

## SUMMER 1959

### *Christopher Kuhl*

Wade doesn't understand excitement. At 5 a.m. his father comes into the bedroom Wade shares with his older brother, Lyle; they sleep in bunk beds. Lyle is already awake, but Wade is not. His father yells, "Up and at 'em, boys. We're going on an adventure!" He nudges Wade's leg. "C'mon, boy, get up. We've got a long way to go and a short time to get there!" He laughs. Wade's father is clearly in a state, but Wade doesn't get it. He doesn't respond; he just opens his eyes and stares at the bottom of the bunk above him.

Lyle is as excited as his father is and has already jumped down from his bunk, scrabbling for clothes. Dressing quickly, he runs to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, and washes his face. Then he clatters down the stairs. Wade, meanwhile, has yet to move. His eyes are open, but it's still dark. He thinks about how it's dark in the early morning and a deeper, moon-shadowed dark

when he goes to bed. Wade likes this: certainty, no change, except twice a year, when he just wants to throw up.

## §

The family has been driving for hours. Lyle has ants in his pants; Wade has his fingers in his ears to drown out the road noise. Lyle kicks the back of the front seat until his father yells, “Knock it off!” Wade squeezes his eyes shut. The sun, other cars, trees, houses whiz by, making pulsing air noises. Empty spaces are rare and silent. This is change and uncertainty on a bigger scale than Wade has ever experienced. Where, oh, where is Wade? He doesn’t know. Does he care? Care. He doesn’t know what that means. He scrunches into his seat, accidentally kicking Lyle in the shin. Lyle is not hurt but screams anyway, “Stop, you moron! Dad, make him stop!”

His father says, “Maybe we should eat.” Wade’s mother just nods, and his father pulls into a Carroll’s just down the road.

Wade’s mother, Amy, says, “Good idea, Winston. They’re probably just hungry, and it’s hot.”

Lyle leaps out of the car, yelling about fries and chocolate milkshakes. Wade doesn’t move; after all, he’s a moron, according to Lyle, and anyway, fast food turns his stomach.

Amy goes to the back door and says in her cooing way, "Let's get out of the car, Wade, and walk around a bit. And then maybe you can eat a cheeseburger and a Coca-Cola." Wade doesn't say anything. He stares at his mother, never taking his eyes off her as she holds his hand. They walk around the restaurant, and then Wade has some fries. He eats carefully, methodically: the short ones first, and then the long ones, bitten precisely in half. Then he drinks a small soda.

His mother asks him, "Are you feeling better?" Wade clears his throat as if to speak, but doesn't; he gives a sparrow's nod of the head.

An hour after lunch, they're on the road again. Wade has to pee. He leans over the front seat and whispers his need, now urgent, to his mother. Amy, in turn, tells Winston, who barks, "Dammit, Wade! Couldn't you have gone before we left the restaurant?" Wade doesn't say anything, just crosses his legs as tightly as he can.

His mother says to his father, "What choice do we have?"

Winston says, "Maybe he could pee by—"

But it's too late. Wade wets his pants, urine flowing down his legs, wetting the vinyl backseat.

Lyle starts screaming. “Why did we have to bring him along? He’s always doing something like this!” (Wade can’t remember when.) “Why couldn’t we just have left him at a neighbor’s? Why couldn’t we just have a dog? It’d be a lot easier.”

By now Wade is crying. Maybe if he were a dog or, better yet, a puppy, people would like him.

His father is clearly exasperated. “Well, now, we’ll have to stop again”—this last spat out—“and get him and the car cleaned up.” He turns to Lyle, who has turned uncharacteristically quiet. “And you, Lyle, shut up. He’s your brother, not a dog, and they’re more trouble than they’re worth. So keep your big yap shut.”

Winston finds a gas station. Amy sponges Wade off, dresses him in clean clothes. Winston cleans the backseat and floor of the car. Thirty minutes later everyone’s back in the car. Lyle sulks. Wade can hardly breathe. He feels the family’s tension in his chest. He closes his eyes and sits very still.

But then Lyle starts in again. “Where are we going? When’ll we be there? Dad—”

His father yells, his voice higher than usual, “Shut up! We’ll get there when we get there, and I’ll tell you when I’m good and ready.” Lyle kicks the

back of the seat again, and thinking it's his brother, Winston screams, "God-dammit, Wade! Leave me alone! One more kick and I swear I'm going to turn this car right around and go home. And you're going to be unhappy boys, especially you, Wade, because I'll be one unhappy man. Got it?"

