

# August in Buck Creek

By

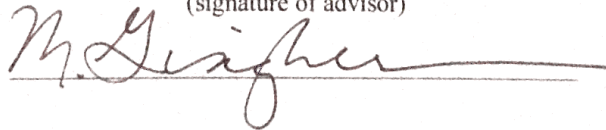
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Approved:  
(signature of advisor)

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "M. G. Lister", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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## WELCOME

Buck Creek, North Carolina, August, 2017.

You drive in through trees so clogged with rhododendron and dog-hobble that the first settlers, when asked how they passed through these mountains, said they swam through them. The highway curves along the river, hugging tight to the sides of the ridges, and if you aren't from around here, you drive slow. The locals will call you a Floridiot, even if your tag proves otherwise. You stop at the pull offs for the waterfalls and get wet in the spray of white mist. You follow the turns until the trees start to thin. More sun shines through the leaves.

The gorge widens to the valley where the ditches thicken with grass and Black-eyed Susans, yellow flowers with deep black centers. Chicory and ironweed bloom in spills of blue and purple on the banks. You drive past the Harrisons' stand for wild honey. The jars are full of June's sourwood nectar, distilled by the bees to a glowing orange. Open the windows, and the air is cooler up here in the hills and smells like wild onions shorn short with the grass. Cows watch you pass, jaws munching hard. A tall mohawked boy and a short lumpy girl are walking in the loose gravel of the shoulder. You stare as you roll by. More fields, uncut, gone to seed, mustard yellow and pale faint green. A fence with a horse, gnawing on a post. He is always there, and he has chewed his post a full foot lower than the others.

You pass Billy's Gas and More, its yellow letters declaring the Regular: 2.59, the Diesel: 2.92, and Eclipse Glasses too!: 5.00. That's why you come. The Great American Eclipse. Buck Creek lies in the path of totality, the campgrounds are cheap, and it's less well known and therefore less crowded than the larger or richer towns of the Blue Ridge: Asheville, Highlands, Franklin, Brevard.

The following stories won't be about the eclipse, but that is what brings you here. A once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of the sun disappearing. Perhaps you will find it a primal awakening, or perhaps just a spectacle no more anti-climactic than the news declaring North Korea's latest missile launch. You come, you have preordered the certified glasses, and you will stare at the sky.

But the sun and the moon were out all through August, not just on that one day, and this will be about before and after and the people who live here, what you could not have known while watching the moon cover the sun.

The fields curve up the sides of mountains, and the grazed ones glow green. There's an abandoned greenhouse with only the frame of metal piping left, and a raven is perched on top, beak open and squawking. A truck passes with a bed of blue trash bags billowing, headed to the dump. Whirligigs twirl from an awning. Intersections. A stoneyard. A sign at a turn, for a Christmas tree farm. Roads curve into deep shaded coves. And then, one more twist of the road back into thick shrubs of dog-hobble, and you cross Buck Creek. Right before it, the green sign informs you, Welcome. Population: 793. The town lies beyond. You pass through the thin fog that gathers above the water.

## THE HORSE TROUGH

It was two weeks after Ms. Chakroun started wearing the turban that I saw her skinnydip.

She was my neighbor who owned the horse field that butted up against my backyard, a sculptor from New York City who had fallen in love with the quiet beauty of the mountains. She'd bought the old Harris property, turned the barn into her studio, and built a house way back in the woods. I'd never been to the house, and Mom said I was to never go there, that "the whole thing's surrounded by demonic wooden sculptures, Satanic abominations."

All I knew of Ms. Chakroun was her horses. She had three. One of them, Jasper, stuck to the far end of the pasture where the field ran along the highway. The other two, Daisy and Earl, roamed the field, often coming to rest in the shade where the fence met the trees at the far edge of my parents' property. Earl was a chestnut brown horse with a black mane. Whenever I walked close his eyes would start to roll and his lips would start spluttering, showing teeth as big and yellowed as the church piano keys. He'd never let me close enough to touch him.

Daisy though, would walk right up to me, stretch her neck over the fence, and let me scratch her ears. She had a white and gray speckled coat and her mane and tail blew like smoke in even the slightest of breezes. Her teeth crossed over each other and stuck out, just like mine. I loved to watch her feet move back and forth.

When I was eight, Ms. Chakroun caught me rubbing Daisy's side through the fence. She spooked me before I had a chance to run.

"Would you like to brush her?" she'd asked. I stared back without saying a word. I'd heard all kinds of things about her. People called her Chakroun the Loon. Dad said she wasn't

like us, that she was a wild woman, loose, and pagan to boot. Called herself a witch like she was proud of it.

She stood in front of me, smiling. Her eyes were deep and dark, and her nose was hooked like a witch's would be, but her face looked crinkled and kind. I knew Hansel and Gretel though—witches had tricks to look nice.

I said nothing. She nodded and told me to hold on for a minute. I watched her walk away, hips swaying in bright red jeans that made her legs look like tubes of lipstick. She was wearing work-boots like the ones my dad owned, shoes I didn't know girls could wear.

She came back holding a big Ziploc of biscuits and a wide wooden brush. She handed them to me, and nodded to Daisy, "Go ahead, give her one." I pulled out a biscuit and Ms. Chakroun flattened my fingers down, "You hold your hand straight out, just like that."

Daisy followed the biscuit with her nose. Her lips moved over my fingers and her breath was warm, her whisker hairs tickly. I barely even felt her grab the biscuit, but when she lifted her head, it was gone. She swung her head back and forth as she chewed, and then let out a long whinny. Her lips flapped and her breath slapped my face, warm and slightly nutty, like oatmeal. She grazed my hand, looking for more, and left a big smear of slobber across my palm.

Ms. Chakroun laughed and wiped it up with the soft sleeve of her jacket, and suddenly I was gushing about the horses, how this one was my favorite, and that I called her Angel.

She told me that was a lovely name, but that she called her Daisy. "Daisy is an Arabian, just like me," she said.

I thought she was saying she was related to horses, and that made sense to me. Her arms and legs were just as muscled, her skin as rich brown as Earl's coat, and her hair just as wild too.

That night I asked my parents if I could start taking horseback riding lessons. Ms. Chakroun said she could give them to me for free. Mom and Dad looked at each other and didn't say anything for a moment. Then Mom shook her head.

"She can't be trusted," Dad said. "She ain't from around here." He told me how one of his friends Mike had gone to install a generator in the house and said she had a whole witch, Wiccan, wiki temple set up to draw spirits in. "You know better than to go down by the field."

Mom nodded for a minute, then added, "That and horses can kill you. There was a girl, Savanna Perkins, same age as me in school, and we were about your age when one threw her off. Her head landed on a rock and smashed like a tomato."

The next day I kept picturing girls with smashed tomatoes as heads, but when I saw Daisy by the fence, she didn't seem capable of that at all.

Ms. Chakroun caught me at the fence again and came over smiling. She seemed nicer than my parents. She left two brushes in a bag that she tied to a tree on my side of the fence. She told me to use them whenever I liked.

I started saving slices of apple at lunch and bring them to the fence after school, for Daisy—I'd rub the brushes down her sides, making all the hairs smooth before hitting the brushes together with a big smack of old hair and dust.

I was twelve when I saw her skinny-dipping in the horse trough. It was a Sunday morning in mid-April, and I was dressed and ready for church, but my older brother wasn't. Mom was inside yelling at him. Dad had already revved up the minivan and rallied my younger sisters to wait there with him.

I decided to take Tank for a walk. Tank was a goofy fluff of a mutt that never grew into the name my brother gave him. I walked him into the backyard. The leaves were teeny, wrinkled green things on the trees. Tank dragged me down the hill, following his nose to the far edge of our yard where our grass ran into trees that bordered Ms. Chakroun's field. This was my special place, far enough from the house to not be seen, but close enough to come running if I heard my name being called. This was where Ms. Chakroun had hung the bag of brushes years ago, and it was there, by the fence, that I saw Ms. Chakroun, her head in a bright orange flash of fabric, sprinting down the far side of the field.

Her legs flung out and she spun her arms out like wings. I was still young enough to hope that if I ran fast enough and jumped high enough I'd be able to flap my arms and take off. I really thought she might start flying.

Instead, she pulled off her shirt mid stride. She slowed to a stop at the horse trough.

The trough is a cement tub, the same shape as a bathtub, but deeper, at around 4 feet tall. It's fed by a pipe that carries water down from a spring in the side of the hill. I only learned this later. That first time, she leaned against the side, catching her breath. Then she kicked her shoes off. She pulled off her socks, then her sports bra, then her shorts and underwear in one yank.

I watched. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Hers was the first naked body I remember seeing. Her skin was honey brown and sagged around her middle. She had to have been near fifty, and her boobs hung loose on her chest. She pulled off the orange hat she was wearing and her hair was gone, shaved clean off. When she took the stone steps up to the edge of the trough, the sun hit her and made her skin glow.

Then she stepped in. With a splash, her body disappeared. I pulled Tank's leash close to me, thinking maybe it was magic, maybe a portal, something evil at work. But then her body



splashed out, sending water glittering up in the air. She made all kinds of sounds, and they seemed to echo off the hills, “WoohooOO!,” and “aye! Aye! AYE!” When she heaved herself out, the water made her body catch all the light.

Tank had his head stretched through the fence posts, reaching for a pile of manure. I yanked on the leash and ran. Mom was on the porch in a purple floral dress, hands in fists on her wide hips.

“Laura, put Tank inside. Get your ass in the car!” She pointed at the van. Mom only cursed when we were late to church, and it seemed every Sunday we were late. This time, she said we were all going to wait in the car until my brother was ready. Every minute we waited she’d add another chore not only to his list but me and my sisters’ too. Dixie and Kaylee were too young for many chores, so she mainly just meant me. I climbed into the back of the van, too shocked by Ms. Chakroun to be angry.

