Winter

By Clay Zelbst

Gus looks through the window out into the dark rain. His face is chaffed from winter’s slap. It is late December. Gus knows it will freeze when the night’s cold temperature falls. The six-o-clock news reported ice for the night and snow for tomorrow, brought about by a cold front. He knows what that means too—there will be a thick sheet of ice suffocating everything he can see. He also knows a drop in temperature correlates with a rise in the likelihood of cattle dying; likewise the cattle need extra calories to stay warm. He knows what responsibilities are going to be thrust upon him, but right now he wants to savor his moment; a moment in which he can just take a deep breath, blink, and enjoy a small piece of time that will soon slip silently into darkness.
Losing a cow or calf is always difficult, though cattle-ranching is a business, and cattle are means to an end. When an animal is lost, there is a loss in profit, but there is always more to the loss. Wayne, Gus’ father, always told him it was their duty to be good shepherds to the animals, because animals were God’s gift. And humans were supposed to treat them with respect, even though they were food.

Gus isn’t religious at all, but likes to think life has intrinsic value. It makes him feel better about giving the animals his precious time, and taking theirs. He figures, if life is meaningless, then why does it matter how anyone treats anything else. They were after all, Gus thought, animals without the ability to rationalize anything. But if they have some intrinsic value as beings, then they deserve fair treatment as such. Gus’ mind is a convoluted playground for impractical thoughts, and the truth of the matter was that no matter how he decided to view life he was still going to have to get out in the snowstorm.

Last summer when Gus was home from college one of the ranch hands had gone to church and forgotten to check the newly pregnant heifers. Gus’s father bought some new Angus bulls that summer. They were great bulls, solid black, proud and muscular, but they threw big calves and sometimes the young mothers had difficulty giving birth. Gus ended up having to go pull a calf on a Sunday morning. The situation plagued Gus, he thought it was existentially disturbing, a little too harsh for what he wanted to quantify as reality. He wasn’t a sheltered child by any means, but he didn’t want to recognize that bad things happen to undeserving creatures. Gus ended up on his back in a dirty pool of amniotic fluid with a dead calf in his arms. The life the calf could have had would never be.

Gus gazes out the window in silent reflection, and notices frost creeping up the panes of glass. Gus’ mind rambles through the rain to dreams of summer as he hopes against hope that
tomorrow he won’t have to get into the mess outside–faulty reasoning. Sure enough a few moments later his father comes to him.

“Son, I need your help tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

He doesn’t argue. The way he understands it there are people who are paid to feed the cattle, but that is something he tells himself to justify his laziness. When he is honest he knows more people are better, because it’s a flat out a pain in the ass to manage all the cattle in difficult conditions.

“I’m going get you up at six.”

“Okay,” he replies with an air of annoyance.

Gus has a hard time in the mornings, not because he doesn’t go to bed, but he is a bit of an insomniac. He has gotten used to stress, sleeplessness, and tanking up on coffee. He is the first one in his family to go to college, and he has a hard time voicing his stress to his father, who sees it as lazy. He, like his father, is high strung, but in a different way.

For Gus stress equals sleeplessness. During the course of the semester he would lay awake at night stewing on everything he had to do the next day. He would let the time, which he could have spent resting his tired body, waste away. He always had more reading than he could ever get through, and all the time he spent awake thinking would been better spent doing something other than running through his thoughts. He would tighten his eyes shut in an attempt to force himself to sleep, but sleep never came. If he tried to catch up on reading he would become sleepy, and crawl into bed and stare at the ceiling.

Gus up wakes up later in the night, most nights he woke up at 3:30 or 1:45 without warning. He leans over to check the time on his cell phone, 3:30. He has two messages on his
screen from his ex-girlfriend. “Hey!” the first one says. “Wake up!” The second one says. He ignores them, although she can't help but dance through his mind while he tries to fall asleep again. Eventually the glorious darkness finds him, and he drifts to sleep.