Now Wade is lost. Maybe it would have been better to have a dog. More orderly, less chaotic. Why do his parents fight over him all the time?

Suddenly Amy rubs his father's shoulder. "Winston, it's okay." Then she turns and reaches into the back seat. She takes Wade's hand and says, "Dogs are nice, but little boys are nicer. Look—You have ten lovely fingers, not paws, that you can do so much with: color, make little clay animals, make paper airplanes, build a tower with blocks. You're our little boy, and we all, even Daddy and Lyle, love you. Your father is just tired but excited, and he wants to get where we're going as soon and as much as you do. Just shut your eyes, honey, and breathe."

Wade is overwhelmed. His nose starts to run. His mother gives him a Kleenex. "It's going to be all right. God loves you too."

Wade stares out the window and thinks about God. He feels a longing for a world like Heaven: orderly, happy, full of music. Music. Wade wishes they had a radio in the car. He would like some music. And as if she could read his

mind, his mother starts to hum quietly songs he knows from school and Sunday school. Slowly, he relaxes. He knows music is orderly and suddenly he can breathe. He leans his head against the window and dozes off to his mother's humming and the smell of his father's cigarette.

They ride in silence for a while. Wade's father is driving through the seemingly endless mountains, shifting and braking his way through the switchbacks. Wade has never been here before, and the sharp turns, combined with the big car, scare him a little. His father is all concentration; Amy and the boys are silent. No more yelling. Less tension in Wade's chest. He doesn't dare look at Lyle for fear he'll do something—he doesn't know what—that will set Lyle off again. But Lyle is peering at the road, pretending to drive.

Slowly the switchbacks diminish, and then they're out of the mountains. They pass farms, churches, old fields of dark gravestones. Wade gets nervous: so many dead people. Why are they here? Amy touches her husband and tips her head to the back seat.

Winston speaks up, easy, joking, "Well, boys, at least we're on the right side of the grass." Lyle snorts; Wade is puzzled. What happens when you're not on the right side of the grass? How do you get to Heaven if you're buried

below the ground? Hell is supposed to be below the ground, all fire and monsters and torture machines and implements of destruction. Where, oh, where is Wade? Is he going to Hell? He tormented his brother, wet his pants, upset his father. As he muses on this, more buildings and cars start appearing. Winston starts to get excited again. “We’re almost there, boys. The State Fair!”

Lyle jerks up straight and starts looking around, reading the signs, pointing at different car makes and models. Wade feels like he’s going to throw up. But Amy coos, “It’s okay, Wade. You’ll like this. They have all kinds of fun food, carnival rides, livestock shows—too much for me to tell you. But this’ll be a good adventure, just you wait and see.” Wade, not hearing anything but his heart pounding, stares just past his mother, who thinks she is helping him. He thinks back to the morning when he lay in his bunk bed, staring at the bunk above. Another world away. “Take my hand, honey, so you don’t get lost.”

Hesitantly, Wade puts his fingers in her palm. “Where?” he whispers. “Where?”

## §

Half an hour later they’re by the rides. The Tilt-a-Whirl, the Whip, a merry-go-round. Men are walking through the crowds, selling cotton candy. Wade is disgusted. The candy is sticky, pink, overly sweet. He feels sick. How

can anybody eat that stuff? He nibbles on his corndog, his mother still with him. He's a little queasy. Amy takes his face into her hands and looks carefully at him. "Are you all right, honey?"

Wade blurts out, "Why do all the rides go counterclockwise?"

Amy lets go of his face. "I don't know, honey. I never even noticed. Maybe that's just how they work."

Wade is frustrated. But he points at the merry-go-round. "Look. The horses and their riders are going clockwise. Can I ride it?"

Amy is so unused to Wade showing any interest in, let alone excitement about, anything that she says, "Of course, honey. You ride the black horse. I'll ride the pink horse next to you." And they ride, and ride again, and Wade thinks of pictures in books of knights in olden times riding their horses at each other, colorful banners and clothes flying, jousting. For the first time in the day, he's happy because of the order and predictability of the rides. His mother notices and thinks, *Controlled chaos*. But she doesn't say anything to Wade; suddenly she realizes how little she knows about her son.

Amy so wants to prolong this mood of Wade's that she proposes a ride on the Ferris wheel. Wade trembles. This is not a good idea. The wheel also goes clockwise and goes very high in small increments as the carnies load the ride.

Wade sees that if they get on, they will be up in the air, feet dangling in empty space. Then the ride will start, moving faster and faster, and Wade won't be able to see where he's going. This is the kiss of Death, and he's having none of it. Instead his father, also watching the rides, gives him a dime for a Coca-Cola. It gets Wade away from the dangers around him, and the soda soothes his stomach.

### §

The family has gathered at the grandstand, the boys separated from each other by their parents to ward off any upsets. First come high school marching bands from all over the state. Wade really likes this—Music, band members marching precisely together, led by their drum majors into fluid, ever-changing patterns. And the shiny instruments and flashy uniforms. Wade claps his hands as the bands go through their paces; this has been, by far, the best event of the day.

After the bands have left the field, their music drifting away with them, the track that surrounds the field is uncovered. This fascinates Wade. What could it be for? A race? A parade? Wade is a little unsteady but curious; Lyle and his father are beside themselves with excitement.

“Okay, fellas,” says Winston. “This is what it’s all about.” And suddenly out comes a car waving a multicolored flag. As it moves around the track, the PA announcer cries out, “LAY-deez and gentlemen, boys and girls, here is something the likes of which you’ve never seen. Let me present to you the world-famous Joey Chitwood Hell Drivers, kings of trick driving! Give ’em a big round of applause!”

As the crowd claps, out come two dozen souped-up, wildly painted cars onto the track. The checkered flag waves, and the show begins. Speed, spins, leaps—It almost looks like someone is going to get killed as they drive, but they always get out safely. Lyle and Winston, along with most of the grandstand audience, are on their feet, screaming, whooping, and hollering, roaring almost loud enough to drown out the car engines. Wade is once again shaking. Too much noise, too much confusion. He can’t tolerate any more, so he almost shouts into his mother’s ear that he has to go; he’ll be right back. Wade is unsure if Amy hears him; she nods and squeezes his hand. And Wade is gone.

## §

The livestock pens are some way off from the grandstand. Wade can’t hear. His ears are plugged from all the noise of the grand events. He swallows hard with his eyes shut. His ears pop. He can hear again; when he opens his

eyes, he finds himself looking into the face of a cow with big, homely brown eyes. A calf pulls at her teat; the cow is calm. Wade knows this is called “nursing” and that this is how mammals feed their babies. He wonders if humans ever do it. Now? Or in olden days, before glass formula bottles? For a moment he wishes he were a calf, but then he can’t imagine such a gross public display. He’s sickened by it but touched too, so he moves on.

Aimlessly he wanders the animal displays. With the animals are young boys and girls. Wade wonders what they are doing but is too shy to ask. Then he hears a grown-up in a cowboy hat talking to one of the children. Apparently, they belong to a youth organization called 4-H. All these kids have raised, trained, and maintained, from birth to maturity, different kinds of animals: cows, horses, goats, pigs, chickens, rabbits, and more. Clearly they love their animals; Wade wonders if animals, especially farm animals, can love their humans. Once again Wade wishes he were some kind of doted-upon animal, or that he had an animal of his own to raise and train, play and sleep with. Farm animals are okay, but Wade thinks a dog would be best. You could teach it tricks, and you could be friends. Best friends. Wade’s eyes well up. He wipes them with the back of his hand and hears an echo in his head: “Where is Wade? Oh, where, where is Wade?”

Now he comes upon a huge field of high, rustling corn. Wade contemplates this. How do they pick it? What actual size is this one? Are all cornfields this big? Wade wanders along the edge until, unexpectedly, he comes upon a man standing by a hole in the field's edge. Wade screws up his courage and timidly asks, "What is this, sir?"

The man laughs. "Ain't you never seen a cornfield, boy?"

This unnerves Wade. "But why is it out here at the fair?"

The man laughs again. "This here is a corn maze." Wade stands, silent. The man says, "You go right in here and then follow the paths cut in it until you find your way out. You do know what a maze is, don'tcha?" Wade does, but he's never known a maze could be so big. In school they have paper mazes, and they take a pencil to trace their way out without crossing any solid lines. Wade does this somewhat slowly at school, but he likes it and always finds the exit, so he gets a silver star. He's never gotten a gold star, though, because he's never fast enough.