As we drove to church, I didn’t say anything. I knew if I told my parents they’d be mad at me; there was no way in hell I’d ever tell my brother, and if I told my sisters, they’d tell my parents. Staring at her nude body had to be a sin. I prayed to God for His forgiveness and wondered if this was what my parents meant when they said she was crazy.

It was after youth group, when the service let out and all the adults got coffee, that I found my mom with the crochet club, discussing Ms. Chakroun and her turban.

She’d started wearing turbans sometime in March. Ms. Jackson who led the choir said she’d seen her in the grocery store, with a big blue one towering on top of her head. “Absolutely absurd. Like, like that Willy Wonka girl that turns into a blueberry,” she was saying. Mom said she’d seen her at the mailbox with a red one on, that *she* thought it looked more like the hairdo of

the Queen of Hearts from Alice and Wonderland. They'd thought she was atheist, or that witch thing, now she was a Muslim?

I'd seen her with my dad at the pharmacy, and not knowing really what turbans were or what Africa was, I thought she looked like an African Queen. I stood by my mom as she took sips from her coffee, and I tried not to think of Ms. Chakroun's naked body dropping into the water.

That week I walked Tank in the front yard. I didn't go near the trees in the back and didn't visit Daisy or Earl. But come the next Sunday, I walked out to the fence just before church, telling myself it was only cause Tank wanted to walk there.

I lingered at the fence though, even after Tank had sniffed out the perfect pee spot. A few minutes later I saw her, running wild out of the woods. Her knees were horse knees, big and muscled. I watched again as she stripped off her clothes and dunked into the trough.

The next week, I started bringing Daisy apples and carrots again, something I'd stopped doing one winter and never picked back up. Four different times, even one frosty morning, I saw her come running from the woods to dunk in the horse trough. It felt like watching a movie, like watching something magic happen. I knew what my parents would say, that this was Satan's temptation, but no matter how many times I prayed for control, I found myself walking back through my yard toward the field. Later in church I would pray for her, and myself for watching.

It was late May when we found out she had cancer. Every Sunday service, before the all of us kids left for youth group, Mrs. Harris would read a list of people from the health clinic and all their afflictions. We'd bow our heads and pray for every broken bone, failing kidney, and

diseased liver in Buck Creek. When Ms. Chakroun's name made the list and was followed with, "and we pray that her body fights off her cancer," people started whispering. I opened my eyes, then closed them again and tried to pray. I couldn't concentrate on God though. I kept thinking about her shaved head. I'd thought it was just another one of her crazy art things, something people from big cities would do for show or fashion

When I found Mom after the service, Ms. Jackson was saying the turbans made sense now. Ms. Mabel was asking, did anyone know what type? Ms. Jackson said, "Ovarian. Which I mean, kinda makes sense, if she did a lot of, you know what."

I watched Mom raise her eyebrows, cross her arms tight, and say, "My oldest sister died from ovarian. It's a terrible one."

The ride home was quiet. Aunt Judy had died when I was six, and I didn't remember much of her other than the chocolate bars she'd give my brother and I when she visited for Christmas. She lived in Pennsylvania near the Hershey's factory, so she brought down blocks of chocolate as big as whole cutting boards. We only visited her once. It was the furthest from Buck Creek I've ever been, and all I remember is lots of flat brown fields and Aunt Judy on a couch with tubes hooked up to her arms. I hid from her in a sunny room with big windows and played with my stuffed animals.

When we got home from church, I asked Mom if she thought Ms. Chakroun would be okay.

"Help me unload the dishwasher honey." She had already opened it up and was stacking the plates in a pile. I pulled out the silverware tray and started sorting. She lifted out a plate crusted with barbecue sauce and started scrubbing it in the sink. She stopped and caught me looking, "Laura, all we can do is pray. We can't know God's plans."

It felt unfair—nastily unfair—that after all the Sundays and Wednesdays we spent at church, we couldn't know more. When the dishwasher was empty, I went outside, walked to the fence, and crawled over for the first time. Earl was close by and started running up the field, throwing and tossing his head back and forth. I ran after him. He thundered quick up the hill, and I had no hope of catching him, but it felt good to try. From the top of the hill I could see down the hill to the barn and the backside of Ms. Chakroun's house. I walked over to the edge of the horse trough and ran my fingers around the edge of the concrete. It didn't make sense that she could be so sick when she looked so strong. Ms. Harris had to have got the name wrong.

A few weeks later, right after school let out, Mom made a broccoli cheese casserole, but when I went at the side with a fork she pushed me away.

"It's for Ms. Chakroun," she said, "You and me, we're going to take it over."

"Why am I going?" I asked. I'd never been allowed near Ms. Chakroun's house.

"It's what neighbors do, and she's your neighbor, so you're coming."

"What about Dustin?" My older brother had just walked in from the living room where he and my dad were watching a basketball game. "Or Dad? What about Kaylee or Dixie?"

"She's gonna go to hell no matter what," my brother said, reaching into the fridge and pulling out a can of ginger ale. Dad heard him and started laughing.

Mom nudged me toward the door, covered the casserole with Saran wrap, handed it to me, and then grabbed a bible from our basket by the door. It was one of the red ones we handed out to tourists on Wednesday bluegrass nights outside DJ's Diner.

Mom drove us even though it was a short walk. The smell of the casserole filled the car, and the pan's heat burned my legs.

My parents had never let me take horseback riding lessons with Ms. Chakroun. They told me that being close with her was dangerous; you could talk to non-Christians, but only about Jesus. Anything else and they'd pull you away from God. I felt angry, like the casserole was just an excuse for Mom to tell Ms. Chakroun about Jesus, and that the only reason I was going was so Mom didn't have to risk her soul alone.

We turned at Ms. Chakroun's mailbox. It was a carved wooden horse with a latch on its chest so the mail slid in right where its organs would be. I'd never gone past the mailbox.

One side of the driveway bordered the horse field, and the other side bordered the forest in a bank fringed with bright green ferns. A minute up the road, the sculptures started. The first we passed was bird shaped, looming over the road with great arched wooden wings. Our van rumbled under it and into the yard. Mom made no move to get out. The yard was full of massive creatures, towering above the orange blooms of the flame azaleas. A huge wooden bear stood on its hind legs, shaggy fur carved out in thick waves, but with human boobs smoothed and polished on its chest—red nipples! Its front paws were raised up, and its claws matched the nipples, in a manicure of bright red. My mom made a loud gulping noise. She looked pale and doughy and scared. Another with metal talon feet, thick wood feathers, but with a head, human shaped, mouth open like it was screaming. Mom cut off the engine. I lifted the pan off my shorts and my legs were red and sweaty.

Finally, my mom said, "All right, let's go." I opened the car door and the evening breeze swept in. We walked up the path. The sculptures towered above us. On the porch there was a short gargoyle sculpture with a big wide head and bulging eyes. I stared down at the welcome mat. Ms. Chakroun's muddy work boots were right beside it. Mom knocked.

When she opened the door she looked much older than I remembered. Her head was shiny brown, a polished acorn seed without its cap. As bald as Aunt Judy's had been.

"Oh, Laura," she said, with a sigh. "Daisy's missed you."

Mom turned and looked at me, then turned back to Ms. Chakroun, and said, "We heard you're going through tough times, and thought we'd bring this over." She handed her the bible, and I realized Mom thought Ms. Chakroun was going to die. This was a last ditch effort to stop her from going to hell.

Mom jabbed me in my side with her elbow.

"Laura, tell Ms. Chakroun what you brought for her."

The casserole had steam that was beaded in droplets on the Saran wrap and dripping small puddles into the cheese. I held it out, staring above her eyes at her head and how shiny it was. Ms. Chakroun bent over, balanced the bible on the head of the gargoyle sculpture, and took the casserole with a smile. I stared at the bible. Mom thought she was going to die. I grabbed the bible and took off running.

I ran off the porch, past a towering sculpture of a mountain lion, past the barn, through the field, dodging piles of horse manure, faster and faster until I reached a far corner of the field. I dug my fingernails into my palms until my hands were bruised with the tiny crescent marks they made. I felt like a small child, angry and ashamed with something inside me I didn't know how to say or let out.

It was dark before I slipped in the back door of the house, still holding the bible. Mom heard me and met me at the door to my room. "In your room now. No dessert." Mom said I'd have to go over there straight thing in the morning and return the bible. "Why would you want to deny someone God's message?"

I sat on my bed, angry and scared, half praying for God's forgiveness, half questioning him, why did you make Mom do that? Why would you create cancer?

Ms. Chakroun knocked on our door not thirty minutes later. My mom answered, and even from my room, I could tell it was Ms. Chakroun—her voice was different than anyone else's in Buck Creek. It was like the tourists that came through in the summer. "City talk," my dad would say, "Thinking they're better than us."

Mom came and got me.

"Apologize, now."

I couldn't believe she was there, in my house. She stood in the doorway, her head wrapped in a yellow turban this time, and the fabric piled so high that she almost didn't fit in the door. My little sisters were scooping banana pudding from their bowls—Kaylee held a big spoonful dangling between her bowl and her wide-open mouth. I felt that same rising humiliation, the blush all over, a rising dread that she was here in my house, where she could see Mom's cross-stitched quotes and Dad's mounted deer heads. . . me, my sisters, our silly green carpet.

"I was just headed to the grocery store," she said, "I wanted to make sure you got home."

I swallowed hard, and blurted out an, "I'm sorry," as fast as I could.

She chuckled and shook her head, then said, "You did nothing wrong. Your Mom told me you love that casserole. I'd be mad too if I had to give away my favorite food."

"I—" She had to know that wasn't it, but she kept going.

"You can have it, I'm not a big cheese-eater, and if you really want to make up for it, you could start taking care of the horses." She smiled.

I could tell Mom was listening. She'd stopped washing the dishes in the sink.

“Okay,” I said, waiting for my mom to say no. She didn’t say anything.

