

## DAN LAVIGNE

*Perch*, 2016  
Oil on Canvas, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## RANDY FOWLER

# The Homecoming

I'm thirty minutes from Louisville when La Grange comes into view, and the tension builds in my shoulders. I don't know why I volunteered to pick him up, but I'm already sorry.

As I pull into the parking lot of the Kentucky State Reformatory, the empty feeling returns. It's different this time; maybe I'm getting ulcers. I back into a slot for compacts. I get out and lean against the front fender as though I don't have a worry in the world, but when the nervousness peaks, I begin to pace. A half hour passes before I decide there is no way I'm ever going to be comfortable, so I get back in the car and turn on the radio. A moment later, I turn it off; I hate country music.

The silence is worse. I wonder if it's as quiet behind the walls as in the parking lot. The brochure that came with the letter announcing Jimmy's release said thousands of inmates are housed around numerous facilities in La Grange, and several times that number get processed through their doors every year; nearly half return within three years. I doubt it's as peaceful inside.

An hour later, I see him. I jump from the car and start to walk in his direction. Standing and waiting for his slow swagger to cover the last fifty feet, I barely recognize my own brother. The hardness I've seen before has crystallized into a hatred that scares me. I don't see my brother when I look into his eyes, only a cold, vacant stare.

He doesn't even look at my fist-bump gesture, sidestepping me instead and walking straight to the car, passing with only a glance.

He hits the front fender with the side of his fist. "What the fuck, J2? You drivin' my damn car?"

"Don't call me that," I plead.

"You been drivin' my damn car the whole two years, four months, and six days I been in this hellhole? You takin' advantage of my perdiciment?"

I don't answer. I've learned to wait and listen—and hope for the best.

"You even got a damn license? Gimme the keys. I drive my own damn car," Jimmy says.

"It's Mama's car," I say, which is true. He just took it when she died, without saying anything to anybody. I don't remind him I was too young to drive then, and the farthest our father ever goes is within walking distance, and that's only to the neighborhood bar and his sister's house. I leave