Wade closes his eyes, thinking. Can he do this? The corn is higher than he is; could he get lost? He remembers his silver stars, opens his eyes, asks the man if he could try it, and would he get lost? The man looks seriously at Wade for a moment and then says, gently now, "Yes, you can try it and"—Wade's

lower lip begins to quiver— “you won’t get lost, a smart boy like you. And if you can’t find your way out, someone will help you. They’ll find you wherever you are, and bring you out, and get you back with your family.” Here the man pauses, then asks, “Where is your family, son?”

Wade hesitates. “At the grandstand, watching the cars.”

“Well then, boy,” the man says, “have at it.” He shakes Wade’s hand. This is the biggest adventure. Wade tries to imagine himself as a pencil and steps in, immediately swallowed up by the tall, rustling stalks.

At first the path is straight—How hard can this be?—but then it T-bones into a path where he has to turn, make a choice. Right or left? Wade looks around for clues, looks at the sky: nothing. He decides to go right, clockwise, a relief after all those carnival rides, and starts out on the new path. He’s enjoying the still air, the silence, the puzzle. For a while the path twists and curves and then brings him up to a circle with five new paths branching off it. He has to choose again. He picks the third path; again he comes to a T. Hasn’t he been this way before? He doesn’t know but, just in case, goes left. He travels paths, seemingly going nowhere, everywhere, over and over again, but not to the exit. He starts to panic. What he thought would be orderly is not; he is caught up in the chaos of twisty, rattling stalks where he can see nothing but

sky. He cries out once, but his voice seems to get lost in the corn. He wanders a little more but now has no idea where anything is. Finally, hot, sweaty, itchy, unable to discern the entrance, the exit, or the man who got him into this horror, he collapses, scrunches into a ball, and, whimpering, rocks back and forth.

Suddenly he can't see. The light is too bright; the sun has a black ring around it. Everything is ablaze and Wade starts screaming. But who can hear him? Find him? Save him? Oh, what if Lyle was right, that he'd be better off as a dog? Then he could sniff his way out. But he is a boy, a useless, troublesome boy. Slowly his vision dims further. He stops screaming, topples over, and passes out.

Where is Wade? Oh, where, where is Wade? The air is still, the sounds are small. Wade wakes up. Where is he? What has happened? He looks around. He is in the medical tent with a wet washcloth on his forehead and a needle in his arm, connected to a tube from a bag of fluid on a pole. His parents and brother are there, and the medic is speaking quietly to them. Wade is shaken up. He can't remember anything and starts to cry. His mother is right by his side, putting another cool cloth on his head, urging him to take a sip of Coke. Amy hums a bit, and this makes Wade feel a little better. Winston has him by

the shoulder. “You’re gonna be fine, boy. You found your own adventure, didn’t you? Good going, son.” He stops, looking at Amy, who looks right back. She sings softly, “Where, oh, where is my little boy, Wade? Where, oh, where is Wade?”

And then it starts to get dark, fireworks less than an hour away. Amy says quietly to her husband, “Winston, let’s skip the fireworks and head home. I think they might slip Wade back into overload. I know it’s a long drive, but I think we’ve had mostly a good day, and the boys—both of them—need to settle.” Winston grunts, and they go.

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As they’re heading through the mountains, they’re stopped by a bear and two half-grown cubs crossing the road. Winston waits them out. Wade then curls up quietly in his corner of the seat and sleeps as the moon rises, and the trees and tall grasses and curvy roads envelop him in peace, and again he sleeps, breathing deeply, the only sound the thrumming of the engine and the steady hum of the tires running on the road.

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**Christopher Kuhl** is a nationally published poet, and an active reader of his work. Recently, he has begun to explore short fiction; he has published all his stories, and in 2016 won Editor's Choice for his story, "Wade," in *Inscape*. His new poetry collection, *Night Travels*, was released in August 2017. You can learn more about Christopher and see samples of his work on his website at [www.christopherkuhlpoet.com](http://www.christopherkuhlpoet.com). Finally, when he's not writing, he paints and studies Hebrew. He is never bored.