“Gus, Gus it’s time to get up!” his mother says the same way she has awakened him his whole life. Gus thinks it is nice to have someone to wake him up, especially someone he loves and trusts. When he is at school he has to set his own alarm, wake himself up, do his own laundry, and find his own food. Back home his mother does laundry for him, she wakes him up, and cooks for him. It is nice to just exist without thinking too much. Gus is a philosophy major, and now on his senior year, he has been taught for four years what is wrong with the world. Arguments fill his head, for and against everything. Gus thinks how odd it is that everything he knows is on the more pessimistic side. He, like many other philosophers, has no religion, because he has analyzed it to a point where he deems it incoherent.

His family didn’t respond well to his religious apathy. It was a shocking revelation to his bible belt kin that he didn’t give a shit about someone’s religion.

“Fuck this.” He doesn’t want to get up.

“Come on Grumpus,” his mother says again.

He can only growl at his mother as she walks away from his room; her heavy footsteps thud down the hallway. He allows a few moments to pass in warm comfort before he drags himself out of bed. His house is frigid, mainly because his mother is going through menopause and isn’t too great at dealing with hot flashes.

Gus is immediately cold-stricken as he emerges from his bed, so he decides to take a hot shower. He turns the shower as hot as he can bear and lets the water roll down his skin like time
as he takes deep breaths and closes his eyes. He places his palms against the wall, and his wet hair sticks to his forehead in soggy brown clumps.

After he retires from the shower, he looks outside. The only thing he can see is the porch lights reflecting off the falling snow. “Shit,” he mutters under his breath. He is not happy with the weather. He finds a long-sleeved thermal to slide into and picks up a pair of jeans off the floor, then a pair of Carhartt overalls, and a black and white plaid flannel shirt. He walks into the kitchen where his mom has cooked bacon, and in the grease has scrambled a heap of eggs. He loves when his mother cooks eggs this way—cook the bacon first, then scramble the eggs in the grease. In Gus’s mind there was nothing that tasted better. His father is at the table eating. Gus sits down with him.

“Howdy Gus, how’d you sleep?” his father asks in a friendly tone.

“Not too well. Woke up ‘round three. Couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“Oh, well have a cup of coffee.”

“Yup, mom can I have a cup of coffee?”

“You’re a big boy. Help yourself, pot’s by the sink.”

He gets up and she hands him an empty mug with a smile. He walks to the pot and pours a cup of hot coffee, and, for a moment, watches the ethereal wisps of vapor escape the heat of the dark liquid. He drinks his coffee black, which he had done for about five years now. He had a nanny when he was little who got him started on coffee when he was about three, except when he was little he loaded it with cream and sugar. Now he is addicted to caffeine. He has been trying to cut down, but when he gets stressed he turns to caffeine.
Gus’ family, despite a lack in formal education, is a very wealthy ranching family. They own thousands and thousands of acres of land, which had been accumulated over the past hundred or more years, and the ranch is one of the largest working ranches in Oklahoma.

Gus scoops a heap of bacon, and bacon-grease eggs, onto his plate and takes a bite. He doesn’t want to swallow. He just wants to reside in that sliver of time as long as he can. But the moment leaves him.

“What time we starting,” Gus asks.

“Round 8:30. Sorry we woke ya up so early. While you were in the shower Lou called, and thought it’d be better to wait. I agree cuz we can’t see nothing.”

“That bad?” He knows the answer.

“It looks like its shaping up to be that way, and the news is sayin’ it’s a whiteout. Spos’d to do this all day.”

“Fuck me running’.”

During the summer months when they fed it took them about an hour on a bad day, but during a bad winter storm it could take three, maybe four, hours. During the winter, feeding was something they had to do every day. Gus didn’t want to be in the cold for that long, but at least he didn’t have to think too much. He knew the time would pass whether he was productive or not.

The sun rises around 8:00 and by 8:30 there is enough sunlight to turn the lack of landscape into a depressing shade of miserable def-tone swirls and reflections. Gus hasn’t ever seen it so bad. He can’t see anything in the haze of grayish white. The Wichita mountains are usually painted in gorgeous shades of green and brown, the nubby granite peaks in grey and blue, silhouetted by a sunset or sunrise or the baby-blue sky with perky wisps of clouds, but today
None of their waning omnipotence is visible. There is only a thick cloud of cold misery spreading over everything, reducing the visibility to less than a hundred feet. Gus knows time will crawl today.

Draped in Carhartt, a ski hat, a face warmer, and gloves, Gus tromps across the barnyard. He marvels at the trees being hammered by winter. They are weighed heavy with ice, their branches drooping low. Gus wonders how they are able to resist breaking. Those old trees were around long before Gus, and they know how to stand up to winter’s icy chainsaw; nonetheless Gus is amazed at their resilience. A night out in that weather Gus would be dead, but those trees had resisted many more winters and more time than he would ever have the luxury of seeing.

In the barn he finds his dad and the two cowboys employed on the ranch futzing around. The elder of the two cowboys is named Lou. Lou is a good-natured man in his forties. Lou always wears the same pair of boots and the same smile, which houses a hint of sadness. The other is Paul. Paul is very religious, and from what Gus has heard has a way with women.

“Hey Gusser! How ya been,” Lou asks with a smile. Lou always found something to call Gus other than his real name.

“Oh I been doin’ all right. Be a lot better if it weren’t so damn cold!”

“Yup!”

“Gus, I’m going with Lou. You go with Paul,” his father says, getting straight to business.

“Okay, you ready?” Gus says to Paul.

“Yup. You driving or me?”

“You are. If we get stuck I don’t wanna have to take the blame.” Gus smiles pointlessly underneath his neck warmer.
They get into the old white pick-up. “Heat works good,” Paul says to Gus with a dumb grin. “That’s a plus,” he responds as Paul backs into the cake-house where they keep all their feed.

“How many?”

“We need fifteen twenties.”

“Holy shit.”

“We moved most the herd into the McMaster. There’s 110 in there, and we got to do double ration and put out hay.”

“I guess I missed that.”

They load the sweet-smelling, fifty-pound orange and brown paper sacks of A&W co-op feed into the back of the truck, and get back in the cab.

“Ya’ll got your ears on?” Wayne asks over the radio.

“10-4,” Gus responds

“Okay. We’re going north to the Hale places, the Rex, and the Wolf, then we are going to make our way to the Hodge.”

“10-4.”

“Ya’ll be careful in this blizzard. It seems to be getting worse.”

“10-4.”

“Ready?” Gus asks Paul.

“Yup.”

They pull out of the cake house back into the cold. Feeding livestock is an uncomplicated process, but nonetheless a process. They start with the horses. They always feed the horses first. If not, the horses will wander out their pen and come run the cattle off their feed. The next group
is the heifers, then the mothers, and then the bulls. They give each group four or five sacks of feed, and they give each group a bail of hay.

Gus cannot believe how miserable the poor cattle look. Ice covers them head to toe, and the snow makes no promise except to keep beating them relentlessly. Luckily cattle are made to live outdoors, and Gus and Paul know to be careful in case one or more of them seems sick with pneumonia or foot rot.

The newborn calves are most seriously at risk in the cold. There aren’t too many of them; usually the cowboys put the bulls to the herd so they threw calves during the spring. However, cowboys left the bulls on the herd late this year.

Time passes quickly for Paul and Gus. They begin to rejoice in the thought of finishing early, and would be happy to get out of the storm. Gus and Paul had found pretty easy conversation in discussing women and beer while they worked. It isn’t that Gus thought about baser pleasures all the time, but Gus thought it best to keep conversation uncomplicated so Paul could keep up. Around the time they finish in the McMaster, they get a call on the radio.

“Gus, Gus. Paul, Paul.” It’s Wayne on the radio.

“Go ‘head,” Gus responds.

“We got a steer that broke his leg and we’re stuck. We gonna need ya to bring the backhoe and a cattle trailer up here.”

“Where are ya’ll?” Gus asks slightly annoyed.

It never fails that something goes wrong at the worst time for things to go wrong. Gus has discovered such is life on a ranch. He loves how easy things were in a city. Someone else has to deal with problems. Where Gus grew up they were the law, the fire department, the engineers, plumbers, electricians, and everything else. In a city there is someone else to do the civil work.
“We’re up at the Wolf place.”

“10-4. We got our last bale to put out, then we’ll head on over.”

“10-4. We’re stuck so hurry.”

“10-4.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Gus snarls.

“Never fails,” Paul responds.

“Yup, let’s get this last bail out. We need to fucking hurry. This storm's getting worse.”

The storm had turned from a snowstorm to a full-on blizzard. In Gus’s twenty-one years he had never seen a snowstorm so bad, especially in the southern part of Oklahoma. Oklahoma City would get pummeled by a winter storm every now and then, but the ice and snow hardly ever made its way this far south.

The roads are dangerous, and Gus doesn’t even want to think about what kind of mess Wayne and Lou are in. He knows, if worse comes, then they can get the bulldozer.

The McMaster pasture is known as the home pasture, and it doesn’t take long for Gus and Paul to get back to the barn. Unfortunately, Wayne and Lou are about five miles down the road, which, on a day like today, will take a substantial amount of time.

“I’ll fire up the backhoe and you grab the trailer, or do you need help?” Gus tells Paul

“I can get it.”

“Think you can make it up Meers hill with the trailer?”

“Of course,” Paul smiles.

Gus climbs into the weathered backhoe cab. There is snow inside, because whoever last used it neglected to close the back window. He fiddles with the clumsy pane of glass, so he can
shut out the winter, then he pulls a glove off his numb hand and gives the key a turn. To his surprise, the backhoe starts right up.

The backhoe cab is cold and smells of rust, the seats are torn, the floor lining is peeling up in the corners, exposing glimpses of the metal floor. The ride to the Wolf place would take at least thirty minutes, probably longer with all the snow, and hopefully neither Gus nor Paul would run off the road. Gus puts the backhoe in gear, the machine shivers, and Gus drives out onto the icy roadway.

He presses on through the blizzard, concentrating on the road, but not really thinking about the drive or driving. He is thinking about his ex-girlfriend, Olivia, and the things he had done to fuck their relationship up. They say every guy has one girl that gets away. Gus in true clichéd male fashion had one he let get away from him. When he reflects on her, he realizes she is everything he wants in a woman.

Gus was too immature to realize what a good thing she was for him. He would have rather be in bed with her, nestled in her warmth, her sexy legs wrapped around him, than be encased in an iced-over backhoe.

Gus has a thing for legs, which he assumes is some bizarre cyclist fetish. He was content to just look at her, and feel her legs brush against his. She didn’t need to say anything, and Gus could just stare. He wanted her smell—the smell of her perfume, and her hair that smelt like pomegranate-raspberry—instead of the noxious scent of gasoline and old oil. He wanted the taste of her flawlessness back on the tip of his tongue, he wanted her mouth back in front him with her voluptuous lips begging to be kissed blissfully curved in a smile, eyes locked in a gaze with his, a gaze that made him feel like they were the only two people that mattered.
He comes back to his cold reality, and grips the steering wheel tight, and feels her slip out of his hands as he feels the numbness slip back in.

He notices the cold, hard plastic composition of the steering wheel, which in turn makes his hands on the wheel cold, but, as cold as he is, he is happy to have something protecting him from the vicious cold outside. He is able to see nothing through the snow. He strains but there is nothing more than solid white in front of him, so he just takes his time. He doesn’t worry about getting lost, he knows these roads blind, but he doesn’t want to run into complications along the way.

A few minutes pass enveloped in the noisy roar of the engine. Gus sees the cattle guard into the Wolf place. He takes his foot off the gas-pedal so he can make the sharp right-hand turn, and when he does he feels the rear wheels slide a bit. He makes a mental note to be more careful on the way out.

They have to drive through the pasture for a little ways to get to Wayne and Lou. Still cold, Gus desperately desires to be somewhere else. He thinks it would be nice to be back in the city. He and his friends could hit the bar across the street from his apartment, and maybe he would run into Olivia.

“A drink?” he said to her with a smile. He couldn't help but smile around her.

“Yeah,” she said as she took his hand in hers, and took the lead. Her hands were always so soft, which was amazing. Gus doesn't have soft hands. His are covered in calluses and scars, just like his entire body. There were days Gus and Olivia would lie in bed, and she would run her soft fingers over his scars begging him for stories. She would hope there was some violent tale living within the bounds of his skin, but most were products of his recklessness. Gus thought it peculiar that she never lived out on an open range with green grass, tall trees, mountains, and
wild animals. Her home was built on a grid, and Gus’s was a fork in the road where two old highways met.

“Macallen twenty-five, and fucking filthy Belvedere martini, dry.”

“You know me so well,” Gus said to her. He loved the way she made the word ‘fuck’ feel so fucking good.

That night, the night Gus wished never happened, the bartender served her the filthy martini, and handed Gus his glass of scotch. He eyed the amber contents. He swirled it, sniffed it, and finally took a sip. He didn't have any reason for his scotch-drinking methodology, but he thought it made him look cool and knowledgeable. She took his hand again, and they moved away from the bar. While they were sliding through the crowd trying to get to the door an old meathead-looking-townie told him to get out of fucking way.

“Excuse me?” Gus asked the man.

“I said get out of the fucking way, I’m trying to sit down.” Gus wanted to ignore the old man, and got out of the way.

“You think you’re better than him,” another voice asked him.

“Huh?” Gus looked around and saw the noise came from some short, fat woman with a loud mouth and a pushy attitude.

“You heard me, you little shit. I asked if you thought you were better than him?” Gus wasn't the kind of person who backed down from a verbal challenge. He forgot about Olivia, who was watching him.

“Yeah, I do you ignorant fucking cunt.” Gus knew those words were the wrong words to say the second he said them.

"You little fuck!"
“Come on Gus,” Olivia tried to tug at him, but he shrugged her off.

“Why don’t you go fall on your fucking face you mistake,” Ryder said to the woman.

“Hey you little shit, that’s my daughter,” the old man jumped into the argument.

“Oh yeah? Well your daughter is one of God’s mistakes.”

“You son of a bitch I’ll kick your ass.”

“It looks like he fucked up both your molds!” The man worked his way to Gus, the woman was yelling, and Olivia was trying to get Gus away from these people. She had never seen him be so mean before.

“Come on over old man. I’ll beat your fucking ass,” the old man took a drunken swing at Gus, who dodged his fist, and, with one shot laid the man out cold on the floor. Olivia thought he killed the man. The bartender called 911, and bouncers took Gus outside where policed happened to be.

As soon as she could, Olivia picked him up from the jail. Gus got lucky, and no charges were filed.

“I can’t do this with you anymore,” she said as they drove away.

“What?” Gus was under the impression everything was okay.

“Have this relationship,” those words made Gus’ heart sink to his feet.

“Oh.”

“You are difficult,” she sighed, “and after last night…”

“How am I difficult?”

“Look, I just think we need some time apart.”

“No, I want to know what makes you think I’m so fucking difficult,” Gus was getting angry, which frightened her slightly.
“Well, first off, I just had to pick my boyfriend up from jail.”

“So, its not that uncommon! And it’s the first time I’ve been arrested.”

“I know, but it’s more,” He could sense she didn't want to tell him what was really on her mind.

“More what.”

“You,” she paused to choose her words carefully, “You hate life.”

“Bullshit, I love life.” He thought this statement was absolutely ridiculous, and that she was being crazy.

“Let me finish.”

“Please continue,” he retorts.

