Sean Prentiss

Spring Ends in Bangor, PA

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay

—A.E. Housman

This is how I remember it.

December 1987, wet snowflakes hush Pen Argyl's nighttime sidewalks and blanket old duplex homes. At the high school, which leans against a shale hillside, people exit late model American cars—Cavaliers, Escorts, and K-cars—and jog across wet asphalt. With damp hair and snow-stained shoulders, they enter Pen Argyl's aging gymnasium to watch the hometown Green Knights wrestle my high school team, the Bangor Slaters, in the biggest meet of the year for both teams.

One by one the four hundred fans slump down on hardwood pull-out bleachers and yank off jackets, hats, and scarves. Their breath and damp clothes fog the high windows. Once the meet starts, everyone will forget tonight's snow, the uncomfortable seats, even the latest downturn of the economy—another round of layoffs at Alpha Cement. Instead they will focus on the wrestlers, on us, battering terribly against each other as we try to prove, if only for tonight, which town stands as the best.

Two hundred years ago, Bangor and Pen Argyl, each with 6,000 people, rose out of the Slate Belt, a geological band of rock stretching fifteen miles from Pen Argyl, on the west, to Bangor, on the east. Until even fifty years ago, Bangor and Pen Argyl produced much of the slate for the kitchen tables, roofs, pool tables, and chalkboards of America. But with the collapse of the slate industry in the mid 1900s, roofs began to be made of cedar or tar shingles, and blackboards evolved into dry-erase boards. And now our slate-gray barstools get held down by the sons and grandsons of quarry miners who came from New York, New Jersey and Italy to cut the earth. Today, their descendants find little to do but drink because the nearby steel industry moved overseas, the cement plants quit producing, the quarrying moved to Middle America.

In Pen Argyl's gym, wrestlers think nothing of slate, snow, or ailing economics. Instead, two Pen Argyl wrestlers stretch. Bangor's Jon Stonewall sprints back and forth across the laminate wood floor. I spin a jump rope until sweat beads across my forehead and my arms loosen. In the crowd, Mom smiles and waves at me, her blonde brushed to either side of her thin face. Dad, a wide-shouldered, black-haired, former 132-pound Division I collegiate wrestler, evaluates the Pen Argyl squad. He sizes up which Bangor wrestler should win and which should lose. I wonder what he thinks of my match versus John Frable.

Jumping rope, I imagine that later tonight fathers in the stands will speak to their young sons, "Did you see Sean? He was so quick." Later in the week, in humid junior high wrestling rooms, sons will pretend they are me. They'll practice my low-leg single across the mat. I almost laugh as I jump rope because I know better than anyone that fathers won't talk about me after tonight's meet, and sons won't want to be like me. Not many people want to emulate a 103-pound sophomore who has only won six of fourteen matches during his first year on varsity.

And whether I win or lose tonight, fathers will speak about the winner between the two schools' senior heavyweights, Pen Argyl's Rick Sterner and Bangor's Doug Communal. Sterner is undefeated at 13-0. Doug is one of Bangor's best wrestlers ever and sports a 13-1 record. Everyone expects Sterner and Doug to travel through the District and Regional tournaments before reaching State. Everyone understands that Sterner and Doug are the great wrestling hopes of our rock-rich but job-poor towns.

After tonight, sons will long to be Sterner or Doug, depending on which end of the Slate Belt they live on and who wins. I jump rope,

knowing that I, maybe more than anyone else, want to be like Doug. In the hallways at Bangor High, Doug slaps my back and asks, "How's it going, Prentiss?" During practice he says, "Keep your weight over both feet, don't get too far forward." Once a match begins, he shoots lightning-fast singles. He drives wrestlers to the mat and then across the mat until they quit.

And off the mat, I want to be like Doug. I want people to trudge through wet snow so they can watch me wrestle. I hope that if I keep trying to wrestle like Doug—only acting and reacting—that maybe in two years, Bangor fathers will leave barstools to watch me. Maybe they'll whisper my name as I run onto the mat.

In the mid 1980s, one-third of Pennsylvania jobs originated in the manufacturing and industry sectors. Steel, cement, garments, automotive paints, pharmaceuticals, and electricity came from local factories and power plants. Still, rampant unemployment choked our region, and we worried about closed quarries, Bethlehem Steel bankrupting, and Alpha Cement laying people off. During my high school years, Pennsylvania had a worse unemployment rate than thirty other states. Our economy stagnated like the stillwaters of abandoned Slateford Quarry.

During my sophomore year, one in six Bangor kids hungered below the poverty line. On my team, four of thirteen wrestlers were destitute—the 119, 135, 162, and 189-pounders. These four ate staples bought with food stamps at Pysher's Market. Steve Stackhouse wore seconds—sweatshirts made at nearby Majestic garment factory where his mother worked. Brian Sokolowski laced up the same wrestling shoes for three seasons, even as the soles peeled away.

Plump cheerleaders in green and white miniskirts cheer as Pen Argyl's 103-pound wrestler, John Frable, runs onto the mat. I yank off my sweatshirt, remove my glasses, and clip on my headgear. My team forms a funnel of clapping wrestlers. Coach grabs my head and stares into my hazel eyes, "Are you ready? This kid's a fish. Kick his ass." My team slaps my back and butt as I sprint through the gauntlet.

In the center of the mat, I scan the crowd. Without my glasses the spectators resemble the murky waters of the Delaware River, which flows in front of my parent's house. I am no longer able to see Mom, who runs a bed and breakfast out of our house, or Dad, who owns a car dealership just south of Pen Argyl. Though I saw Doug's parents earlier, I can't find them now. Doug's mom, Dawn, slops food in the school cafeteria. Doug's dad, Dave, climbs the metal powerline towers that I've always thought looked like giant metal men. Dave repairs the electrical cables that run from nearby Pennsylvania Power and Light to our homes.

From the stands, Mom yells, "Good luck, Seanie." Coach shouts, "Get us a V." As the ref blows his whistle, Frable rolls from the balls of his feet onto his heels. I dive toward his ankle, hook his right heel with both hands, and drive my shoulder into his shin. Frable falls to the mat, and the ref throws up two fingers for a takedown. Instead of battling to his knees, Frable flounders.

After six minutes, I win 11-1 and hope that my victory is enough for the crowd to begin remembering me like they mythologize Doug. Still, I'm dissatisfied. I didn't practice all week just to wrestle someone who refuses to fight. I feel as if I punched in, did my job, and can now go home. I jog off the mat and step into a crowd of slapping hands. Coach grabs me in a bear hug. "That's what we need." I smile and think that maybe I can fill Doug's shoes once he graduates in May. I pull on my sweats and glasses, grab my jump rope, and wave at Mom and Dad before beginning to jump again. The leather sings.

An hour later as Pen Argyl's 189-pounder pins Steve Stackhouse, Pen Argyl's lead becomes insurmountable, yet neither the Pen Argyl nor Bangor crowd departs. As Stackhouse staggers off the mat, his head low with the practiced look of a practiced loser, our teammate-funnel forms for the thirteenth and final time. Even though three-quarters of our team lost tonight, still we clap and holler as our captain takes the mat. Coach slaps Doug on the butt. "Redeem us!" Though we will lose the meet, a win by Doug will satisfy Bangor fans because then we can lay claim to the best wrestler in the region. Tonight, that needs to be enough.

Clean shaven Doug slaps his calloused hands together and runs

through the gauntlet. In the center of the mat, he waits for Sterner, who jogs onto the mat. Sterner's black, wavy hair droops to his shoulders. Chin stubble makes him look older than eighteen, and with thick arms dilating from his green singlet, Sterner somehow makes Doug appear small. From my vantage point, Doug appears beatable, mortal.

The ref blows his whistle, and four hundred pounds of bone, flesh, and muscle begin to stalk each other. The crowd waits for these boys to collide. Sterner and Doug move tentatively, knowing they carry the weight of the towns on their hips, which is where a wrestler's power originates. In a region of failed natural resources and failed economy, failing schools and functionally illiterate students, so many of us need to feed off of Sterner and Doug's success.

