

The Very Air

Excerpt:

On the twenty-third of April, in 1905, Luther Mathias's mother came into their house and sat down at the table and began to laugh hysterically. Her name was Sarah Jane. She was a short, thin woman who had once been almost plump. Her face was permanently raw from the weather of the Panhandle – winds of fierce heat and winds of fierce chill – and it was deeply lined from the strain of life on a tiny livestock farm five miles from Cliffside, Texas. She was twenty-six years old and had been very beautiful, but she now looked twice her age and her sunken face was set in a misrepresentative meanness. She and Luther lived alone for months at a time. Her husband, Aubrey, Luther's father, bunked for much of the year on a huge cattle ranch near the Oklahoma border, where he worked as a handyman and keeper of the stock. On this day, she'd come inside from an unusual late-spring blizzard after feeding the horses, which were by equine standards almost as thin as she was. There was frost in her eyebrows and lashes. It was shortly after sundown.

At first, her laughter was nearly silent. Her upper body simply shook. Luther, who was ten years old, watched her from across the room and saw it as the same violent shivering she'd been suffering for weeks. But then sounds – a cackling, really – began to issue from her throat. They built in pitch and strength. Her shaking had turned convulsive. This was behavior he hadn't seen before. He'd watched her shake and often heard her muttering argumentatively with something he himself could not see that followed her back and forth between their two rooms. He'd grown used to the shaking and, in a way, the muttering enthralled him. But this laughter was new and he was frightened by its wildness.

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Now she grew quiet . . . Her son stood where he was, his fear paralytic, watching the cords in her throat flex and loosen when she swallowed.

After a length of time he realized the room was getting cold. He walked to the stove and fed it some wood. He stood close to it, taking its heat. The sounds in his life were the stove's burning wood and the high-whistling wind. His mother had been still in her chair for a while. She had not changed her position. Her head remained tilted to the ceiling. With reluctance he moved away from the safe heat of the stove. When he reached her side he saw that her eyes were closed. "Mama?" he said.