The next day Mom handed me another red bible and told me to give it to Ms. Chakroun. “Don’t think you’ve gotten away with that.” On my way to the stables I hid the bible in the long-mildewed brush bag Ms. Chakroun had hung by the trees.

At the stables she showed me the shovels and brooms, the barrels of grain, the stacks of hay, and the calcium powder to sprinkle on Earl’s pile of grain. “He’s got bad teeth,” she said. At the back corner of the barn was a giant piece of wood, half of it hacked into the shape of an arm and a leg.

“Mom gives bibles to everyone,” I said, wanting to make sure she didn’t think that I thought what Mom thought: that she was going to die. She just shrugged, said, “It’s a form of love,” and I didn’t know what to say to that, so I started sweeping the floor.

I spent nearly every morning at Ms. Chakroun’s barn, letting the horses out in the morning, setting out the hay and grain, scooping up piles of manure, and sweeping the stables clear stray hay and dust. I loved being around Daisy and Earl. I even got to know Jasper, the horse that stuck to the other side of the pasture. When I pulled out the new hay, all three would come clomping toward me, tossing their heads back and forth.

I didn’t see much of Ms. Chakroun, but the sculpture at the far edge of the barn would have new pieces cut out. It looked like another naked body; I tried not to stare at it, and when my parents asked about the horses, I didn’t mention it. I’d lie and tell them Ms. Chakroun was reading the bible. Sin after sin piled up.

I took to reading books by the fence, hiding far enough in the trees, that if Ms. Chakroun walked through the field I could watch without being seen. I couldn’t figure out if she was like Satan or not. In some ways she seemed more like Jesus, the way she rubbed the horses noses,



and combed through their manes so patiently, the way she sometimes knelt in the grass like she was praying.

In July a friend of Ms. Chakroun came from the big city. She had short blond hair and tattoos on her arms. They'd walk together through the field. They walked slowly, the blond woman holding Ms. Chakroun's arm. One day when I walked into the barn, Ms. Chakroun was sitting by the sculpture, smoothing at it with sandpaper. The other woman was in the room, her shirt off, her belly covered in tattoos and one of her boobs missing completely like it had been hacked clear off with a chisel and sanded smooth. Music was playing so loud they didn't hear me come in. I backed out the door and ran home.

A few weeks later, I was reading my book when I saw Ms. Chakroun walk alone to the trough. She took off her clothes, and even from the fence I could see she was much skinnier than she had been in April. She stepped up into the trough and sank into the water. She stayed in this time and didn't come out spraying and splashing. She stayed so long I got scared. From my reading spot I could only see her head, a small brown dot, at the edge of the trough.

I crawled under the fence. I walked forward praying she would move, and that I would be able to hide before she saw me. She was facing away from me, just the back of her head, the curves of her skull showing.

I tiptoed to the side of the trough. Her eyes were closed. Her hands were resting in the water. Her face looked old and wrinkled. I reached out and touched her elbow, praying, *Please God, don't let her be dead.*

She flung up, still alive, very much so, and cursing. Her hand whipped out and hit me in the chest. I don't think she meant to. She was sputtering, coughing up water, her thin arms trying to cover her body. Her belly had a long puckered red scar across it, her head looked so skinny,

her eyes so big, her neck so long, but what scared me the most was how she started apologizing then, and how when she told me to go home, it looked like she was crying, or had been.

I didn't go to the barn the next day, or the next. After four days, Ms. Chakroun called our house and told my mom she wanted to see me. Mom offered to drive me over, and I told her no.

I didn't want to see Ms. Chakroun. She didn't seem like Satan or Jesus anymore, and I felt more scared than before, when I thought she could be either.

The next day, when Mom forced me into the car, and drove me over, no one answered the door.

Just three weeks later the blond woman from the city came to our house and told us Ms. Chakroun had died. Dad answered the door, but he didn't open the door the whole way, and didn't invite her in. He said we were sorry for her loss. We would pray.

I ran out to the field and sprinted up the hill so fast I had to stop and sit down and catch my breath. I tried punching at the ground but only scratched long green smears into my knuckles. Earl came running up from the far side of the field. His hooves tore holes in the grass, and I wondered if he knew Ms. Chakroun was gone, if horses could somehow feel it.

That night Mom didn't say anything at dinner. My sisters fought over who had the bigger serving of mac and cheese, and Dustin talked to my dad about the upcoming football practices and scrimmages. I watched Mom pick over her plate with her fork. At one point I thought I saw tears in her eyes.

That night she came into my room and sat down on my bed. She said I could talk to her about anything, but I didn't feel like I could say anything. She hugged me before she left the room. She said, at least she died with the Bible. I'd done all I could.

For the next two nights I had dreams of the bible and its red glossy cover, hanging in the bag by the fence, burning a hole through it. Jesus stared down at me from the cross, shaking his head, his arms and legs growing hooves like one of Ms. Chakroun's sculptures—I woke up nauseous before the sun was up.

It was Sunday morning, but no one in the house was awake. I didn't want to go to church, so I walked out of the house, barefoot. It was barely light out and the birds were singing, my toes grew cold and wet with dew. I walked to the horse field thinking maybe I'd hide there all day. I climbed through the fence and walked straight to the far side where the field bordered the forest.

There was a gate where a logging track curved up the mountain, the same track Ms. Chakroun had run out from on the mornings she skinny-dipped. I started running up the trail, the branches and leaves poking and stabbing at my feet. It felt good. It curved up up up, and I quickly started walking.

Near the top of the ridge, the trail curved out onto a cliff. Far to the left was Buck Creek. From there I could see all the way to Main Street, the steeple of my church and the Methodist one, the wide roofs of the school and the Ingles grocery store. Thin streams of fog stretched in the coves. It felt eerie up on the rock with all that below me, but Ms. Chakroun not anywhere. I kept thinking about how Mom said God makes plans for everyone, and how Satan leads people astray from those plans. I couldn't figure why God couldn't stop Satan, and it was all starting to not make sense in my head. The sky looked empty. I felt like yelling up to it, demanding answers from someone up there. I let out a small sound, then a bigger one. I screamed louder and louder, screaming at the sky even when I knew for sure no one would respond.

I ran back down the mountain, trying not to trip, my feet sliding on the wet leaves. I felt certain that the sky was empty, but there still was something surrounding me—ghostlike spirits

like the ones Ms. Chakroun was said to beckon, coming out of the trees behind me, chasing me, about to catch me any minute. I could see them like streams of fog emerging, hands out. I was next.

When I finally made it to the gate, I climbed over it quick. I kept sprinting, racing down the hill until I reached the horse trough. When I looked behind me, there was nothing there.

I held the edge of the horse trough. Green moss grew on the cement along the water's edge. I stepped on the wooden steps and they creaked. My family was probably still asleep. Earl and Daisy were chewing on grass off in the far corner of the field. Ms. Chakroun was gone. I was all alone.

First, my shirt, then my shorts, then my underwear. The sun hit my skin and the breeze felt like it was touching every one of my hairs. I jumped quick quick, before I lost my nerve. The water swallowed me up in a cold darkness that tasted like grass. I thrashed back into the air, making sounds without meaning or deciding to, sounds my parents would never make, sounds I'd never let myself make before. My toes touched the bottom, and it was thick with a slimy muck of dead grass. I let out a loud holler, one more time, and then heaved myself out. The concrete scraped across my belly. Moss smeared off in green chunks. I stepped back down to the grass, and the grass, the field, the trees, Earl and Daisy—they were all still there, still alive, and my own self there too—moving, shivering, shaking. I felt more alive than I ever had. I stood trembling, my body shaking, but the sun warm. Everything was alive and drying out in the sun, and it felt like Ms. Chakroun was somewhere in the air, blowing like a whisper. Daisy like a ghost of gray and white, tossed her head free of flies, and her mane flew out in a wispy white smear.

## THE GINSENG POACHER

Eddie came up early in the morning, with bad news. Eddie is Buck Creek's sheriff, only Reba's known him since he was born. He grew up down the road and would come over to play with her son. Now he's the only one who comes to visit, blaring his siren as he pulls in and always sharing the latest town gossip over a bowl of cornbread.

This time he walked in quieter than normal.

"The girl Sam's seeing, it's Robin Whiteside, isn't it?" he said. Reba nodded, and he let out a long sigh.

"She got pulled this morning," he said. She paused mid-slice through the last hunk of cornbread, waiting for him to finish. "Loopy as hell, and near twenty grams of marijuana and two jars of Vicodin in the glove box."

*God.* Reba had thought Robin was a nice girl, despite being the goth type. She always ran cash register three at the Ingles grocery store where her grandson Sam worked. When Reba went into her line, Sam was nearly always beside her bagging the groceries. She had racooned eyes and a tongue ring of all things—a tongue ring! But she made Sam laugh, which was more than Reba could do, even if Robin's secret was, as far as Reba could tell, in how she handed off the more phallic vegetables—eggplants, cucumbers, zucchinis.

Last fall they'd started holding hands, giving each other little kisses when they didn't know anyone was watching. Then, this spring, her belly started poking out in the isolated, telltale way that can only mean a baby is growing inside. One day when Robin grabbed the bananas to scan them, Reba saw a thin diamond ring on her finger, the same ring Reba had helped pay for

years back, when her son got Lottie pregnant when they were both just nineteen. Before the divorce, before her son left, and long before Lottie drove her from her grandsons' lives.

When Reba asked if there'd been a wedding, Sam stopped smiling quick. Robin explained; it was just an engagement ring.

She had to be near seven months when Eddie came in that morning with the news.

"I thought she was all right," Reba said. The tongue ring was unfortunate, but at least she didn't have the wild tattoos some of the other girls had. "I mean, her teeth are fuzzy, and she needs to learn how to brush them, but other than that—"

Eddie rolled his eyes. "It's in her blood. Her dad's been in and out of jail for years, and hasn't got but two teeth left to brush. She's got twin brothers too, just barely sixteen and already in juvie."

