

the remaining miles ahead of us, the long drive back home. But in those few pressurized seconds, I chose to simply lie.

“I don’t gamble.”

The energy left his face as we passed the intersection. His shoulders sagged. He faced forward again.

“I didn’t know,” he said. He rubbed his fingers on his chin, as if reconsidering whatever assessment he’d made of me.

“Well, I need to pull over,” he said, slowing down and pulling to the side of the highway.

Luna stayed seated next to me as he got out and shut the door. He walked around the front of the truck and down a small embankment, and peed in the dirt.

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We soon left the highway. After a series of turns, the asphalt eventually gave way to gravel, and we reached the dirt driveway that led onto Harold’s land. It was a few acres, stretching up to the top of a small hill, with oak trees rising here and there, tall and gnarled, bearing broad patches of lichen on the north-facing sides of their trunks. Post-and-wire fences lined the property on three sides, clarifying the boundary that separated Harold from his neighbors, one of whom had built a large house with a detached garage and a small horse stable. Harold parked the truck and let Luna out on his side. She bounded up the hill and, within seconds, flushed a pheasant from beneath a bush, then rushed onward as if in several directions at once, darting from tree to bush to rock. My legs stiff from the ride, I stepped out of the truck and stretched. Harold made his way to one of the trees and peed again.

“Luna loves it up here,” he shouted over his shoulder. “Some day she’ll get to run around here all day.”

The air was clean and fresh. There was a light, pleasant breeze. It took a few moments for me to realize that what I had first mistaken for outcroppings of rock were actually Harold’s retaining walls. All over the hillside were several haphazard stacks of broken concrete, cobbled together like fragments of castle walls. A few had started to give way, and one had completely fallen over. A large pile of dirt had spilled down the slope, and the pieces of concrete had rolled several feet down the hill.

“It looks silly now,” Harold said, still zipping up as he

came to where I stood. “But come winter, the rain can play some real havoc.”

He pointed out a groove in the hillside, where water flowed down the hill when it rained, and described his plan for holding the land in place. Tall brown grass had grown up around several of the pilings, and the closer I looked the more of them I saw. It was impossible to gauge just how many times Harold had driven up here for no other reason than to bring another load of those fragmented, oil-stained blocks, one truckload at a time, over the course of twenty years.

“Up there,” Harold said, resting one hand on my shoulder and pointing to the top of his portion of the hill. “That’s where I’ll build my house.”

For a moment, I could actually see it: the smooth driveway curving up the slope, rising to a plateau atop the hill; the modest home with broad views of all of Lake County, and even, on clear days, the Sierra foothills; morning sunlight entering the kitchen; a screened patio for enjoying mild summer evenings; a fireplace in the living room for lolling away winter nights in pleasant solitude. A hazy, transparent vision taking shape against the barren sky beyond, like a ghost, but the ghost of one who never had the opportunity to live. There must have come a point, perhaps long ago, when Harold realized he would never succeed in building that house. Perhaps it was a sudden revelation, on some cold morning as he lay alone in his lumpy bed, or a vague awareness slowly taking hold over the course of several years. Perhaps he’d known it all along, from the moment he signed the deed to that land. Still, as we stood in silence, gazing up that hillside, I could see it, just as vivid in my mind as I knew it must be in Harold’s. No matter that what I saw was likely not at all what he saw, that the house in his mind was not at all the house in mine, because what we were looking at was no more than a dream, or no less than. The details might be different, but the dream is the same, like dreaming of God.

Harold exhaled, a breathy, audible sigh, just behind my ear. Then his hand squeezed my shoulder and he said, quietly, “Let’s get to work.”

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I arrived home ahead of Catherine, my body sore, tired, aching. In the bathroom I stripped off my clothes, dusty

## ZACH WESTON

*Northern California Dog, 2014*  
Black and White Film Photography, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST