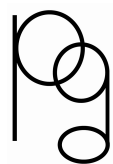


BEFORE I MOVED
TO NEVADA



JAMES IREPELL



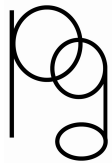
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PUBLISHING GENIUS
2200 Maryland Ave C1
Baltimore, MD 21218

PG TPC 016
Cover drawing by Christy Call
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James Iredell grew up on California's Central Coast, near Monterey. Before moving to Nevada, he engaged in varying acts of infantile debauchery. Since moving from Nevada, he has published the chapbooks *When I Moved to Nevada* (The Greying Ghost Press) and *Atlanta* (Paper Hero Press).

His writing also appears in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Descant*, *The Literary Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, *elimaë*, and many others. *Before I Moved to Nevada* is his *Star Wars: A New Hope*, in terms of these other chapbooks, which together make a novel entitled *Prose*.

It was me, Sean, Ike, and Randy in Reno for the first time. The heat emanated from the desert floor, like we stood atop an enormous range. Because Sean was like a painting of a person—all emotion, and nothing to say—Kevin Healy picked on him, saying his nipples were sausage slices pasted to his chest, and Kevin called him Nate, for its alliterative qualities. Kevin had the creativity of a spider. Because Sean carried this look—his eyes were so dark, like black holes, they had to absorb everything—I liked him. The whorehouse—this place named after horses, and famous for its camp—swam in liquid lit blue, the interior decorated with cheap aquariums. A waste, all that water on display in a land so much devoid of it. The hookers were taken by Sean’s red hair and galactic Filipino eyes. He was the kind of guy who’d say thank you to these women. Nothing happened, except for the fish, and back outside the sun seemed much brighter, and the Earth dryer and still.

BEFORE I MOVED TO NEVADA
James Iredell

Black T-shirts heaped on the cabin's couch and the TV rumbled volcanoes. No one cared about motorcycles—choppers, as they say. The crash, a pack of dogs that had hunted the house down and taken out a measly corner, clamored outside where the air was woodfire smoke. Tuna cans—shining stars—spread across the dark driveway. The bear was the size of a VW, licking up one of those star's remnants. I lit a fire on the asphalt, a supernova. I sat alone, folding black T-shirts. The wind rattled the power lines, which ticked like a refrigerator's compressor, or a car's cooling engine. The heat and smoke were solar flares to my eyes.

The hike had taken us over a thousand feet vertical. My legs were custard. My shirt had sponged all my sweat, and hung heavy from my shoulders. I felt like but smelled worse than a dessert. The creek ran cold and deep. We wanted to dive into the brown water and dunk our heads, but instead we drove into Nevada and to Harrah's. The diner glittered like the marquee at a cheap matinee. Our waitress had cigarette lungs, like me, and we got along. Her skin resembled the mountain granite. We ate eggs and meats at 4 PM, with Budweiser. Jon was at home. I would have to leave. Eventually, Nevada would become a memory. I would hold it in my pockets like a last chip, the remainder of winnings I'd long ago thrown back in on a bet. Now I dream about the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Sometimes I wake and I've already started to dress before I realize that I won't go skiing, that Sarah still breathes soft under the covers, that outside the air hangs thick with humidity, and just South gators skim the riverbeds.

I'm grateful to the editors of the following magazines, where pieces from this book have been published (sometimes in slightly different form): *The Angler*, *Dogzplot*, *Lamination Colony*, *NANO Fiction*, *Storyscape*, and *Willows Wept Review*.

The trail ran and the stream crazed down the slope and pushed the topsoil with it, exposing the orange and gray of the granite. We would come off the mountain to Reno with sweat and dust along our calves, caked to our socks. We would not reach the summit. The waterfalls eluded us. We tired out and waterlogged. We paused in the shade of aspens and sucked deep on the bottles we'd hauled with us. Below, the meadow spread out like a blanket. The lake was a mirror for the sky, the stream from a jet airliner slicing the smooth surface. The snow flowers had inched free of the pine floor and exploded bright red at our feet.

The Black Creek Canyon trail had been etched into the mountain by the gouging tires of dirt bikes. Oil hung in the atmosphere. The snowmelt charged across granite. Jon and me sucked at the air as if it was one gigantic popsicle, and we couldn't get enough of its sugar at once. The sky went green in the overhanging pine. My vision turned yellow with the soil. Below, along The Lake shore, glints of sun shot like stars off the chrome of bumpers, off the windshields.

“Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.”

—from “Digging” by Seamus Heaney

Tahoe City slid past the windows down Highway 89, along The Lake's west shore. We passed Granlibakken, and near Homewood we found the turn-off from the freeway, which wound between pines and crossed a stream, white with rapids in the shade. The asphalt ended and dust clouded up behind the truck. The trail rose from the road and disappeared into the mountains. The stream went deep in a meadow, and trout wiggled after mosquitoes. The water poured from the ten-thousand-foot snowpack. Jon geared his binoculars, a camera swinging from his neck, a water bottle drooping under his hairy knuckles. I stretched and breathed deep, the wheeze of cigarette lungs stealing out of me. I had twenty-two years already. Far above us loomed waterfalls: the trail's end. I would heave like a locomotive to the tree line.

We'd gone to the cabin with our fathers, who'd enrolled us in YMCA Indian Guides. This organization's goals were in the right place, if not mixed up. Y-Indian Guides Motto: "Pals Forever"—a direct translation of a native slogan. Y-Indian Guides Aims, #5: "To love my neighbor as myself"—the natives incorporated this after they gave up their heathen ways and were again born, accepting Jesus as their Savior. After dinner, Kevin Healy's dad, Jim, said he was going to the North Shore to play. The Unwritten Y-Indian Guides Aims #7: Thou shalt gamble when within 20 miles of Nevada. Jim stumbled in 8 AM next morning. His breath was what whites' Hollywood has Indians call "firewater."

The bear in the neighbors' kitchen was a black bear. Perhaps a brown cabin kitchen bear among these snowy mountains. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen pushed in the kitchen door. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen seemed to know that no one lived there. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen rooted through the drawers. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen in the open refrigerator's light. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen found the oat and cornmeal. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen wore butter on its face. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen left a stinky gift on the deck. The bear in the neighbors' kitchen trundled down the driveway. I could've called the neighbor about the bear in their kitchen. The neighbors have kitchens in houses—not mountain cabins—where they live year-round, where there is no snow, and no bears. I could've chased away the bear in the neighbors' kitchen. I could've been the bear in the neighbors' kitchen. I could've trapped the kitchen bear for the neighbors. My black kitchen hair. My bear.

We sat deep in the porch as the sky lit with streaks: meteorites thundering through the atmosphere. A waft of Old Spice drifted past, another of clean laundry. The breeze blew hot, rising from the valley's vines after a summer day drenched with sun, rustling hairs on our legs. A cluster broke apart and scattered and faded. Jackrabbits darted between the rows of Zinfandel. Someone sleeping rolled, the trailer a-shudder. Coyotes yelped. Tomorrow would bring turkey buzzards.

At the cabin, Jon pissed and I leafed the books for trails. The deer's eyes followed Jon down the hallway. Jon said, "That's a little deer your granddaddy shot." "How old is this cabin?" said Jon. I said, "Here's a picture of me sledging. That's my brother and sister. Here's my grandparents in their Model A." Whiskey lined the cart of liquor below the tiny deer's head. I thought about a drink and thought about a drink and thought about a drink and thought about a drink.

Grandpa heaved me onto the bank, yelled me toward the entrance. I pawed my way and found a shovel, then the front door. Inside the deer's head gleamed back in the shadows. Grandpa's moustache had caked with icicles. He had flown during WWII. He had an overbite. When he died, his teeth were what I noticed most.

We met at the football field, and the sun was how it gets in California, which is to say, bright and hot. He wanted to smoke a joint, so Randy, me, and this guy Ike—"like the soul singer, you know"—shuffled off for a Nissan glinting in the parking lot. Afterwards we lazed back into the high school smelling like Mexico and wishing that was where we were. Ike would end up dumping my sister, and I would want to beat him like any guy named Ike deserves to be pummeled. Eventually, though, I forgot about it. Until now.

The cops said, “Step out of the car.” We had parked at the Slough, this place that could’ve been prehistoric, for its waters and fogged-in eucalypti, pelicans dive-bombing for sardines, otters smacking up abalone on their little bellies. We seesawed the dock and the waves rocked out below the sky and our descent into the water was so slow that millennia lived by and our shoes wouldn’t even get soaked. They said we couldn’t drive home. Afterwards, Ike felt a joint tucked into a shirt pocket, unfound during the pat-down, and one end of it bound for the Nissan’s cigarette lighter. Beyond the trees the power plant glowed red, and made the fog do the same. I knew in the future—within the hour—I’d drive toward the light, and past it.

