

William J. Klebeck / WHITE RABBITS

sometimes when I'm sitting in the sunshine outside the home rocking back in the wicker rocker I see rabbits crouched still white nibbling on green stalks in the flowerbed that's when I close my eyes I find him near the creek he's fallen to his knees then bent over backwards when I get closer I see only half his proud Polish head is still there I step back jerk my eyes away to the rifle the rifle he just borrowed lying on the caked mud near his right hand I'm changing oil in the Massey when John Kovatch comes into the yard I'd like to borrow that .303 of yours Ernie he says as I crawl out from under the tractor I shake a red handkerchief out of my back pocket wipe my dripping brow Sure is hot Kovatch nods Can't remember the last rain myself heavy crowsfeet border his squinting eyes and there are deep furrows in his tanned forehead You should be wearing a cap John he shrugs About that rifle after spring well I ain't had a gun on my place I know why I'm mixing feed behind the barn that day getting covered in chaff goddamn pigs when I hear shots coming from the coulee across the road but the shots irregularly spaced are more pops than cracks I reckon it's a single-shot .22 probably the Kovatch boy hunting rabbits Raymond Kovatch and his younger sister Patricia spend a lot of time down in the coulee playing hide'n'seek and making forts I imagine and since it's closer to our place than their own they someday come over for a drink of water knowing full well that if Mary's been baking they're liable to get some fresh buns and milk can't say I mind too much seeing little Patricia's pink tongue curl over her lips and her brown eyes widen with her smile when my wife appears on the back step to call them into the kitchen though I do swear I've never seen anyone let alone a boy put back as many buttered rolls as that Raymond I dump

another five-gallon pail of pop oats into the mixer springtime just after the snow is gone good time for hunting rabbits in the coulee the grass and the underbrush are brown autumn leftover and the rabbits are still white their summer jackets not having arrived yet Pepper starts barking making a general fuss in the yard I walk through the barn and see Raymond in his overalls a .22 in one hand running sprinting from the road towards me I've never seen him move this fast and he's yelling something too but I can't make out what it is until he stops in front of me Pat pant in the the his eyes roll his head lolls back I grab his shoulders to keep him standing and shake him What's wrong his eyes focus he points Where I run after him into the coulee and he shows me his sister crouched into a ball in a clump of willows she's wearing a white cotton dress and she's been shot high in the back I kneel down turn her over she's still breathing her eyes are filled with water that doesn't tear she coughs spits blood Oh shit I pick up this slip of a girl and run towards my house run as fast as I can Mary I yell when I get to the road Mary my wife opens the door just as I reach the steps She's been shot I hold the girl out for Mary to see brown eyes staring through glaze Ohmigod my wife steps back She's dead I walk over and put Patricia's body on the kitchen table suddenly Raymond breaks into a wail in the porch I advance towards him but my wife is there first and she brings the head of this boy taller than she to her shoulder It's going to be all right she rubs his neck It was an accident that's what I say later in the day to John Kovatch the Polish farmer who moved from Ontario three years before moved into the old Mac-Gregor place half a mile up the road with his wife two kids Ray was hunting rabbits I'm saying He didn't know Patricia was hiding out there Kovatch turns from the workbench Where is she with a hammer in his hand At my place they're both at my place Kovatch

lets the hammer drop to the dirt floor and rubs a bushy sideburn streaking grease across his cheek then he walks past me without speaking out of his shop I catch up with him She's dead he swings at me but I'm ready for him grab his arm I had to tell you we don't speak more than three times the rest of the summer but now John Kovatch is over to borrow my rifle After spring well I ain't had a gun on my place and something's been after my chickens I put the handkerchief back in my pocket Ain't nothing been after mine Well you're lucky with times this hard I ain't got many chickens to lose I nod C'mon up to the house I'll get the gun we walk in silence across the dry cracked ground to the house I pick the rifle off the rack in the porch and hand it to him Thanks he grips it by the barrel I open a drawer Need some shells Just a few Here I give him the whole box If it's a fox you may need 'em all John puts the box of shells into his jacket pocket Thanks Ernie I'll pick up another box next time I'm in town No hurry I say as he turns to leave Got time for a coffee he shakes his head No no and walks down the steps I better not I got chores I nod again and watch him amble down to the road then I strike off towards the tractor I'm halfway across the yard when I hear the rifle crack hear the echo in the coulee I stop walking he's probably just checking the sights but after springtime I think I better take a look opening my eyes thirty years later I find him in the flowerbed white rabbits nibbling at stalks that grow up between the ribs of his twisted skeleton and if I rock forth I can see worms crawling through the fist-size hole in his skull