“You just don’t give a shit about me. You treat me like a toy that is supposed to be there when you want to play. You casually disregard me when something more interesting strikes your attention, but worst of all I can’t tell how you feel about me.”

“You know I love you.”

“No, I don’t. What drives me most fucking crazy about you, is that that you spend so much of your time in your own fucking head, detached from reality, and I just don’t know how to get you out. It’s like you hate everyone but yourself. Or you’re content to lock everyone out of this little world inside your head. I don’t know what goes on in there, and I don’t think I want to know.”

“You are being ridiculous.”

“You're ridiculous Gus.” He didn't say another word, but she continued talking. “Look Gus, I love you, but I’m not going to alienate myself with you, I’m not going to shut myself up in your head. I’m sorry. I know you don’t get it."
The recollection makes him a little angry and he punches the steering wheel with a
gloved hand, which doesn’t hurt it. Olivia never took Gus back. It wasn’t a question of whether
or not she cared about him, but Gus really didn’t get it—whatever it was. They both knew he
never would get it. He figured she saw him as a waste of her time.

Gus finally sees Wayne and Lou’s feed truck as a vague blur of red through the ocean of
white. The truck is buried up to the doors in snow. Gus climbs out of the cab when he reaches
their location.

“Looks like ya’ll fucked up,” Gus says.

“Yeah.” His dad replies with a smile.

Lou climbs into the backhoe and begins to dig into a snowdrift while Gus, Paul, and
Wayne stand out in the blizzard watching while the cold penetrates their layers.

“Why don’t we go get in the pick-up?” Paul asks Gus and Wayne, who both have
forgotten about the cattle trailer.

“What’d you need the cattle trailer for?” Gus asks his father.

“We got a steer that slipped in a cattle guard. Broke its leg in two, so we gotta haul em
home.”

“Oh. Well why don’t you let Paul and me get the steer, while ya’ll dig out the truck and
finish feeding?”

“Okay. When you get back you’re gonna have to shoot it. You can leave him in the trailer
till Lou gets back, and he can slaughter him.”

Gus hates to kill anything, because he thinks it immoral.

“Okay,” Wayne could sense his disdain for the task.

“I know how you feel. It’s the right thing.”
“I know.”

Gus and Paul drive the truck over to the wounded steer. They don’t have much trouble finding him. They look at the animal with its leg dangling behind—broken in half like a twig. Gus tries to imagine the pain the pitiful creature is in as it tries to walk; falling, it bawls in pain as its weight compresses on its broken leg. Had the ground been solid the steer might have died from shock. Gus’ insides squirm while he watches the fearful animal scream.

“You think we can herd it into the truck?” Gus doesn’t like the phrasing of Paul’s question. He reasons a thing is not an it, it is actually a steer, and a steer is not genderless, it is actually a male, albeit lacking testicles.

“I think that’s our best bet.” Gus says nothing to Paul about his internal digression. He also knows there is really no painless way to get the animal into the trailer. He wishes he'd brought a gun with him, so he could end the animal’s miserable existence here and now.

“Alright.”

They back the trailer as close as they can to the steer, but are unable to get as close as they want. They give a wide range to the steer as they encircle it. “Easy boy,” Gus says, but he knows his words make no sense to the frightened animal. The steer charges Gus when he is close, and sends him reeling onto his back in the snow. Paul, who is prepared with a lasso, manages to slip it around the steer’s neck when it loses footing.

Gus scrambles back to his feet and looks at Paul, who is looking at the animal. Gus can see the gears turning in Paul's mind, but also wonders if they are making any progress to a viable solution to their situation. The steer looks almost as if it knows its time is running thin, because he keeps fighting—charging Gus and Paul back and forth until he is out of energy and collapses in the snow. Gus and Paul don’t know how they are going to get the steer into the cattle trailer, so
they both grab a hold of the lasso and drag it toward the trailer. The steer begins choking as its
grey tongue protrudes grotesquely from its open mouth, gasping for air.