With 0:30 remaining in the third period, Doug leads 8-7. Everyone stands from the rickety bleachers, and, instead of cheering, a silence sweeps through the gym. I lean far off my folding metal chair and steal glances at the clock:

0:22. Sterner and Doug circle the mat. Doug hugs the outer edge.

0:20. Sterner shoots a high-crotch takedown and slinks his arms around Doug's leg.

0:18. Someone in the stands yells, "Come on, Doug."

0:16. Doug throws his bicep across Sterner's face. Sterner's head snaps back, but he holds on. Doug struggles for the edge of the mat. If he reaches the line, he'll be out of bounds and no points will be awarded. Doug wrenches at Sterner's arms, and Sterner's fingers begin to separate.

0:10. Two feet from the boundary, Doug leaps. Sterner strains to hold on as they thunder to the ground.

0:08. The ref throws two fingers into the air. A takedown for Sterner. Doug, down by one, fights to escape.

0:06. Doug climbs to his knees. Peels back Sterner's fingers.

The buzzer wails. Sterner stands and throws his arms into the air. The Pen Argyl fans jump up and down, shaking the bleachers. Their cheers bounce off the rafters. Doug gently slaps the mat and then climbs to his feet. The Bangor contingency falls to their seats, silent. We are amazed that anyone can out-wrestle Doug. His loss proves he's conquerable, and we are so much more so.

Three months after the Pen Argyl and Bangor meet, all that remains of the 1987-88 season is the State tournament. At the District tournament, eleven of my twelve teammates were eliminated. Doug placed second, losing to Sterner in the finals. I was ranked twelfth out of sixteen 103-pounders. But, despite a broken nose, I worked my way into the top five. My fifth place and Doug's second place sent us to the Regional tournament. And even though I surprisingly qualified for Regionals, no one talked of me in reverent tones like they did of Doug, whispering while he wrestled, "Shit, did you see how fast he was? It's like he doesn't even think out there." No one came up to me after my matches and said, "That was the most beautiful six minutes I've seen."

At Regionals, I lost two straight and my season ended. Though disappointed, I was excited to have made it that far. Doug won every match at Regionals until the finals where he again lost to Sterner and again placed second. Still, Doug became the first Bangor wrestler in thirteen years to advance to State.

During those same days, Doug accepted an athletic scholarship to wrestle for NCAA Division I Clarion University, securing his way out of Bangor. The scholarship paved the way for him to become the first member of his family to attend college. And he became the only Bangor wrestler I knew to receive a sports scholarship.

A day after my loss at Regionals, Coach invited me to attend State with him and Doug. Coach wanted me to keep Doug relaxed and wanted me to experience State in preparation for my anticipated appearance there next year and the year after. I accepted the invitation.

I didn't notice it back in 1987, but many of Bangor's male role models were reckless with their teachings. Without realizing it, we hoped we could understand their toughness, persistence, and low-leg singles while disregarding their examples of alcoholism, despondency, and limited job potentials waiting us after high school. Those of us who could imagine something more than factory work hoped for an escape, but we often didn't know to what. We strained to envision a

career other than the assembly line. We had so few examples of success.

With little work to be found, many former Bangor athletes searched ten, twenty, even forty years after high school graduation for something to fill their lives. After days spent in the steel works, too many former high school athletes spent nights hunched over Bangor bars—the Oak and Maple, the Rod and Gun Club, the Pequest. On evenings when Bangor wrestled, these men left their stools and their longnecks of Yuengling lager for gymnasium bleachers. While their children wrestled, Bangor fathers visualized themselves back when they were high school wrestlers. They recreated memories until they won that final match of their careers.

We didn't know it then, but everything our role models taught us would at best give us three years of athletic glory followed by a lifetime of struggling to pay rent. And we learned that alcoholism and unemployment mean the same thing to a former .500 wrestler as it does to a former Regional qualifier.

Late March, Doug, Coach, and I travel two hours south to Hershey Arena for the State tournament. Since only coaches and wrestlers are allowed at mat level, I sit in the bleachers as Doug wrestles. I stare at the eight mats lined in rows of four and envision myself wrestling there next year.

