

to them. Isn't this what the great stories tell? Shouldn't I feel this way before a god? In that moment of attention, without any further demonstration, I know I will do anything for them.

I look around. The rye room seems shabby to me, not good enough for the deer. I wander for hours, looking for a place to build a new room, but nothing is worthy. Finally I leave, full of restless desire. I go back many times that summer but I never see the deer again, and I am never satisfied. The next year, when I walk into the field, I have grown taller, and because I can see farther, to the edges of the field and beyond, the rye loses its mystery. But longing holds. Even today, I never see deer on the road, in fields, even hanging from the hunter's tree, without hoping they will look at me inclusively again.

Farms

Owens, Anne-Marie. *Pulling Down the Barn*. Detroit: WSO Press, 2004.

The Barn

Barns place the farmer squarely in the middle of dirt, animals, and reverence. Barns are where things die openly but not serenely: stillborn calves, drowned swallows, frost-bitten kittens. Our barn is a place of largesse and work, open mows and high arching spaces. They are the cathedrals of farms, where all the great rituals are housed.

On days when we can leave the fields and play, Tom and I dare each other to walk the high crossbeams, balancing on the old cross-cut, ax-hewn ten-by-tens.

The first time I hesitate, and Tom taunts me. "Hey you, you're gonna get stuck up there, and somebody'll have to come getcha."

"Yeah, scaredy-cat, fraidy, can't walk the high beam," Rick joins him.

And then I remember what my mother, who is afraid of heights, has said: "Don't look down." I look directly at the beam, at the ladder brace in the middle, and take tentative, wobbly steps all the way across the high beam.

When I am good enough to climb like a cat, I curl onto the ladder and laugh down at my little sisters. Though I am too young to know the words to describe the experience, I love sending dust and pigeon droppings down into the shafts of light. I take pleasure in the way my stomach feels if I nearly lose my balance. Walking that ten-inch-wide beam across the open bays has nothing to do with death, only with the thrill of

risk. Walking the crossbeam is a chosen dare. Through my brothers and I say to each other, “You could fall and die,” what we mean is “You could fall and hurt yourself.” We do not believe ourselves immortal, as teenagers do; we haven’t thought of death yet at all.

One day my foster brother, Bobby Barnes, who lives with us while he finishes high school, holds a heavy work rope in his young hands. The rope is winched to an iron eye at the very peak of the barn. Bobby is tall and lanky, with dark brown hair, and in a way that I don’t yet understand I like him. He is from a downstate city, Muskegon. He is much older than the other children who sometimes stay with us, and he works long hours with my father. He often plays with me, and he is willing to teach me things. On this day he is teaching me to swing the bay.

The rope hangs and drops loosely down into the center of the bay, that open space where we pull the wagons to unload the hay. Bobby and I take turns hauling the rope up into the north mow. We wrap our legs around it, grab it with our dirty hands, and leap off the high-stacked bales. We swing wildly across the bay to the other side, dropping into the softer, lower mow on the south. The trick is to let go at the right time, before the rope starts its pendulum swing back. And because we are swinging from a high place, the rope, even at the lowest point of its arc, is many feet above the floor of the barn. But we never think of falling, only of the wild swinging and the shrieking as we land in the softer, lower hay on the other side.

Even though I am clumsy, the swing through the dusty air is pure addiction. Bobby does it better than I do. Swinging farther and farther out, he whoops and waves. It becomes a dare, him swinging, then me swinging, seeing if I can fly as high, as far as he can before dropping off onto the other side.

Though I am tired and sweating, I grab the rope. “I want to go higher. Higher than you.” I am full of bravado.

“You probably can. You’re lighter.” He grins. For him the competition is no issue.

This time I twist the rope twice around my foot. This time, as I pull the rope up and back tightly onto the mow, he grabs my hips and lifts me higher, so I can leap from a greater distance. Then he lets go, and I lean back and fly. I slip into the air like a fish, swinging fast, the dusty speed cooling my face. But way out, somewhere in the space between one mow and another, leaning too far back into the slim beams of light, my hands come loose, slipping in their own grime and sweat. Because my feet are wrapped in the rope, the trunk of my body falls first, my ankles untangling last. From several feet in the air, I free-fall, landing on the floor of the barn on my back.

I feel no impact. I know where I am. Staring up through the dust motes in the sprawl of light, I experience a sense of floating, as though I have gained the weightlessness of being under water. And then, in that dim way awareness returns when one is stunned, I realize that I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe. My body tightens. I feel pain in my chest so foreign that a streak of panic rushes through me like nothing I have known in my life. *I cannot breathe.*

I know that I have died.

This sense of not being able to inhale is fiery and alien. No other awareness enters my small intellect. I thrash and roll on the floor, then somehow I stand. Without knowing how or where, I am running, trying to scream, unable to scream.

Somewhere between the barn and the house, I do inhale and scream. The screams bring my mother from the clothesline. Through some wild buzz in my body I see her running too, wiping her hands on the faded apron. In her brown saddle shoes, she clomps down the sunny driveway. She moves closer and closer to me in an odd silence that is also a huge noise in my head, covering the sound of her thudding steps. I do

not remember entering her arms. I am simply there, screaming strange, incongruous utterances over and over.

As sense pulls me back into the world, I look down at my chest. My hands are spread across it like wings, as though something in it would break open and escape from my body. I hear my breath at last, rasping but real. I say the words again, more softly, winding down: "I died. I died."

And for every time I say the words, I hear her soft chant, a methodical response to my claim. She is kneeling in the sand on the edge of the barnyard, rocking me, answering over and over, every time. Each time I say "I died," she responds "You're not dead."

I begin to believe her.

But if I am not dead, what was that?

In half-sobbed nonsense, I try to say how we were swinging, how I have fallen. I mutter. My words wind down like a mechanical toy. How can I tell her? I know enough about death to know that breathing is life. If I couldn't breathe, I must have been dead.

"You got the wind knocked out of you." She pulls away and looks into my face.

"The wind knocked out of me?" I am trembling.

"When you fell and hit the barn floor, it knocked all the air out of your chest. It takes a minute for it to come back." She nods.

The wind knocked out of me! Breathing, like wind in a tree, can leave the body and go away and then come back? Is this true? I stare at her for so long that she must look away.

Together, we walk back to the barn. It is still calm and huge, but I am changed. I point tenderly to the rope but do not touch it. I show her where I fell. She explains what happened, the rudiments of a person's lungs. Bobby joins us; he is shy and worried until he realizes that she does not blame him. She says she is glad I am not hurt, asks him not to play

this game with me anymore. She walks us back to the house, where she pours Kool-Aid and tells us to find something more constructive to do. My chest and my back hurt, but I know my body is not seriously hurt. However, there is this other awareness, and I am just old enough to think about it.

The awareness comes to rest in the words, the abrupt phrase *knocked the wind out of you*. I say the phrase over and over. It comes to represent a moment so formative it is forever associated with the thick part of me where breathing is housed. The words and their meaning are linked now in cellular knowing. On that day my mother named for me something that was so like death it negated coming back to the innocence of mere risk. I never again walked the crossbeams or swung on the rope because, with a child's commitment to knowing, I understood that I could die.