“Stop,” Gus says instinctively as he loosens the rope before the steer asphyxiates. He
does it out of some natural want to let the steer die in a more painless manner.

The animal doesn’t have the energy to get up and charge, but it thrashes its head around
trying to butt whatever is in its vicinity. After a few more cycles of tugging and choking, they
finally heave the steer into the cattle trailer.

After a long drive through they snow they make it back to the barn. “I’ll go get a pistol,”
Gus says, "You think you can get him out of the trailer?"

“I’ll try.”

“Okay.”

Gus tromps through the blizzard towards the house. He thinks about how good it would
be to not understand death. The steer understands pain, and he thought it probably understood
some form of pleasure, but it doesn’t understand death, which is a purely human faculty. It
doesn’t have to contemplate its own existence. It doesn’t have its head convoluted with religion,
science, medicine, philosophy, it doesn’t have to take the LSAT, it doesn’t have to go to law
school, it doesn’t have to know about good, it doesn’t have to know about evil, and it doesn’t
have to understand the ephemeral nature of everything or the temporality of life, or love, it can’t
seal itself off in a mental prison with walls of analytical reasoning, it doesn’t have to know
anything, but it has to exist. It has to eat and shit. The poor steer, by virtue of being a steer,
doesn’t even have to fuck. Gus sympathizes with the poor creature’s beautiful ignorance.

Gus has picked apart every piece of his world. He has his opinions, his ideas, and he
doesn’t believe in anything. His father always tells him there is some big plan, but Gus is unable
to see it. We live, he thinks, and then we die, just like the steer whose existence was going to be reduced to nothing but a fairly unmemorable tryst culminated by something that wasn’t its own control. In the same way, he thought, the steer’s life was something beautiful, because it didn’t have to do more than exist.

Gus chooses a .357 magnum revolver. He knows it’s overkill, but he wants to finish the job seamlessly. He loads five hollow-point bullets into the six-shot revolver, more than he would need—he always leaves the top one empty. It is an old cowboy’s superstition. You always leave the top slot empty, so if the hammer somehow fires you don’t get a bullet through the foot.

After he loads the pistol, he tucks it into the back of his jeans. He doesn’t bother putting his Carhartt suit back on. He does not plan on being outside very long, plus some part of him wants to experience the same bitter cold the steer is going to face.

Paul somehow managed to get the steer out of the trailer and tie it to a tree while Gus was away. Gus notes the tire tracks in the snow and imagines Paul tying the lasso to the tree and driving while the steer is drug out of the back of the trailer tongue flailing.

He walks to the steer and holds the pistol to its head. He envies the steer. It doesn’t know about what is going to happen. He will be here in this world full of pain and fear, and then boom. Everything bleeds away as sweet, blissful nothingness encompasses his passing sentience.

The steer looks at Gus, and Gus looks back at him. For a moment they are connected, but just as the moment comes, it fades away. He feels the pistol in his hand, and the steer feels the cold silver barrel of the Smith and Wesson .357 pressing to his head. They both take a breath. Gus slowly draws the hammer. The pistol is cold but comfortable in his bare hand. He takes another breath, letting the bitter air bite his chest, and slowly squeezes the trigger. Gus feels the
pistol recoil in his hand. Little hunks of flesh, bone, and brain flood from beneath the steer’s chin, then his head hits the ground while torrents of blood stain the snow.

Gus feels as if there is no sense of decency to the end of the steer's life. There is no sense of respect. There is nothing but an unmemorable animal unable to comprehend his happenstance with the contents of its head bleeding out in the snow. Gus feels, for the first time, in that moment, the sheer sense of discomfort one feels when facing mortality. It’s something that crawls down your spine, and moves your insides around, like a wave of fear—not fight or flight—but the desire to give up—the desire to quit.

I’m going to get old, and when I do I am going to die, Gus thinks.

His thoughts unnerve him as he feels his heart beat very fast in his chest. He becomes very uncomfortable in his own skin as another moment passes silently into darkness.