Day one, Doug loses one of his three matches. Doug appears confused when the ref raises the other wrestler's hand. Coach hugs Doug and whispers in his ear before Doug stumbles into the locker room. I so badly want to know what Coach whispers.

I leave the bleachers and find Doug slumped on a splintered wooden bench. His singlet straps dangle from his waist. "How are you?" I ask.

"I wrestled like crap." His words come between deep breaths.

"You wrestled great."

"I should've practiced more." Doug wipes sweat off his angular face and runs his fingers through his short brown hair.

"Can I do anything?" I want to comfort Doug like Coach did.

"No." Doug's fingers twiddle in his singlet straps. "No, thanks though." Doug stares at the cool cement floor. "Sean, you ever been to a college meet?"

"A few. Lehigh versus East Stroudsburg and a couple others."

"Were the wrestlers better than here?"

"Not as good as you."

"Damn, I thought I'd beat him."

"You can still place third."

"Yeah, third."

Day two begins with Doug losing his first match by a point. Afterward, Doug and I study the heavyweight brackets taped to a wall. Doug traces his finger from loss to win to win to loss to the fifth place bracket. Doug has one match remaining in his high school career. He finds his name, and below it Rick Sterner. Doug whispers, "I've got him."

And though Doug has lost three in a row to Sterner, I say, "Yeah," and all I feel is faith.

For the 179 seniors who graduated from Bangor High in 1990, almost all that beckoned was menial jobs. I was one of fifty-five who attended college and one of about twenty who received a degree after four years. Because both my parents had attended college and Dad graduated, at least I had an example to follow.

Most of the other 119 drifted off to places like Bethlehem Steel, once the world's largest steel producer. But by the late '80s, Bethlehem Steel rusted beside Route 22. In 1988 and '89, the mills began shutting down as the industry moved to China and Korea. By 1995, after 140 years of producing, the steel works closed, sending thousands to unemployment lines. When the checks ran out, hundreds of Bangorites sought assistance at welfare offices.

Ten minutes south of Bangor, cement factories, like Alpha, coughed gray dust onto lawns. Everyone hated the grit until the cement industry followed Bethlehem Steel toward bankruptcy, and then most everyone hated that their underwear and undershirts breezed white on clotheslines.

Majestic Garments sewed cheap sweatshirts in windowless brick buildings in South Bangor. Women, including my aunt and Miss Stackhouse, streamed into work in the mornings. All day the seamstresses stared at their fingers because there was no view of

trees.

Binney and Smith, the world's largest producer of crayons (Crayola), opened a factory beside cornfields in nearby Wind Gap. A former lover of mine, Mary, got a job after dropping out of college her freshman year. After second shift, she came home reeking of chemicals and cheap wax. I loved her smell.

On Bangor back roads, gravel pits mushroomed. Front-end loaders devoured rock. Fifteen years after graduation, Mom tells me that she sees my best high school friend, Shawn, driving a gravel truck. He and I haven't spoken in five years. Last I heard, he had lost his house in a divorce.

A mile east of my parent's home, Hoffman la Roche's four-story building rose tan and tall. From various pipes, Roach belched pharmaceutical waste into the air and water. Each morning, at 5:30, cars streamed by Mom and Dad's house. Some headed home from the graveyard, others traveled to first shift. My friend, Jeff, joined his father at Roach after Jeff got a girl pregnant his freshman year of college.

Ten minutes north of my parents' home, Metropolitan Edison Power Plant's long, thin, brick exhaust towers stretched above the deciduous trees. Mounds of coal lay beside graffitied railroad cars. Old soot-gray buildings stood next to the calm Delaware.

And five miles south of home, Pennsylvania Power and Light swallowed coal and converted it into electricity. From two wide and low cooling towers, PP&L released steam and smoke into the sky—long fingers of white-gray broken only by the breeze. Five days a week, Doug's dad and other Bangor fathers traveled there for work. Doug's dad climbed those tall metal powerline towers, and from that vantage, Dave could see all of Bangor, all of our industry.