Reba plunked his wedge of cornbread into a bowl of milk and drizzled honey on top. She did so every time he came by. She slid the bowl in the microwave as he told her that the Whiteside family showed up at church sometimes, looking scraggly as stray dogs.

Sam *would* fall for a sad puppy kind of girl. When Sam was little, before the divorce, Sam and his older brother Jackson would come over during the day when Lottie and her son were working. They'd play outside, Jackson always trying to play some version of cops and robbers, but Sam only wanting to play with his stuffed animals. Sam would talk to them in his own mumbly made-up sounds. One spring a stray cat gave birth to kittens under the porch, and he talked to them in the same language. He cried for days when she took them to the pound.

And after the accident, when he was five, he seemed to take it the hardest.

So it made sense that he fell in love with Robin and that Robin was a druggie. A druggie's got to be about as sad a puppy you can find.

Reba pulled the cornbread from the microwave, and Eddie got quiet. He'd always had the appetite of a wild animal, only before he was so skinny it didn't matter. He'd been the youngest bucktoothed beanpole of the neighbor's kids, and loud as could be. She'd always feed him to get him to quiet up.

"How long will they hold her?"

"She might get sent to the county jail for a few days while they charge or interrogate her, and then a court date'll be set. Drug possession like that could take away a few months," he said.

A few months would be best for the baby, she thought. At least it'd keep them both away from the drugs. Her first great-grand baby would be healthy, blond fuzz-headed with fat-rolled calves just like Sam had been.

She handed the bowl to Eddie. He spooned a chunk of the cornbread into his mouth, and milk dribbled off his lips. He was no longer a beanpole, but at least he kept his teeth clean. She'd taught him how to brush them properly, in little circles to protect the gums.

This was her chance to help Sam out, and Robin too. She could watch the baby, spoon feed it mashed potatoes and pureed carrots. She even had a food processor, something she'd never had for her own son. And Mozart, she'd heard how it helped babies be smart. She could rent CDs from the library and play the baby music every morning, help Sam enroll in community college classes, drive Robin to AA meetings. Sam would get a degree. Maybe he'd work as a vet, something kind like that. He'd always been such a sweet and gentle kid.

Eddie slurped up the last dredges of cornbread and was out the door quick, giving Reba a quick hug before pulling his patrol car down the driveway.

Eddie was getting fat, she could feel it when he hugged her. His belly pooled up around his belt, and his neck bulged around his collar in a way that made the uniform seem more Spandex than khaki. Next time, she'd cut a smaller piece of cornbread. Maybe she'd start buying skim milk.

Milk. The baby would that too. And if Robin was in jail or rehab, it'd need formula. It was adding up to a lot of money: the classes, the formula, and all the extra food for the three of them. She'd have to harvest most of her ginseng. As soon as the berries were ripe.

One dried pound of ginseng roots sells for one grand, and she had several pounds growing in the wooded coves behind her house. She sold it to people who sold it to China where the roots go big in the traditional medicine trade. It was starting to pick up in Asheville too, labels for ginseng claiming all kinds of things. It increases energy, balances the body systems, reduces blood sugar, connects the soul to its sacred inner-core! It was silly, all those people spending money on a plant they could grow in their backyard if they tried hard enough.

Her dad had taught her young what the plant looked like. Poked at it with his walking stick and said, this is 'sang,' its roots are like gold, but we're better than pulling it up. Only lowlifes pull up *these* plants for money.

With all the crops he planted and harvested over his life, Reba knew now he'd just been angry that ginseng grew wild and the poachers ripped it straight from the earth without putting anything in or giving anything back.

She'd only started pulling the plants after her husband Doug died of a heart attack when their son was eleven. Her job at the farm and seed store didn't pay near enough.



She read up on the plant and found that Daniel Boone himself rooted for ginseng. Ginseng itself wasn't purely a lowlife thing, especially if she were to farm it.

She saved berries from the few plants around her place and used them to plant new patches the next year. It was more like a business than anything. The roots paid for school supplies, Christmas gifts, and new shoes. When her son got Lottie pregnant, the roots had helped pay for Jackson's baby clothes, stuffed animals, and pacifiers. Sam was born two years later, and again the roots covered extra expenses. It was only after the divorce, when Jackson was six and Sam was four, and then two years after that, after the accident, that Lottie started refusing the money.

With a baby, the bag-boy job wasn't going to be enough. He'd need her money, and maybe he'd finally see that she really did know how to take care of a family.

She grabbed her walking stick from the front porch and started off through the woods. A few yellow leaves flashed far off through the trees. The ginseng was yellowing, going gold in August like the daffodils of February.

Reba didn't know what China was like, but when she checked the patches, she liked to try to picture it: mist, steep rocky mountains, temples balanced precariously near the peaks, monks inside grinding roots with mortars and pestles. The color orange. Gongs. Flute-song.

It made her feel happy, that this special plant grew all the way over here, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of all places.

The poaching had started five years back. Through the nineties and the early two-thousands, she had over twenty patches, some nearly fifty feet across, thick with ginseng. Then the poachers started finding them one by one.

The morning Eddie came by, she thought she had five left.

She waded through the ferns toward the first patch, the largest and oldest patch of them all, already visible through the trees. Yellow leaves and red berries were no good. The five-pronged green leaves of summer were easy enough for a trained eye to find, but come August, the berries and yellow leaves were dead giveaways to anyone thirsting for easy money.

She stopped walking when she reached the thin spicebush that marked the start of the patch. The plants grew thick across the forest floor, sunbathing and shade-sipping in the uneven light. She pinched off all the yellow leaves and drove them into the dirt with her boots. A few of the largest plants still had green clusters of berries. She'd pull them as soon as the berries were ripe enough to save.

She walked on through the woods to the next patch.

She saw the holes from far off. The poachers had come and gone. The holes were fresh, still dark and damp in their centers with thin white roots tangled and frayed round their edges.

Eddie had shown her the mug shots of poachers caught around town. Men who looked far older than they really were, hollowed out by meth, with sagging tattoos and long, scraggly beards. Slurred, stoned, and the same ones who sold drugs to young kids and pregnant girls.

Her dad had been right about some things. Reba planted and farmed the sang, kept her berries in labelled jars, even watered her patches during droughts. The poachers were the lowliest scum; they just waltzed in and yanked it all up.

She needed to stop them but didn't know how. She walked quick back to the house, and decided to go to the grocery store, pick up some skim milk and see Sam. It had to be a bad day for him, and she thought maybe she'd think of a solution for the 'sang on the way.

His motorcycle was in the corner of the Ingles parking lot, splattered all over with mud. When she walked in, he was standing at line three, bagging groceries. No Robin.

He didn't look her way, so she went and grabbed milk, Windex, and paper towels.

She waited in line as he smiled, polite, at the man in front of her.

She set her basket down on his conveyor belt, and it slid towards Sam's hand. He looked up at her through his long, greasy hair, scanned the milk, and sighed. He didn't even grant her the scripted customer service line, "Hello, how did you find everything today?" She tried to come in everyday, just to show him that she was reliable, and that she cared. But each day, he barely even acknowledged her. The apron's sloppy bow around his waist made him look extra skinny this day. He stared at the screen as he read off the total.

"How are you holding up?" She asked.

He looked up again, through his hair. He nodded at the card reader.

"This has gotta be hard for you," she said, reaching up, thinking maybe she'd push his hair off his forehead. He flinched back.

"What?"

"Well, you know . . ." she started, but looking at his face, she considered for the first time that he might not know.

He stepped back, picked up the bag of groceries, and held it out to her.

"About Robin, sweetie."

He actually stared her in the eyes then, but with a look like he was staring at something rotten and reeking. His eyes were bloodshot. He looked exhausted. A woman came up behind Reba and dropped a bundle of green beans and two Rotisserie chickens on the belt. The smell

washed over them. Sam was already turning to her, already saying, “Hello, how did you find everything today?”

"Sweetie." She didn't want to break the news to him. He was glaring now. And the woman was waiting, fingering at the display of gum and candy bars.

She turned back to Sam. He'd had such a hard time growing up, and now at least he was in love, or at least thought he was in love. Same thing really.

“Come by later, and we can talk about it.”

He stared at her blankly.

“I can help, I'll make dinner, we'll make a plan. It'll be good food too, fatten you up.”

He looked past her at the other woman who was now adding a box of orange Tic Tacs to the belt.

Sam's face bloomed red all over as he repeated Reba's total: “Ten ninety-three.”

Reba handed him two twenties. He stared at the money, handed one bill back, and gave her even change. Then he started scanning the chickens without even offering a receipt.

Reba walked outside and used the Windex and paper towels to clean off his motorcycle.

The sun was hot, midday had already passed, and the motorcycle took a while to clean. Her back started hurting. People kept driving by, people she'd known years back but would rather not see. Old families that had hung out with Doug and her before he died. He'd been the social one, the one everyone liked, and when he died, people talked. They'd never understood why he married her, they said, *she's so quiet, too practical*. He'd been so young too, too fit to die so suddenly like that.

After the accident, they talked more.

It was 2003, Jackson was eight and Sam was six. They had been playing outside after school. It was true that Reba had been inside, not watching, but she had been making them oatmeal raisin cookies. It was true that she hadn't heard them yelling when Jackson was bit by the timber rattler. It was true that she hadn't had a phone to call the ambulance, but she'd piled them in the car as quick as she could, and she'd done everything possible to try to get him to the hospital in time. At the funeral, people talked, and afterwards, they talked more. *She didn't even cry*, they said. Eddie had come by after the accident and seen her cry. She felt that he was the only one who understood that she had already cried until she felt like all had been poured out of her.

She'd almost got the exhaust pipes to a clean, clear shine, when the SUV pulled in. She stood up. A drop of sweat rolled down her hairline and hit her hearing aid with a sizzling ring. A black bear was strapped to the roof of the SUV, and its thick padded paws drooped over the edge of the doors. It wasn't bear hunting season, but they pulled in as if it was. She thought about calling Eddie, but figured it wasn't worth it. He was pals with hunters.