The Truckee River leaks out of Tahoe and winds north at the crest of the Sierra. It descends east and carves into the Truckee Meadows, into Pyramid Lake, then evaporates and is reborn in clouds. Truckee-the-town is named after Truckee-the-river, which is named after Truckee-the-Washoe, a name that was not a name at all but probably Washoe for “hello”. North of Truckee, half-froze in winter: Donner Lake. 1847: thirty-five dead. Grandpa said “cannibalism.” My nine-year-old ears soaked up the tale, sponge-like, sitting on the porch overlooking the mule ears, a sunset pinking Squaw Peak, barbecued chicken blackening my fingers.

My first trip to the cabin, with Grandpa, the snow caked on the power lines above the highway, the radio squelched, and we putzed forward, the tire chains rattling like metallic bones. Grandpa dug up the logs he'd split the summer before and stacked between the pines. We kept the fire glowing, but the heat swept up the chimney. We swaddled ourselves in blankets and blew rings with our breath. Uncle Dave took the prime rib to Alpine Meadows, where their generator kept the kitchen running. Dave was an old Hippie. His hair ran down to his ass. His favorite word was *man*. He'd say, "Aw, man," to everything, even in place of *Peace Be With You* after the Our Father. When the chef came in to work, and found Dave in his kitchen, he said, "Get out of my kitchen, Hippie." Uncle Dave said, "Aw man, I've got to check my prime rib." The chef said, "Like hell you do."

At Zmudowski State Beach the waves crested up and we paddled them in. The football shuttled from fingertips. Driving away, Ben's foot was heavy as a locomotive—which was how we steamed through the artichoke fields, weaving around corners, disregarding the softness of our flesh jiggling in the truck cab. When we launched from the burm into the green thistles, and jostled and blinked, we'd landed safely, the engine still ticking. We floored out of the crop, mud spitting behind us. That night it rained. We guzzled Zimas at a condo in Salinas. Leaving, in the same pickup, Ben again gave it too much gas. His father raced the track in Watsonville, and Ben sold parts at Pettigrew and Folletta after school, and this experience gave him the impression of control. We 360ed, came out facing the way we'd started. Ben had a moustache at fourteen. We called him "Dover," and also "Chewy," for all the hair. In his Xmas card he's smiling, bald, with his wife and four daughters. Three of them are triplets.

The fog comes like a cat—perhaps a bear—as it stalks the coast and harbor, pounces artichoke fields, sinks its claws into the browned hillsides, and the fog’s teeth settles in bones like a cold stalk of broccoli, like the earth in which it grows, sunless black, the recesses of space, above the moon, past the atmospheric edge, far beyond this Pacific cloud cover, and below water the sharks missile-cruise the forested kelp for seals, for the succulent fat beneath their skin, and between the shark jaws, in place of teeth, flex rusty bear traps, and if the sharks could, and you could maneuver it, they would let you gnaw yourself free and swim a strawberry trail to shore for the lettuce ripening in the valley, and the strawberries reddening in the hills, because fog is also good for this.

Kanuwapi was a Washoe who scavenged other families’ trash. Nights, he ran his fingers through the chief’s daughter’s black strands. The chief dictated: Kanuwapi had to prove his worth. Kanuwapi wandered north and found a bear like a white-painted farmhouse. Kanuwapi’s arrows were mosquitoes on the bear’s fur, until the Evil One whispered for Kanuwapi to shoot into the bear’s nostrils. When the bear roared and chased, Kanuwapi led him south, to the mountains, to the swamp and quicksands, where the Washoe lived. The bear mired his legs with death. Storms covered him, and everything, with ice and snow. When the snow melted, where the swamp had been, there sat The Lake, and the Washoe named it “Tahoe.”