Besides Jeff, Mary, and Shawn, many of my high school friends remain in Bangor. Jason orders car parts for a local car dealer. Jamie, Joe, and Matt pump gas and grow high on cancerous fumes. Ray, a former wrestler, did time after being shot while trying to rob a gas station. Danny and Scott, two other former wrestlers, joined the Army and Navy. Others disappeared into factories. I haven't heard from them since. I haven't looked, either.

From the stands at Hershey Arena I watch as Doug and Sterner prepare to wrestle their last high school matches. The first thirty seconds the clock scarcely moves as Sterner attempts a headlock. "Sprawl, sprawl, sprawl," I holler as Sterner laces his thick arms around Doug's head and arm. Sterner throws his hips into Doug's hips. I wait for Doug to be tossed through air.

But Doug slips from Sterner's grasp, and as Doug slides to the mat, he pulls Sterner down. The ref raises two fingers, two points for Doug. The rest of the first two periods, time surges. The ref throws up two fingers for Doug for a takedown, two for Sterner for a reversal, two more for Sterner for a takedown, one for Doug for an escape, two for Sterner for a takedown, two for Doug for a reversal. Fifteen seconds remain in the third period. Doug leads by one. Time moves like how the Delaware floats in front of my house, languidly.

0:10. Sterner shoots a high crotch. Doug sprawls and regains his feet.

0:07. Sterner shoots again. Doug sweeps to the side.

0:03. Sterner shots a single. Without thought, Doug sprawls.

0:01. The buzzer blasts.

Sterner slumps to the mat. His hands cover his eyes, steeling himself. Doug smiles, his shoulders stretch backward, his chest juts out, his arms rise. I jump from my seat and revel being a Bangor Slater. Doug now reigns as the fifth best wrestler in the great state of Pennsylvania. He is finished. He has cemented his legacy.

After Doug's fifth place finish at State, he and I take seven weeks off to heal my broken nose and his aches and pains from wrestling nearly forty matches. During my time away from the mat, I think about wanting to reach State before I graduate. I'll need to wrestle like Doug and refine my moves until they flow without thought.

I assume Doug thinks about August when he will enroll at Clarion because he approaches me in the hallway of Bangor High one May day, "Hey, Sean, want to practice tomorrow?"

Honored, I stutter, "Yeah."

"Great, I'll see you in the wrestling room." I walk down the hall smiling.

The next day, Friday, May 19, 1988, Doug and I return home to

the padded floors and walls of Bangor's basement practice room one hundred and eighty-seven days before next season begins. A breeze wafts through the propped door almost suppressing the reek of sweat that seasonally drips from the maroon padded walls. Doug and I sit on the mat and tie our wrestling shoes. "So, you gonna wrestle me today?" I jokingly ask Doug as I finish tying a double knot.

"Not after how well you wrestled at Districts. You'd kick my ass." He grins.

I pop to my feet and crouch in a wrestler's stance in the middle of the mat. "Quit ducking me. You know I can take you. I'll finish what Sterner couldn't."

Doug climbs into his wrestling stance, the scabs of battle brittle on his freshly shaved face. "That's right, what Sterner couldn't," I repeat. Doug smiles and moves toward me, his arms reaching for my wrists. I back away and grow nervous. Still, I prod, "This is your last chance to duck out. I won't tell anyone you're chicken."

"You won't? Promise?" Doug smirks, and, as he finishes speaking, he explodes toward me. Most wrestlers telegraph moves with a twitch of the hips; Doug shows nothing. I try to sprawl, but Doug's fingers clamp around the back of my left knee, tearing it from the ground.

The smartest thing to do is become motionless and hope Doug carries me tenderly to the mat. But I've been trained to fight, so I wrench at his grip. Caught off guard, Doug's fingers begin to separate. He recovers and jams his head into my hip. As I fall to the padding, Doug pitches his two hundred pounds on top of me. His sweat burns my nostrils. The mat tears into my cheek. My hair jerks between the padding and Doug. I try to push Doug off, but my arms remain pinned at my side. A wave of claustrophobia sweeps through me. Right before I yell for Doug to get off, he springs to his feet. "Hope I didn't hurt you." He holds out a hand.