A big man and two little boys piled out laughing, in muddy boots and camouflage overalls. When they opened the door, it caught the foot of the bear and the whole creature slid against the bungee straps.

Reba stared at the black bear, thinking about how in the sun it must be roasting. How if they didn't shop quick, it'd start to rot up there. Then she remembered her dad's old bear trap. Doug had set it up when they'd first brought it home in her share of her dad's inheritance. Doug hadn't asked her before leaving it in the woods, and then he'd left the trap for weeks. Reba had been the one to find the bear out there, starved dead, foot rotting in the clamp. She told Doug he'd need to clean the trap and regretted it immediately.

He hadn't thought the trap would catch anything. He said he just wanted to see how it was set up. He'd thought it too old to be able to really hurt a bear.

He was the kind of man like Sam, the kind that wouldn't even squish a spider. Literally. He'd trap every spider with a cup, slide paper under the rim, and cart the spider outside. He made a point to bury the bear; he even placed a rock as a headstone and everything. For weeks he was quieter.

He died not two years later, and the bear trap hadn't left the basement since. Reba wished he was here; he would know how to talk to Sam. Sam had looked so tired in the store. He'd been so quiet. How like a man, to be so quiet. How stupidly like a man to refuse money that he needed. She wished Doug was still alive so he could tell him right.

Staring at the bear on the roof, with all the light bouncing off the cars, thinking about the money they'd need and the ginseng patches ripped up, she had an idea. She thought about the poachers pulling up her plants and selling death-drugs to all the sensitive, gentle people. She'd never been gentle like Doug or Sam or Robin; it was up to her to stop the poachers.

The bear trap was under a pile of dusty inner tubes. They were deflated like old sacks of skin, but she remembered when they'd been full and tight. She'd taken Sam and Jackson down to the river once and let them bounce down, screaming and splashing.

The inner tubes, at least, weren't heavy. The bear trap, however, seemed to cling to the ground. Maybe thirty years past she would've been able pick it up, but she pulled at it with all her weight, and it barely budged. She thought about calling Eddie but knew he'd stop her if she told him her plan. She sat down on the floor for a few minutes, and then it came to her: the wheelbarrow.

She tipped her wheelbarrow on its side and inched the stock head, and the jaws, and the spring eye all over the rim. The pieces dragged and scraped as they slid in. Then came the hard part: tipping the wheelbarrow back on its rubber wheel.

Her whole body felt like it was crying, all the joints giving up and saying hello to Jesus at the pearly gates. It hurt like hell though, not heaven. She had to sit down on the handles, and she wished she had the extra pounds everyone else in town seemed to be getting. At least Robin and Sam were skinny.

She pushed and pushed, and eventually the wheelbarrow tipped back on its wheel.

It rolled nicely until the lip of the doorway. She pushpushpushed it over the lip and then down to where the trail started. There, it teetered dangerously, veering to the side when it hit roots. She should've known to stop, but this was just her kind of crazy—getting an idea and not stopping til it was done.

Luckily the grove was close to the house. The poachers had pulled out the far ones first, but now they were closing in. Even the house seemed to no longer be a deterrent.

She hadn't seen a bear on the mountain in years. They'd used to come to the porch and rip apart the bird feeders. Doug would curse at them, but he liked the challenge of fixing up the feeder and claiming it "bear proof" until the next furry visit. When he died, Reba stopped that nonsense. Birds could get plenty of food from the forest without depending on her. The bears stopped coming round.

This time, the only thing she'd catch or scare would be the poachers. The patch would be safe until the berries ripened, and then she'd pick the berries into a jar and dig up the roots for selling. Sam would be grateful. He and Robin both.

A few fat towhees chased and chattered at each other through the underbrush. She stopped and watched them, thinking about how singing meant they were courting. She dumped out the trap between the two largest ginseng plants, and covered the metal with old leaves and clods of thick black humus. Birds got it easy. They looked happy, flying around together.

Later, back in her kitchen, she made what Sam had liked when he was little, his favorite mac and cheese, special with black olives sliced on top to look like monster eyeballs. He didn't come.

The next morning, she woke early to go check the trap. She grabbed the pistol, for self-protection, just in case.

Outside, the morning was cool and misting, with a drizzle not hard enough to really be rain. The sound of the water dripping sounded like a soft sizzle, and she wondered if that was where the word drizzle came from.

She would start a new pan of cornbread as soon as she got back. That way it'd be nice and hot if Eddie stopped by. The trick to good cornbread was heating up the oil in the skillet first, so that once you pour the batter in, it sizzles. She would teach Robin so she could make it for Sam, and the baby too.

The ferns were wet, and the water soaked through her pants. The fabric clung cold to her calves, and the pistol was heavy and slick in her hands. She saw a red patch through the trees, and tightened her grip.

She hadn't expected to catch one so fast. Half of her wanted to pretend she hadn't seen the t-shirt through the trees, go back to the kitchen, and have a quiet morning: inside, warm, with the cornbread rising in the oven.



She kept walking through the ferns; it was too late to turn back.

A man in a red shirt was lying in the middle of the patch, his body bent over his leg in such a small, fetal pose that he looked like a child.

He had shaggy hair and the polo shirt and khakis of the grocery store uniform.

She knew it was Sam before he looked up, and a part of her wished she could have shot him before he saw her, so he wouldn't see her and she wouldn't have to see him and his face as he saw her. His left leg was bent in at the ankle where the trap's jaws had ripped into his skin and stained his pants red with blood. Lots of blood. His hands looked dirty with it. She needed to get back to the house. She had a phone now, and she could call for help this time. But the way he looked at her made her go still.

He didn't look angry this time. He looked scared. His blue, blue eyes were bloodshot and dazed. He pushed himself up, grabbing at his ankle like he was gonna scoot away from her. As if he could. She set the pistol down in the leaves and knelt to him. She was closer than he ever let her get in line three, and she knew it was the closest she'd ever be again.

She reached out to try to help, and he told her, teeth gritted, "Don't touch me."

She didn't. She knelt in the wet ferns, thinking she needed to call 911 for help and trying to think of where they had both gone so wrong. He smelled like cigarettes instead of baby powder. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his blue dazed eyes and his leg ripped up, but even when she closed her eyes, the rain drizzle-sizzled all around and she knew he wouldn't forgive her. He whimpered soft and squeaky like how he had when he was little. She could tell he was trying not to, but the pain was too great to stay silent. She remembered how small he'd been in her arms, how small Jackson had been in her arms too, both their hands like baby maple leaves, but with such tight a hold, grasping her fingers as she waved them up and down in front

of them. She wished Doug could have met Sam, that her son would have stayed in town, that Jackson had not taken that step by the woodpile, that they could have all been a real true family.

Eddie's siren came wailing up the driveway, cheerfully and loudly expecting the cornbread she hadn't yet made. She didn't even have whole milk for him, just skim. And she knew she was about to be lonelier than she already was. She could only think of how she had just wanted to help him. She wanted him to understand that she was not cruel, that she had always did the best she could, that she had just wanted him to let her love him.

## BELLY LAUGH

There was a creaking sound coming in the open window, and it didn't sound like the creaks that trees make on windy nights. And anyhow, there wasn't a breeze. The air was hot and still, the kind of August air so humid it stickies and slimes all it touches. Even in just my tank top and underwear, I woke up sweaty.

The house didn't have air conditioning, so on summer nights I left my window wide open for the breeze. This night though, no breeze, and above the normal frog and bug songs there was a low creaking groan.

I woke to the sound, but kept my eyes shut, trying to will myself back to the dream where I'd been swimming in a pool, fish? Brightly colored? Tropical? My friend Laura had been there, hadn't she, maybe a birthday party?

The creak was low and insistent with an up and down sway like someone wheezing.

I opened my eyes and twisted around to clock. 12:35. Six hours and ten minutes til the alarm would ring and it would be the first day of seventh grade. My outfit was stacked on a chair in the corner. The room glowed pink from my lava lamp, and I watched the bubbles glob up to the top and then sink back down. The creaking noise got louder.

It had to be a serial killer. Right outside, standing by the window. My older brother Jake liked to scare me with stories of serial killers over breakfast. It started with a joke about Lucky Charms, then snowballed. Jake liked watching crime shows like Criminal Minds, so he could connect any conversation to a famous psychopath and one of their gory, obsessive quirks. The stories came back to me at night. I would dream of serial killers that killed young girls, ones that

lurked behind trees by bus stops, and ones that crawled in bedroom windows. In the dreams, when I opened my mouth to scream nothing ever came out.

I yanked the sheet up from the pile at the bottom of the bed. I didn't trust that I'd be able to scream if I really needed to. The creak, someone's breath, right outside, a killer with a mask on that made that sound, like Darth Vader or Bane from Batman. Voldemort. A ghost.

But it sounded more like something swinging back and forth than someone breathing, so maybe it was a rope, a bloodied body hanging from the poplar tree's branches. I'd seen photos of that kind of thing: lynchings, suicides.

A lava lamp bubble rose up and merged with another bubble headed down. The pink shape bobbed and then split again into two.

It sounded more like something metal though, something, something very much like the sound my trampoline made.

Mom and Dad got Jake and I the trampoline for Christmas. It was big and blue-rimmed, so tall it had a ladder to crawl up with, and a high net fence that kept you from flying off.

Laura, Amanda, and I had played all kinds of games on it that summer.

My favorite was this one where we all lay down in a triangle in the center of the trampoline. Then we'd put our heads on each other's stomachs and countdown: 3, 2, 1, and all say, "HA," to poof our bellies out with all the oomph we could muster. Our heads would go bouncing up with the bellies, all jiggly. The goal was not to laugh, and to see how many rounds of HAs we could do. The clouds above seemed to move super fast with all our rocking.