I pawed around the shelves and end tables at the cabin, scouring them for books. I eyed my way through all the Stephen King, with the cats and babies coming back from the dead, and cars that wouldn't ever break down. I couldn't get past the first page of anything written by this guy named Michener. I found a blue book, the title hardly legible, scrawled in gold script: *The Tales of Tahoe*. There was a Washoe Indian Chief who built fires on the concrete floors of cold offices, who ate way too many peanuts. He was a cartoon with a funny accent and handed-down white men's clothing. He said that The Lake was once a great swamp filled with quicksand. There was a polar bear and an Indian brave. There was a love story. I carried the book home, tucked into my backpack all the ride in Granny's Olds. I found a tale about raccoons, another about Big Chief. I found this version of The Lake, one that has been replaced with Taco Bell. I like the Fire Sauce.

The party was in Simonville, an apt name, considering someone named Simon once herded cattle over the land, and it is now a gathering of exactly eight trailers, making a total of thirty-two-and-a-half inhabitants. Randy gazed starward, into the sky's kaleidoscope. A burn barrel burned our backs. "Dean Hernandez" and "cops" drifted in from a pair of lips. Me and Dean collided daily on a football field. The steroids made him grunt and scream at, and punch into, his teammates. He was a cop target for the coke he pinched into tiny sacks. Randy and me leapt over the fence where my back met a mass of stinging nettle. Dean wasn't even at that party. I kicked down the fence instead of clambering back over. We continued drinking Crazyhorse.

The sign—Pedestrian Xing—beamed out the Pontiac’s window, the 4 x 4 that once held it in the Earth a backslash. The night extinguished the lights in the fog. Dave was our left guard, though he could’ve been a running back, for his svelte size and his speed. Dave was also the first guy to have smacked my sister’s lips with his own. When the headlights of another car shone down Tustin Road, our speedometer jumped past sixty. We took the curve tighter than a fat lady’s sock. The row of mailboxes sent the sign through the windshield at fifty miles per. Afterwards, Dave guided us home, leaning out the driver’s window. Next day, he remembered nothing—not me, my sister, or the sign.

We walked to the hotel, down Winding Creek, up Squaw Valley Road, then along Squaw Creek. We’d slung towels over our shoulders, my brother’s summer-browned. The building was something the bad guys would build in a science fiction film—all tinted glass and black steel—nestled among pines and peaks scarped from snow. The employees’ dark slacks and creamy jackets made them cop-like. The pool jutted and curved in angles, and a tiny waterfall strung into a grotto. All the other kids—those actually staying at the hotel—cheated, peeking through wrinkled lids during Marco Polo. I found a squirmy red-head in my headlock. He kicked and wailed, and all the walk home the asphalt stung our feet.

The summer they began construction on the Resort at Squaw Creek the walls shuddered with each explosion. Grandpa said they used dynamite to fell the trees. A chopper choppered them out somewhere where I'm sure they were cut up and used to build the exact hotel they had died for. In this sense, they never left. But the creek silted up. There was no horseback riding that summer. Granny baked the fiesta casserole and it tasted the same as always.

We posted up in this cabin, which reminded me of my own family's, except this was in a wash in Arroyo Seco, instead of in Squaw Valley, and this one had no deer's head on the wall, and wasn't surrounded by pines, but instead had been hemmed in by coast oaks. Other than that it was the same. This place gave birth to four-wheelers and dirt bikes. They spit out of the back shed in zippers of noise. Kevin Healy dealt rummy, this six-foot-seven, three-hundred-pounder, our left tackle, a scotch drinker. After high school he pissed and puked away a ride on San Jose State's team. His father had drank and gambled all their lives and card games flicked from Kevin's fingers like cigarette butts. We swam in the creek and jabbed crawdads with spears of oak. Back in Salinas, before the season, we went to the gym where Kevin spotted, while I pressed for air. "Come on," Kevin said, his face sweat-pocked and upside-down, a frown, which was actually a smile. "Push," he urged, "you can make it."

We'd planned the party for a week, our last game on our field. Our cars herded onto the track. Benches smashed themselves to pieces and burned in the aluminum garbage cans. The desiccated scoreboard flag flew atop an Impala that doughnuttled the fifty-yard line. Things had gotten—as they say—out of control. When the janitors' ATV headlights bumped in like a gang of wild cyclopes, I dove into Randy's Toyota. On the way out Randy said, "Who's driving your car?" We found a hill overlooking the field. I bet stars dotted the sky, but we couldn't see them beyond the fog that topped the valley, like a lid on a pot. Even from this distance I could see my truck, spotlighted by the Sheriff. Next morning my dad's eyebrows peaked in a way only a father's can. "Out of bed, sonny boy," he said. "Time to clean up."

