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Land of Lincoln

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That's where Lyle Wilson went, wearing his Mariners baseball cap. In 1979 he was drinking tequila by a paper shack near Bothell, Washington, when he got killed by a car that didn't stop. The driver drove right into the Reagan revolution, leaving Lyle Wilson, a boy who was no longer human, to escape like smoke wafting out of a stovepipe hat. The afterlife is bare as Illinois: the Land of Lincoln, south of Chicago,

where farms flatten to grey as if a spray of ash has fallen. I'm loathe to drive through, even with the windows rolled up, but I did it once, en route to St. Louis. The towns were not true towns: just Burger Kings, and houses with their doors nailed shut. No wrestling teams were practicing in the dark and windowless gyms. In the Land of Lincoln, everything turns into him: he's a tow truck, a tire store, a bank, a school, a canister of logs, and a national park.

There is no heartland except in the heart: it is a single apple, the red start of two or three trees. It is not Illinois, where the prairie root systems are uprooted. Is it weird to lust after the dead? Sometimes I picture Lyle, luminous in his skin. I wait for his pulse until it beats in my wrist. In American Gothic novels the heroines aren't really afraid of ghosts. No, they're afraid of ironing: the board, the sheets and pillowcases, the flatness, the Midwestern

flatness.