

## PHILIP ROSENTHAL

*Farmhouse, 2014*  
enamel on panel, 36 x 48 in



courtesy the artist

## KAT MEADS

### In This Season of Rage and Melancholy Such Irrevocable Acts as These

Opportunities to practice plowing the field weren't easy to come by the summer George was ten or any summer thereafter. Crops already planted, fertilized and cultivated; corn and soybeans too high for a tractor's company; any attempts to improve the year's yield long past. To while away the time, he could mow hedgerows and access paths, but those were sideline activities. Those didn't put him where he wanted to be: smack in the middle of field, nothing between him and sky except the cap on his head.

July through August, his father performed moisture checks before breakfast, always starting with the acre farthest from the house and finishing up with the cut alongside the kitchen. By then, he'd also be awake, watching from the back steps in his pajama bottoms, crunching Cheerios. Ira Scaff's sampling routine never varied. Select a spot between rows. Squat. Dig for a dirt clod. Lift it. Sniff it. Pinch it. A good sign, gummy grit. It meant the soil beneath topsoil hadn't yet been sucked dry. But rarely had he borne witness to his father's gummy thumb. Mostly he saw dirt clods turn to powder, fall, and dust Ira Scaff's brogans.

Finished with farming chores for the day, his father hung up his cap, took a seat at the kitchen table, and tucked into a stack of syrup-heavy pancakes. Didn't hurry through breakfast, didn't hurry doing anything. The problem was too much time, not too little. To keep himself occupied between moisture checks, his father fished the creek or holed up at Kiley's, discussing tractor mechanics, Farm Bureau reports, so and so's risky decision to plant an acre of peanuts. Allowed to tag along, little George Scaff, farmer-in-training, lunched on canned sardines, balanced his butt on bags of dog food, and tried his utmost to look, sound, and behave like the genuine article. By example, if not blood inheritance, he should have learned to tolerate summer's shutdown, how to get through the idle months till harvest. But there wasn't much of a Kiley's crowd to hang with anymore, and the farmers who did still gather preferred to talk about their failing health. He couldn't spend a full day casting for perch on the creek. He didn't enjoy being on water. Land was what he loved.

"Right," Leeta scoffed. "Dirt, the romance."

"True love," he confirmed.

"Uh-huh. I better not catch you trying to ball a dirt clod."