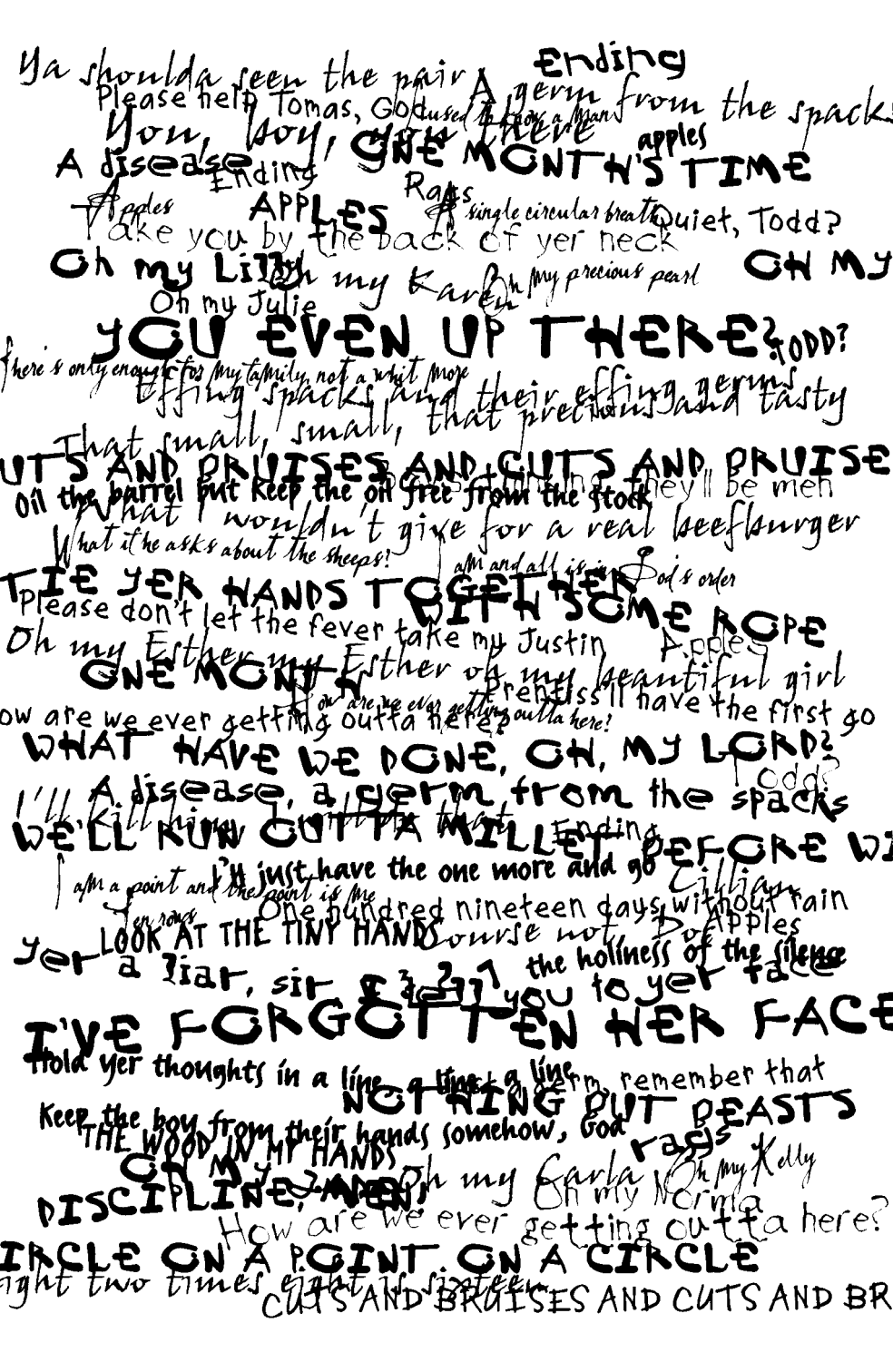
for itself, in a town of 146 men that dies a little more with every day that passes.