Once me, Fredo, Moses, and people I can't remember, went to Kings Beach for the Fourth of July. That morning I had gobbled up an eighth of psilocybin and, driving in to Tahoe City, I narrowly missed fendering a bicyclist into a drainage ditch when I steered into the Safeway parking lot for beer. "Kings Beach" is accurate—the beach part anyway—for a strip of yellow pulverized boulders crescenting a tiny bay. Who or what the kings were I couldn't say. Kids—eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds—speckled the sand like chocolate chips. I could've been staring at an enormous cupcake-thing: the bright sun, the blue water, a billion dark bodies that cast shade. Jet skis roared and spit past the buoys. When I was a child I came here with Grandpa and the highway was one lane. You pulled over and let the oncoming traffic inch around you. I'd like to say we were in Grandpa's Model A, but really, that time, he drove a Ford pickup. But then, this Fourth at the lake—the time I'm talking about—the shore swarmed with ass and tits and money. The water was a spill of two-stroke oil. So, I watched Fredo get drunk and throw up. His vomit undulated in the sand. Whenever someone moved they left a ghost. When I swerved back to normal, around noon, I drove into Reno, and to work at The Men's Wearhouse. To my first customer that afternoon I said, "Happy Independence Day! What the hell are you doing here?"

Jon was like a cow except he was skinny. What I mean is, he never moved fast, and didn't think it was important, for example, to know that over the next hill would be either a waterhole or more cracked earth. He was Southern by the grace of his parentage. His daddy gave me 8 AM beers at their ranch-style home, browning out under the sun in Spanish Springs. His mama made me toss down plates full of eggs. Old Glory crossed the Stars and Bars above their television, a most honored spot in the living room. I believe Jon had frequented monster truck exhibitions. After a first draft of this, when he read what I wrote, Jon looked at me differently, a sadness tilting his eyes, making his baldness seem balder. I always imagined that Jon wanted to feel the inside of the back of my skull with his knuckles. I swallowed another beer in two swallows. It's only now that I can look back and say what kind of an idiot I've become.

At K-mart I bought boots stitched from the remains of dinosaurs. They lasted what a white person's idea of a native would call many moons. Me and the boots hiked the mountains west of the Black Rock Desert, this landscape thorned and poppied, hissing with rattlers. The desert itself was alkaline, the dust silty-fine, so that it worked into everything, even your skin, and started grinding things apart. I slipped these same boots past my toes for a day trip to The Lake with Jon. Everyone says "The Lake" like that, because people who live at "The Lake" have money, and then there are those living in the meadows, and saying it this way makes everyone feel rich. Jon's Mercury Cougar had rust damage that spotted it like pimples. Jon didn't even live in Reno. He lived in the desert. That should tell you something about his skin.

The sun had sparkled over the eastern rim of the Truckee Meadows. The heat already rippled from the parking lot's asphalt. Me and Jon did the McDonald's Drive Thru for breakfast burritos and coffee, both of which nearly equaled the sun's heat, literally. By that I mean that after those 93 million miles through space, through that electromagnetic field blocking hazardous radioactivity, and the sixty miles of our atmosphere, it was around a hundred degrees. So maybe the coffee was hotter. You might think I talk a lot. But I'm like a book when I drive: everything's between the covers. So me and Jon swerved up the Truckee River gorge and the mountains had begun to yellow with autumn. The granite made me think of a dentist's office: all gray and menacing, the boulders like molars. Jon himself was quiet. He liked birds. They hardly talk at all.

We pulled up at the cabin, a pre-fab sentried by pines, a pair of old skis X-ing the apex of the roof, like something on a cartoon poison bottle. Grandpa had slathered a dull green paint over its wood so that it would "blend in" with its natural surroundings. It resembled a barracks. From the outside, this place could've been the staging ground for some bearded radical, someone who San Francisco had failed. Inside sat evidence of a thriving thrift store. Even the books were *Reader's Digest Condensed*, which made me think of soup. A deer's head stared over the kitchen and hallway, above the cuckoo clock and the liquor, and the windows that squinted out over the California brome and, across the road, Squaw Creek, which ran cold and white with ripples. The creek had once slithered with brook trout. But they built hotels upstream. Instead of trout there are tourists, which are almost the same thing.