Most of the time we just jumped, trying to see who could bounce highest. Sometimes the trampoline got so hot with the sun that it was like hopping on parking lot blacktop. When we soared through the air our bodies felt light and cool.

The creaking sound had to be the trampoline. But it was far too late for trampoline jumping. Maybe Jake actually wasn't "too cool" for it, maybe he just only jumped at midnight when no one was watching. Or maybe an animal was trapped on the trampoline, and I needed to save it—I crawled out of bed, pulling my bedsheets with me, and tiptoed to the window.

The moon was full and bright and made the trampoline look like a dark pool of water in the grass. A pale moving tangle twisted in the center. Body. Bodies. Naked.

I took a step away from the window and watched the trampoline sway up and down. Who was? They—what—Sex? On the trampoline?

At school I'd doodled my way through sex-ed, hoping that if I didn't look up no one could see me blush and no one would know I hadn't even gotten my period yet. Or held a boy's hand.

Kissing was gross. Anything else, even grosser. Laura agreed, but Amanda said we just needed practice, and if you wear lip gloss you taste good and can't even taste the guy. A win-win. In July, Amanda had told us about seeing her first penis, well first penis other than her little brother's, which didn't count. She'd been over at her cousins for the fourth of July and started watching a movie in the basement with one of her cousin's friends. They kissed a bit; he was pretty cute. She went upstairs to grab a snack and when she returned he had his pants off and his boxers around his knees. She said it looked like a giant earthworm. We all screamed.

Out the window the bodies were writhing. A man's back. Arms splayed out, legs sprouting from a rib cage, then the legs bending, curling up around another pair of legs, and a butt, oh god, it looked hairy, and I didn't know butts could grow hair. Who were they? Why were they on my trampoline? The trampoline springs creaked as they—that thing—heaved up and down. I squirmed away from the window.

I'd never touch the trampoline again, never.

Then, above the low groans of the trampoline, sharp gasps and moans. Then, "Dave, Dave, Dave!"

Dad's name was Dave. Oh, dear God. Arms, legs, the head, it looked like Dad's bald spot. And there, hanging on the netting of the trampoline, those were Mom's glasses with their thick wire frames. My parents. My *parents*? Down there, the bodies looked more like an alien mutant creature, a pale, squirming cave being with too many legs and no eyes.

I hadn't seen them this close before, had not ever seen them kiss.

I watched as they rolled off each other, two separate people again. I watched as they lay there, rocking, looking at the sky. Their bellies rose and fell. Below their bellies, there were dark patches—hair? Oh God. Back to the lava lamp. Outfit stacked for the morning. Butterfly shirt, black skirt, hi-top red sneakers. Six hours til breakfast. My schedule was math, English, band, gym, lunch, social studies, science. Jake would drop me off and then go to the high school. He would be a senior. He was dating someone. Did they?

I turned back to the window, not deciding to turn, but turning all the same—they were still there. Mom curled up near Dad, and he wrapped his arms around her. They were saying something down there, something that I couldn't hear, but then they started laughing, and I could hear Mom's nasal cackle join Dad's big belly laugh. They laughed so hard they started panting, and then when they caught their breath they laughed again.

The laughter rose up over the trampoline. I hadn't realized that was part of it at all, the laughter and cuddling, and I felt very alone in my room, wrapped tight in my bed sheet, feeling horrified, but also feeling like I was left out of a joke.

Then they were rolling over, crawling toward the ladder, grabbing towels hung from the blue-rimmed edge. They pulled out shoes from the shadow of grass under the trampoline. Mom slipped on flip flops, and Dad pulled on his Crocs. They walked, still touching, across the lawn.

I stared at the empty trampoline, the big black hole of the thing felt like it was sucking me up. In the center, the image of the pale creature heaving. I didn't want to touch the trampoline. I didn't want to do any of that, ever, but also, the way they touched seemed kind, so unlike the way Mom yelled at Dad to pick up eggs from the store, or the way Dad slammed the door when he came home from work. I stared into the black hole of the trampoline and saw sprouting hands, elbows, toes, calves, knees. Mom's toes flexed, the pedicure we'd gotten together at the salon the week before. Mom's calluses rubbed off with those spongy Swiss cheese stones, the dead skin sloughing off in a snowy pile.

The frogs started up with their throat-burp songs, and I kept hearing that laugh they'd had together big and round, bouncing up.

## POKEWEED

Caleb saw the bear in late evening. His sweat had dried to a salty crust on the back of his neck, and gold-orange light spilled over the tall grasses of his yard, making them shimmer. He sipped a beer, cold from the fridge. It was the same color as the light—deep orange gold, and it felt like the evening breeze, distilled, sliding through him.

All day had been spent with the crew, repaving Highway 215 up near Balsam Grove. Ten hours of asphalt steaming, listening to the sizzle as it poured out slow and thick, then the pound of the tamper and the hiss of it flattened smooth. Months ago, when he'd first started, he had felt like he was suffocating, like all the air was too solid to breathe. He'd been doing it all summer though, and now he was used to it. He coughed out gray lugies and when he blew his nose, his snot was black like his grandfather's who'd worked in the coal mines of Bell County, Kentucky.

He sat on the porch with his beer, and each sip was long and cold, like diving deep down to the cold rock bottom of a swimming hole. The shadows stretched long and purple under the trees. Caleb felt like the whole summer had slipped by in days of sun and evenings like this. The pure exhaustion seemed to make him feel more sane than he had any year past. After work he was too tired to feel all that much. The tug of sleep was too strong. He took another swig, and then saw the dark shape by the trees, just another shadow until it moved and walked out into the sunlit weeds.

The bear was massive. Its weight swayed with each deliberate step. The sun shone off the healthy black-purple of its fur. It followed its nose through the seed-heads of the bank.



Caleb watched the bear as it sniffed its way to a pokeweed bush. It pushed back onto its hind legs until it was at least six feet tall, and then snapped one of the hollow pokeweed stalks with one swat of its paw. The branch, laden with pinkened green leaves and thick clusters of black berries, crashed down, and the bear crashed down with it, landing back on its front paws with a thud. The bear tossed its massive head back and forth and pulled the berries into its mouth with its paws. It tore branch after branch, cluster after cluster into its mouth. When it was done, the bear rolled in the grass as if stretching after a good meal. Then it rolled over, stood up, and weaved behind tall goldenrod, disappearing once again into the shadows of the trees.

The next morning, Caleb walked across his yard and into the tall meadow weeds. The dew was steaming off with the first glints of sun, lifting up into a warm fog of wet plant smells. He pushed through the grasses, toward the pokeweed plant.

Its pink stalks were torn and split. The stems were crushed with bite marks. Splintery pieces stuck up at harsh angles. Most of the berries were gone, but he found a small cluster dangling between two leaves. He reached up and pulled the berries into his hand. They came off easy.

The berries were as dark black as the bear had been, but already they were streaking lines of pink against his palms from where he'd plucked them from the stem. He smashed them in his hands and his hands smeared a dark magenta. He'd forgotten how *pink* they were. Pokeweed grew on nearly every road bank near Buck Creek, but not until there, in the meadow with the berries smashed pink, did he even think about the day with Jake, his childhood best friend, during the summer before sixth grade.

Jake and him, grabbing the berries by the fistfuls, smashing them in explosions of pink on their buzzcut heads, rubbing the juice over their arms and faces, pulling shirts off and smearing

their chests with the berries. He didn't remember why they stripped naked, only that it felt glorious to smear the berries all over until both of their bodies were deep purple-pink. They prowled through the weeds, wild pink alien creatures traversing a deep, wild jungle.

Caleb didn't remember if they were trying to build grass huts, or find food, or escape from a prowling lion. What he did remember was his older brother Justin coming home early and seeing them, naked and purple, with seeds and dead grasses stuck all over their bodies.

*Faggot. Gay.* Arm twisted out and yanked toward the porch. His brother locked him in the closet. He was still there, naked and purple and itching, when their Dad came home and spanked him so hard he could barely walk the next day.

He didn't know what had happened to Jake. He must have crawled back to his clothes and walked home with his skin drying to a thick purple. He hadn't seen Jake again until school started, and even when Jake ran up waving, Caleb hadn't look up.

Somehow the spanking was the part he'd always remembered, and the words Justin and his Dad had used that day and weeks after. It had been years since he'd remembered the feeling before Justin came home, the feeling of Jake smashing berries on his head, the hot sun and the cool smear of the pink juice and seeds, the wild freedom of leaping and yelping.

He rubbed the berries through his hands and felt a thrill through his body. The sun was coming in streams through the fog, and he felt chills tingle up the back of his neck. He grabbed a stem and snapped it, yanking and twisting it until the shreds of stalk split.

Justin was long gone, deployed to Afghanistan back in 2009 and living in Texas now. Jake had moved away halfway through eighth grade, and Caleb had no clue where or who he was.

The juice on his hands started to dry and stick, and he'd need to leave for work soon. He didn't want to think hard on this, didn't know what it meant, so he walked quick back towards the house. He hoped the day in the sun would bake the memory away, and by evening he'd have forgotten it again.

## PAINTER

Dustin comes into the gas station right before my shift ends. I'm eating a Snickers bar and laughing with my coworker Michael. I've started loosening up, thinking maybe I'll make it through a whole shift without seeing him, but then the bell over the door jangles and in he walks, surrounded by the other members of his construction crew.

He doesn't look my way. He walks to the wide fridges full of drinks. He walks with a bounce to his step, a swagger in his hips. The Snickers sticks in my teeth. I look outside, trying to focus on the trees behind the line of cars filling up and how the leaves rustle. I try to breathe deeply, as if I am out there, alone, blowing calm with the strong steady wind, but my heart is already pounding faster and faster even though I'm standing still. My arms feel hot, tingly. I look down at the slick top of the counter. Michael, my coworker, adds curly hair to our latest shared doodle, and then walks to unlock the glass cabinet to grab the cigarettes he knows Joe, one of the crew members, will want.