I stumble to my feet and shake my head groggily. "Hurt me? Not a chance. And don't worry, I won't tell anyone I just whooped you." For the next hour and a half, Doug and I practice side by side, rehearsing phantom fireman-carries, low-leg singles, and high-crotches. I study Doug, watch how he finds the space where the body acts without thought. He doesn't notice me staring, or me imitating his moves. Soon Doug and I glisten with sweat.

Each day my team trained repetitively, as if we were being prepared to one day run a drill or a solder. Coach shouted, "Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot," as we practiced high-crotches. We obeyed and put our bodies on the line. I hyper-extended an elbow, broke my nose and a few fingers, and loosened my right shoulder enough that for half a decade it was hard to write for longer than ten minutes. When I briefly wrestled in college, athletic trainers used electrical stimulation to relax my back spasms.

The rest of the team was the same. Vomiting on the mat, shoulder dislocations, stitches, and broken bones occurred seasonally. Taped and bandaged, we resembled many of our fathers and mothers who returned from work with sore backs and crushed fingers from the press machines and the pneumatic nail guns. I was lucky because my parents last worked in the factories in their teens. Still, my father can't sit cross-legged because of an old wrestling injury.

Outside the wrestling room, the sky softens with the red stains of dusk. It's nearly dinnertime, so Doug and I end practice. We pull on sneakers and sweatshirts and stroll to our cars, the only two in the parking lot.

Doug crams his 6'2" body into his 1980 Mercury Lynx. The door groans as Doug yanks it closed. His four-cylinder engine sputters to a start. I climb into my 1971 Ford Torino station wagon. With a turn of the key, the 429 cubic-inch engine roars to life. Doug leans an arm on the top of his door and shouts through the open driver-side window, "Let's practice Monday."

"Sounds great." I'm still amazed Doug, my hero, wants to practice with me.

"Hey, and I'm having a party tonight. Come."

"What time?" I ask.

"Nine. My parents went to Lake Wallenpallpack. You know where I live?"

"Yeah."

"Wanna race? You know this baby blue Lynx can beat that shitty wagon of yours." Doug runs his hand along the faded paint below

the driver side window. "Plus, I need paybacks for that whooping you gave me today." Doug and I smile, and then Doug slams the gas pedal. His Lynx crawls across the parking lot. I wait for Doug to get a substantial lead before I step on the gas pedal. My tires gyrate, spewing smoke. My wagon rumbles forward and surges past Doug's Lynx. I wave and watch in my rearview mirror Doug and his Lynx disappear.

On empty back roads, I race past heifers chewing cud in muddy fields and old farm houses in need of paint jobs and new porches. In back fields, barns lean away from the wind. In a fifteen years, at the time of the writing of this essay, those barns will crash to the ground and soil will blow over the fallen red-painted boards. In fifty years, grass will cover the mounds of wood. In a hundred, no one will remember that the barns ever stood, and the piles of decayed wood will resemble giant, freshly dug graves.

At home, I eat dinner and do not go to Doug's party because I haven't gone to any high school parties yet. I'm nervous about hanging out with seniors, plus I don't have any reason to drink; I haven't yet felt loss or tasted failure. The worst pain I've ever felt was losing at Regionals two months ago. Afterward I cried.

I go to bed with dreams of more spring matches against Doug, all of which I'll happily lose. I dream of becoming one of the best wrestlers in Pennsylvania. I go to State, win my final match, and cement my legacy. I earn an athletic scholarship to a far away school. I follow Doug and use wrestling as a ticket out of Bangor. I dream as May 19 bleeds into May 20.

Fifteen years after my sophomore season, a mentor and I speak about my wrestling career. A few days later she hands me James Wright's poem "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." I sit in my office at the University of Idaho, where I teach, and read stanzas about a football season beginning in a small Ohio town. Locals drink long-neck beers, and the blast furnace workers dream of heroes. Tired women cling to their men. While reading the final lines, visions of my wrestling career spring to mind:

> All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home...
> their sons grow suicidally beautiful...
> and gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

Just like that, Martins Ferry becomes Bangor. We gazed into the stands at our fathers. Our mothers clung to our fathers' arms and searched the rafters of the gym for all that they had lost and all that they had been promised but never received. And we, we wrestled suicidally against each other.