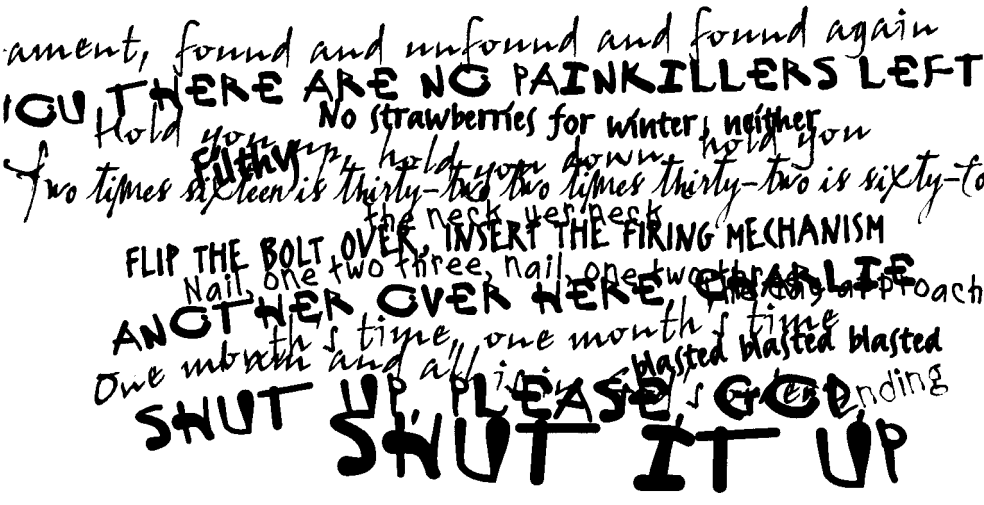
Cuz some men can't take it, can they? They off themselves like Mr Royal or some of them just plain disappear, like Mr Gault, our old neighbour who used to do the other sheep farm, or Mr Michael, our second best carpenter, or Mr Van Wijk, who vanished the same day his son became a man. It's not so uncommon. If yer whole world is one Noisy town with no future, sometimes you just have to leave even if there ain't nowhere else to go at all.

Cuz as me the almost-man looks up into that town, I can hear the 146 men who remain. I can hear every ruddy last one of them. Their Noise washes down the hill like a flood let loose right at me, like a fire, like a monster the size of the sky come to get you cuz there's nowhere to run.

Here's what it's like. Here's what every minute of every day of my stupid, stinking life in this stupid, stinking town is like. Never mind plugging yer ears, it don't help at all:




Ya shoulda seen the pair
Ending
Please help Tomas, God used to love a Man
A germ from the spack
You, boy, GET THERE
ONE MONTH'S TIME
apples
A disease
Ending
Rags
Apples
APPLES
a single circular breath
Quiet, Todd?
Take you by the back of yer neck
Oh my Lily
Oh my Karen
Oh my precious pearl
OH MY
Oh my Julie
YOU EVEN UP THERE?
TODD?
There's only enough for my family, not a whit more
Effing spacks and their effing germs
That small, small, that pretty and tasty
UTS AND BRUISES AND CUTS AND BRUISE
Oil the barrel but keep the oil free from the stock
What wouldn't give for a real beefburger
What if he asks about the sheeps!
I am and all is in God's order
TIE YER HANDS TOGETHER WITH SOME ROPE
Please don't let the fever take my Justin
Oh my Esther my Esther oh my beautiful girl
ONE MONTH
Apples
Prentiss I'll have the first go
ow are we ever getting outta here?
How are we ever getting outta here!
WHAT HAVE WE DONE, OH, MY LORD?
odds
A disease, a germ from the spacks
I'll kill him, I'll kill that
Ending
WE'LL RUN OUTTA MILLET BEFORE WI
I am a point and the point is me
I'll just have the one more and go
Jillian
One hundred nineteen days without rain
Apples
LOOK AT THE TINY HANDS
Course not
Do
yer a liar, sir
the holiness of the silence
you to yer face
I'VE FORGOTTEN HER FACE
Hold yer thoughts in a line, a line, a line
a germ, remember that
NOTHING BUT BEASTS
Keep the boy from their hands somehow, God
THE WOOD IN MY HANDS
rags
Oh my Carla
Oh my Kelly
Oh my Norma
DISCIPLINE, MEN!
How are we ever getting outta here?
IRCLE ON A POINT ON A CIRCLE
ight two times eight is sixteen
CUTS AND BRUISES AND CUTS AND BR



And them's just the words, the voices talking and moaning and singing and crying. There's pictures, too, pictures that come to yer mind in a rush, no matter how much you don't want 'em, pictures of memories and fantasies and secrets and plans and lies, lies, lies. Cuz you can lie in the Noise, even when everyone knows what yer thinking, you can bury stuff under other stuff, you can hide it in plain sight, you just don't think it clearly or you convince yerself that the opposite of what yer hiding is true and then who's going to be able to pick out from the flood what's real water and what's not going to get you wet?

Men lie, and they lie to theirselves worst of all.

In a for instance, I've never seen a woman nor a Spackle in the flesh, obviously. I've seen 'em both in vids, of course, before they were outlawed, and I see them *all the time* in the Noise of men cuz what else do men think about except sex and enemies? But the spacks are bigger and meaner looking in the Noise than in the vids, ain't they? And Noise women have lighter hair and bigger chests and wear less clothes and