I glance up. Sure enough. He's seen Michael leave, and now he's walking toward me holding bottles of lemon-lime Gatorade. They glow yellow. I stare at the bottles as he hands them to me. His hands graze my wrist, calloused and rough, and I remember how they felt like sandpaper against my skin.

"Slut," He says as he passes them to me, so quiet it could have been him clearing his throat.

I say nothing. This has become our ritual. At first, I tried to search for something I did, and apologize. Now I say nothing.

He only speaks when I am alone at the register, but he comes in nearly every day, and nearly every day I am alone, stuck behind the counter, waiting to tell him his total, scan his card, and offer him a receipt.

The other crew members come through next, holding bottles of Mountain Dew, Cheerwine, and Mr. Pibb. A bag of peanut M&Ms. Pork Rinds. They are laughing at a joke, and I fear that joke is me. My cheeks burn. They jostle, hitting each other with their elbows, chewing on thick wads of dip, already cracking open the bottles. The carbonation hisses. Their boots leave clods of red clay through the aisles.

This time, as soon as they walk out, Ms. Humpty Dumpty lady comes in.

“Sonya, those boys disgust me,” she says, and on this day I love her. She’s a regular. Ms. Humpty Dumpty isn’t her name of course, but I don’t know her name, so that’s what I call her. She lives up in Hemlock Heights, one of the rich retirees from Florida and Atlanta who “summer” in the mountains.

Most of the summering women never come into Billy’s Gas & More. They go to the Buck Creek Mountain Market that sells ten dollar cheeses and has a whole room for wine. But this lady is a summertime regular, an older woman who comes in khaki pants and a pressed blouse, pastel like an easter egg. Her shoes always gleam shiny white. Her hair’s curled back off her forehead, and even her forehead is shiny white, a peeled boiled egg instead. Mrs. Humpty Dumpty. I imagine that she plays golf. She smokes a pack of cigarettes a day though, which I like. It makes her seem like maybe she has a glamorous and rebellious past.

We have our exchange down pat. She knows my name from my nametag and likes using it. Says, “Sonya, I’m caving. Marlboros please.” I say “Yes Ma’am,” and move to the glass case

of cigarettes. Her fingers tap tap tap until I slide the pack towards them. Sometimes she adds a pack of gum, spearmint. She says, “Bless your heart,” and then leaves.

Today, she changes it up.

“You’ll never believe it,” She says. She lays her hand on the counter, her nails are long and manicured like claws. “I was going on a walk today and ran into my neighbor. She found her dog dead in the backyard this morning.” She sighs. “Mauled and torn apart by an animal in the night,” she says, and then pauses, fingering at her ring, “Apparently animal control came, and they thought the wounds weren’t right for a bear or coyote, looked more like that of a big cat.” She raises her eyebrows, then whispers, “a mountain lion.”

I nod.

“But they’re extinct,” she says, as if wanting my local badge of approval.

“That’s what they say,” I tell her. And it’s true: that’s what the official word is. The park rangers say they’ve been extinct from the Smokies since the 1930s, wiped out from all of the eastern U.S. except Florida. Me though, I’m a believer.

When I was little I saw a mountain lion walk down the road of our trailer park. I should say I think I saw this. It was so long ago and I was so young that I don’t trust it wasn’t a dream. But when I close my eyes I see the memory—the long body gold brown with fur, its thick tail swinging as it walked in the line of grass between the gravel ruts of the road. It was early, I’d woken up to Mom and Dad screaming. The sound of something slamming and shattering in their bedroom. My little sister snored through it, but I ended up outside, curled in my Dad’s blue folding chair. Every other memory of the chair has him sitting in it, a can of beer in one cup holder, the other his ashtray. It was still dark out, the sun not yet over the mountains, when I saw

the cat walk out from behind the dumpster. I sunk deep into the chair. The animal was massive, but its footsteps were silent. Its tail swept the top of the grass, then it turned off the road, twisted into the woods, and disappeared in the shadows. I'd walked back inside, wanting to tell someone.

I've heard rumors all summer too, word of a cat near the town, a big cat. An Eastern cougar, or, as the locals call them, a painter.

Early July, Mike, one of the regulars, came in for his weekly Powerball ticket and told me how he'd seen one while hunting for deer up on Big Laurel, isolated National Forest Land. He was on a four-wheeler trail that looped around the meadow of an old homestead clearing, and he as he turned a corner he saw a painter up the trail, just fifty feet away. He said he was so scared he forgot to even try to shoot it. It walked into the weeds though, didn't lunge or nothing, barely glanced at him.

A few weeks later, a night nurse told me something leaped across the road when she was driving home from her shift at dawn. It had looked like a huge cat, almost ghostlike, with a tail as long as the body.

The tail is always the proof. Bobcats don't have tails like that.

Cigarette-Easter-Egg lady herself told me weeks back about a sound she hears in the morning. She said she's an early riser, wakes before the sun, and she's noticed a call, maybe a bird? "It sounds like a scream almost," She said, and asked me what it could be.

I shrugged, and told her I didn't think any birds made that noise. Screech owls maybe, but they're more of a trill. I whistled a mimic. She shook her head, and said it sounded really like a scream, said she found it downright haunting.

I don't know any birds, but I've always heard that painters scream in the night as they search for mates.

When my shift ends I drive home, trying to focus on cats. Cats are good. My Mom, sister and I have five. Fang, Ranger, Zelda, Neko, and my oldest, Cupcake who I named when I was six. Now I'd have more respect than to name a cat that. I like the way they move, all quiet and powerful, delicate on the balls of their paws. I like to watch them walk through the grass of the backyard, how they stretch and lick themselves in the sun.

I could watch cats all day, but try as I might to focus my thoughts on cats and painters, Dustin is like a disease, a smoke, something tiny that sneaks in every pore.

I drive out of the gas station, through fields yellowed by late sun—I grew up with him. He was in my first-grade class and everything, but we were never really friends and never really not friends. Last spring, he started snatching my drawings in class. He'd hand them back and mouth, "You're good!" It made me feel special.

I drive past where the road dips over the creek, I try to look upstream, perhaps a painter will be lurking on the bank—Jeannie found out about the party, a last day of school bash to start the summer off wild. She begged me to go, and I didn't take much convincing. We'd never been to a real party before. No one around here ever really seemed to throw them, at least that we knew, so this seemed like something from the movies, something from teenage lives we would be living if we lived somewhere other than Buck Creek.

I drive down Main Street, past Ingles, past the drugstore, past the school—Jeannie told her parents she was sleeping at my place, and I told my Mom I was sleeping at hers. Our plan



was to go to the party, stay up late, then park somewhere dark and quiet and sleep in the back of Jeanie's station wagon. We'd never been camping, but figured it would be something like that, what all the rich tourists came here to do.

Dustin was the one throwing the party. His parents were out of town, and his Mom did real estate. He'd found the keys to one of her places she was trying to sell, up in Hemlock Heights, and was going to throw a party there.

I pass the fire department—The house was massive. It had a porch bigger than my family's doublewide. A real true chandelier hung by the door. People I recognized from school—girls on the cheerleading squad and a few boys from the football team were drinking cans of beer under it. Jeannie and I had gotten there early though, and the house was so big it felt empty. I went to the bathroom. The sink counter had granite countertops that had shiny flakes in them, like jewels in the stone. Jeannie had straightened my hair, but it had rained on the drive over, and with the humidity it was already frizzing back to its wild curls. At least my eyeliner was still on point, long winged cat eyes I'd drawn and redrawn five times.

The kitchen sink was full of ice and loaded with cans of beer. The music was loud, but it didn't even matter; the next McMansion was acres away, out of earshot. People were drinking like they did in the parties of the movies and laughing with their drinks in their hands—the kind of people I'd pictured people at parties to be. We had talked about both of us not drinking, so Jeannie wouldn't feel left out since she was the one driving. But as soon as we got there, I nodded at the sink, “Could I?”

I drank two cans of Bud Light in the first twenty minutes, forcing it down in big swallows.

Dustin found me in the kitchen and took my hand in his. How exciting, to have a hand in my hand, a warm boy hand, bigger than mine and thick with callouses! He grinned, said, "I didn't think you'd be here," and then led me to the porch. The air was cool and wet. The music was quieter, and I could hear the cicadas in the trees. A couple I recognized was making out, all pressed up against the porch railing. He led me down the stairs, said, "Let's go on a walk."

He said, "Hey, you're really pretty. I like the makeup." He noticed!

His hand twisted around my waist, his whole arm a coil of warmth. I was already dizzy; I leaned in to him. His body felt warm and strange. He was tall, with big thick arms. He played baseball for the school, I knew that much. I'd never been that close to a boy or a man before, never felt the wide flatness of their chests and the strange hardness between their legs.

He started kissing me, sloppy and smelling of beer. I hadn't kissed anyone since my eighth-grade boyfriend of one month, and we'd only ever really pecked. Dustin's tongue plunged in between my teeth, eager and amphibious as if trying to reach for something. God knows what. My tonsils? My uvula? My lungs? I pulled back. His arms pressed me tighter to his body, and his tongue thrust again, insistent against mine. I kept my eyes closed, waiting to feel something of what he was feeling that seemed so urgent. But I felt cold hot slimy. His hands, rough and sticky, pushed up my shirt, then up under my bra. This was gross, not that pleasant, but I also thought, maybe just go with it, this is new? kind of exciting? and exactly the kind of thing Jeannie and I had gone to a party for?

We ended up in the grass, his hands pushing all over me. I opened my eyes to his mouth, loose-jawed over me. The grass was wet and sticky. I stood up, still dizzy, the wide yard and tall hedges swayed. There was a pond across the way, with a large spouting fountain in the center.

He pulled on my wrist, grinning.

“I have to find Jeannie,” I told him.