May 20, 1988, I wake confused. In the first light of dawn Mom and Dad stand at the foot of my bed. One of them must have called, dragging me from slumber. I sit up. Dad speaks in a steel voice, "Doug died last night in a drunk driving accident."

I've seen the old buried in dark Pennsylvania loam, but I know nothing of burying my peers, my heroes. I climb from bed, pull on a pair of pants, and walk past Dad. He was a great high school wrestler who used wrestling as his way to escape his hometown on rural Long Island. Wrestling offered him a college scholarship and a degree. From there he started his car business.

I move past Mom's slumped shoulders, her gentle hand rubs my back. "Okay," I say as if this word can somehow protect me from all the thoughts that will come. I head out the screen door, which slams behind me, a slap of wood against metal, and walk beside my Torino. How did Doug, his mind drunk and his body acting without thought, get his Lynx to gather enough speed to kill? My fingers run the long length of my Torino, feeling the smoothness of paint, then I skirt the edge of the cornfield growing behind my house. Stalks break from the May soil. In two months they will tower over me. In four months, farmers will scythe the brittle growth to the ground. All across the field, the reek of manure hovers in the air. Everything smells dishonestly of spring.

The field abuts the tranquil Delaware, but around the bend Foul Rift churns, and the river dives over and around boulders as it surges south one hundred and seventy miles before escaping into the Atlantic. I sit on the grass beside yellow honeysuckles, stare at the river, and sob. Maybe Doug's Lynx hit a tree or a bridge abutment or flipped across a cornfield. Maybe he blew a tire and crashed into a

shallow creek. Later, I read the truth—Doug, drunk, leaves his party. A cop pulls behind Doug, and the cop turns on his lights. Doug gathers speed, tries to run, takes a corner too fast. His Lynx slides into the other lane, hits an oncoming car fender to fender. The Lynx flips and flips and flips, and in my mind it never stops flipping. The Lynx bursts into flames. Newspapers write that Doug was partially ejected and died instantly. A week later, a friend, a paramedic, tells me about screams. Fifteen years later, I still see the Lynx rolling down asphalt. I still hear those screams.

I think about how I was the last person to wrestle Doug, to lose to him. It becomes the first loss I've ever been glad about. Sitting and crying beside gently moving water, I don't know that during the next two years of high school, I will never qualify for State. I will never follow Doug there. But I begin to realize that Doug has been added to the list of people who thought they could escape Bangor but never did. He never made it to Clarion. I begin to realize what that means. Two years later I abandon Bangor to wrestle half a season at a small Colorado college. By January, I quit the team, but I still graduate three years later. Once I went off to college, I never moved back to Bangor. I left Jeff and Mary and Shawn rusting in factories. I left Doug sleeping beneath a tombstone made of tan marble quarried in Indiana. His stone, with a wrestler etched into it, sits on the slant of a mowed hill.

Fifteen years later, when I stand at his grave, caressing cold rock, thousands of acres of cornfields flow downward three miles to my parent's house, to the placid Delaware, to PP&L. Between the grave and the river, corn quavers in a breeze, and it is a sea, a sea, a sea of green with corn running all neatly rowed like the graves surrounding me.

Looming over that verdantness are those huge metal towers heft powerlines from PP&L to our homes. These steel shadow-casters have always reminded me of one hundred foot tall wrestlers with broad chests and narrow waists, but no heads and an empty space where their hearts should rest. And in those giant metal men, I see everyone from my wrestling team—Sokolowski and Stackhouse and Doug and me—athletes trained to fight but not to think. The tower-men stride next to Doug's cemetery and down the hill. I trace the cables and the towers to PP&L, five miles away, which gulps in Delaware riverwater to cool turbines and engines.

Beside the power plant, smokestacks and massive cooling towers rise above the landscape. They rise above the gigantic tower-men and seemingly rise even above our rolling Kittatinny Mountains. These stacks and towers cough white fingers of steam and smoke into a perfectly blue spring Pennsylvania sky.

Inside the windowless power plant, former classmates of mine, former wrestlers, convert coal into electricity and long to return to the days when they, when we, galloped terribly against each other.

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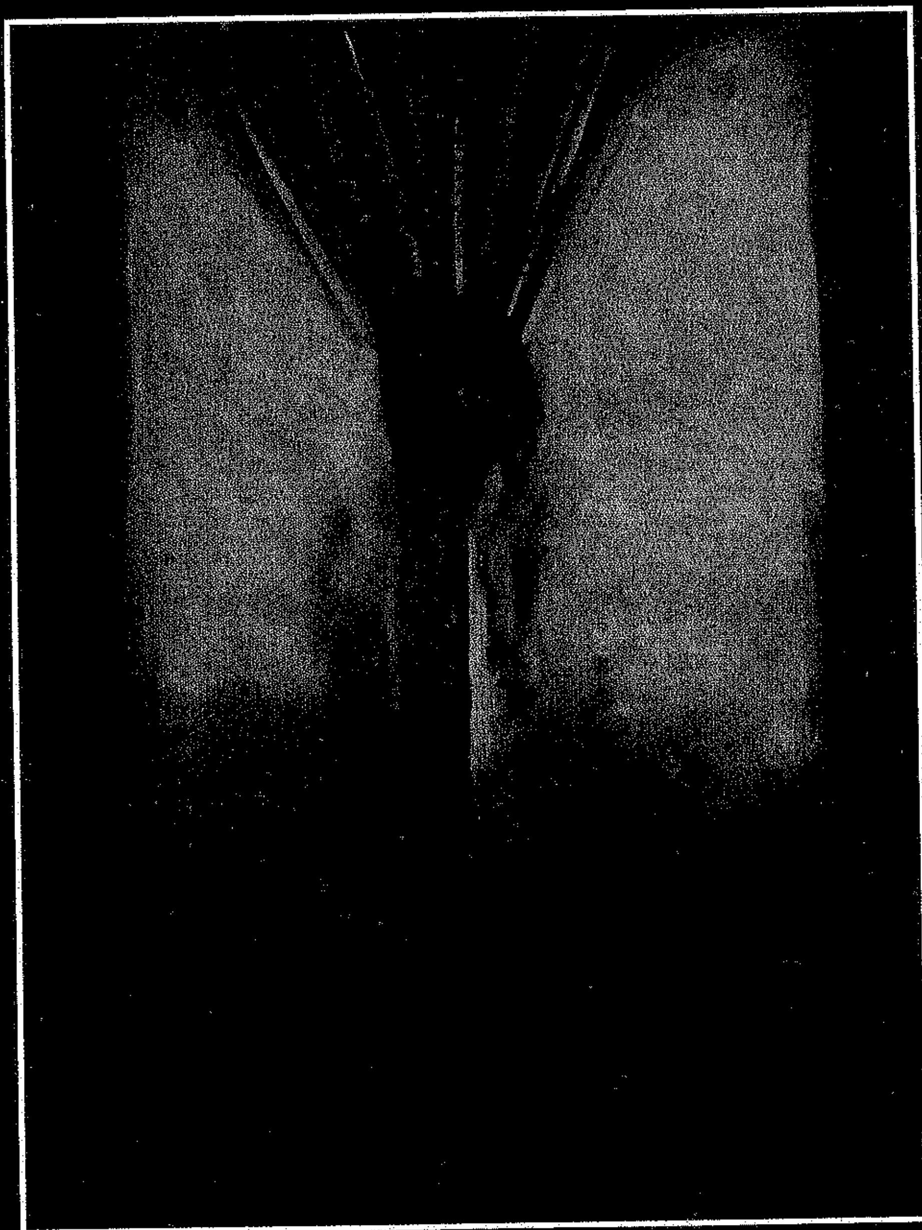

Interview with Bret Anthony Johnston