“Oh, come on Sonya, she’s good without you.”

I pulled toward the house, and he finally let go.

“At least give me your number,” he said. He handed me his phone, and the screen glowed. The numbers looked like they were swaying, zooming in and out, and it took effort to press the right buttons. He slid his arm around my waist again, and I slipped out. I walked quick across the grass and back to the house that was full of light and music throbbing.

I pull into my driveway. Mom is in the kitchen mashing potatoes when I walk in. My sister Laney is on the couch, watching the season finale of “The Bachelorette.”

Laney’s fifteen, and just started her sophomore year of high school. She’s started straightening her hair like the lady from the show, spends like an hour on it every morning. I haven’t straightened my hair since the night of that party.

Jeannie was mad at me for disappearing, and when I found her she was standing by the sink with her arms crossed tight. She said the music was shitty, and no dancing either. The bonfire backyard parties in Oak Forest, our trailer park, were more fun. At the time, I dragged her to the bathroom, “Have you seen this counter though?” She shrugged. “Dustin kissed me,” I whispered, and she shrieked and started giggling, happy again.

We left shortly after, I was ready to go. She was annoyed, she lingered in the doorway, wanting to stay, just in case something exciting might happen, only to her this time. I wanted to leave though, I didn’t want to run into Dustin again. We drove up to a pull-off at the top of the road where a fancy gate blocked off the golf course and country club beyond. The pull-off had a

long view out over the mountains. I turned on the radio, feeling mighty fancy with the wide-open view. I tried to tell Jeannie about the kiss, about how *bad* it had been. She still had her arms half-crossed though, said most girls would kill for that.

We slept, curled close for warmth, in the back of the car, and in the morning the sun poured in the windows early. She sat up and looked down at me, started laughing, already in a better mood than the day before. She dragged me to the rear-view mirror so I could see the hickies, spotting my neck like the splotches of chewed gum flattened into the pavement of the gas station.

“Sonya, you slut!” she said, giggling wildly, proud. I laughed too, this was exciting, a new me! But when I touched the hickies they hurt.

At home, I grab the cat food and go out front to fill the dishes that line the edge of the lawn. I pick hornworms off the tomatoes. Their big green bodies looked like the gummies we sell at the store. I don’t want to squish the worms, so I throw them across the road into the Jacksons’ yard. They’re a rude couple anyway.

I walk down the road a bit. The Harrisons are sitting in lawn chairs, listening to oldie music, some lady with a soft crooning voice. The air is smoky from the burgers sizzling on the Smiths’ grill. The woods look dark though, spookier than normal. I think about the dog, way up in Hemlock Heights. I want the painters to be out there, alive and powerful, living up in the cliffs beside the rattlesnakes, walking quietly, stretching in a clearing, taking down a full-grown deer with one lunge from the shadows, alive and spiting all the people saying they were gone.

Dustin texted me the next day, asked me if I wanted to go out to the movies. The closest movie theater was twenty minutes away, at least, and there weren't any movies I wanted to see. I told him so. Jeannie kicked me when I told her, "Sonya, no!" she screamed. We both wanted the other to date someone, anyone, if just to have something exciting to hear about all summer.

The next day he asked if I wanted to get ice cream. I was at work. I looked at the message then put my phone away. He walked in near the end of my shift.

"I saw your car!" He said, out of breath and smiling in a concerned kind of way. "Did you get my text?"

I froze up, I lied, and I ended up outside DJ's Diner holding a ridiculously overpriced ice cream cone. When Jeannie and I wanted ice cream, we just bought a pint of it from Ingles, snagged a few plastic spoons from the diner, and shared it in Jeannie's car. The cones were ridiculous. The ice cream dripped down it and onto my fingers. He led me down the side road by the diner, and his hand was sticky too. Soon his tongue was pummeling deep in my mouth. I pushed away. He grinned, thinking it was a game, and pushed in for more, the meat of his belly tight and warm against mine, pressing me tight against the brick wall. He had rough stubble wet with melted ice cream, and it stuck to my cheeks.

I tried to enjoy it. When I got home, my chin was rubbed red and my throat felt dry. My lips were sore from his teeth.

For next week, he came into the gas station whenever I was working. He asked me to go on a walk. The next day, to go to the movies with him. The next day, ice cream again?

I told him I had to pick up my sister, I already had plans, I was too tired. He started texting me, saying he wanted to see me, and I didn't respond. Then, he came into the store when I shared a shift with Michael, my favorite coworker. We were laughing and co-doodling, a game

of ours where we switch off the pen after each new added detail. That day we had created a mermaid-Viking-shark riding a rocket.

Dustin came up, looked at Michael, and said the bathroom was clogged. As soon as Michael walked away, Dustin said, "It's not." And then, "God he's weird."

He put down his bottle of Gatorade. I shrugged.

"You know he's gotta be gay, right?" I looked up at him, shrugged. "You like him?" He said, lips twitching. I shrugged again, my lips felt sealed as tight as they could. He gave me a look of pure disgust, spit on the counter, then walked out the door.

That night he texted me: *What's up?* I didn't respond.

I woke up in the morning to a second text: *Slut.*

I pace my room. I don't want to eat, don't want to watch TV, don't want to draw, don't want to text Jeannie. When it all first started and I told her what Dustin said, she said, "Well, it's kind of your fault." Since then, we haven't talked much. Save for Michael at work, the summer's been lonely as hell. School is starting back up soon. I'll have to see Dustin in class, in the cafeteria, in the hallways. I feel nauseous just thinking about it.

I drift off sometime around two am, and the painters come into my dreams as big shadows in the trees, moving through the ferns without a sound.

I wake restless. The window is still dark. My phone says it's four a.m. I've had his number blocked for weeks now, but I still flinch when I look at the phone.

I go to the bathroom and scrub my face until I feel like my skin might rub off. My eyeliner from the day before runs down my face in streaks.

Neko, the youngest of our cats, jumps up to the counter. She stares at me through the mirror, and I think about how the painters slink through the woods in the night. They're dawn and dusk animals, I know that from a thick Nat-Geo BIG CAT book Laney and I had growing up. Ambush predators: they stalk, leap on the back of their prey, and kill with one spine-cracking neck bite. Creepy, but also the kind of attack that demands respect.

I walk toward the door and the can of bear spray we keep in the drawer by the shoe rack. Mom bought it after my dad moved out nearly ten years ago. She told Laney and I that if we were ever home alone and anyone tried to come in, we should grab the bear spray.

That morning way back, after I saw the painter walk out from behind the dumpster and into the woods, I'd walked inside and tiptoed toward Mom and Dad's room. It sounded like Mom was making noises in there. I stopped at the door to listen. Then the door swung open, almost hit me, and Dad pushed past. He walked into the hall and out the door. Mom was leaning against the side of her bed with her eyes closed and one eyelid already bruising, taking slow, loud inhales.

Dad left a few weeks later. It was only after he left, on his own accord, to be with a woman that lived in South Carolina, that she bought the bear spray.

It is cool outside. Foggy. Dark. I drive up to Hemlock Heights. The pull-off is high enough that it is above the fog that fills the valleys. The sky stretches out with stars, and a full moon hangs over the horizon. I get out of the car. The wind blows through my pajama pants as if they are nothing. I hold the bear spray in one hand, a flashlight in the other.

I don't have a plan, but I need to do something, anything to release the feeling that has been building up inside all summer, a feeling that I am heading toward something that could go

one of two ways—a deadened stillness like the sad, sagging look Mom has most mornings, or, an alternative that seems just as frightening: implosion, explosion.

I step off the pavement and into the bank of jewelweed. The stems snap under my feet, and their wet juices ooze from their stems and slime my ankles.

I push through the woods at a quick pace. In the lines of light from my flashlight, mushrooms are crumbled in shredded heaps from the heavy rain of a few days ago. My light shines off the wet skin of salamanders as they crawl through the leaf litter.

The woods are loud with insects, and even in the dark I feel like everything is vibrating, buzzing with some fever of late summer. The leaves are so thick that the woods feel claustrophobic. I feel like all kinds of animals could be watching me. The ground seems to writhe with crickets and millipedes and snails.

As I walk, I feel the hair on my neck rise up. My footsteps are too loud; they crack on stems and pinecones. I pass the backyard of one of the mansions. Without the shade from the trees, the green lawn is bright. The sky above the grass seems to be lightening.

I walk down a cove and up higher on the ridge. I hold the bear spray ready. I look behind me every few steps, but see nothing but shadows and the twisting trunks of trees. I stop to sit on a rock, and decide to wait there til the sun rises. The tense tingling in my arms is starting to leave, and I start to feel crazy, lost out here in the woods, thinking I'll stumble in one night across a painter, a cat long declared extinct by rangers who've spent years in the wilderness. I sit there as the leaves become clearer, the details of the tree trunks emerge, and the birds start singing. The sky pales from purple to pink to orange. I want the painters to be out here, alive in their full fierceness, unstoppable.

The sun crests the closest mountain and light glints off the wet leaves.



I rise from the rock, and start wandering back around the ridge, finding solace, that if worst comes to worst and I really am lost, I'll walk uphill. At the very least, the golf course is at the top of the mountain.

Then I hear the scream, a high-pitched woman's scream. The sound I've always heard that painter's make. I look around. There are only tree trunks and shadows of rhododendron, but the light hitting wet leaves makes everything hard to see.

I start walking fast. A hill curves up to my left; to my right there are only thick rhododendron. I walk straight along the ridge.

I hear the scream again and start running, even though I know running makes me look like prey, and I'm not a fast runner, and I don't know where I'm running. I run until I see a clearing through the trees and keep running until I am standing on a rock, an outcropping, a cliff.

I turn and stand with my back to the edge, holding my pepper spray high. I face the woods and wait for the cat to come lunging.

Then the scream rises up again, keening, and it sounds like it's coming from behind me, from the open, empty air. I turn and look out. The cliff is high, and I can see over the leaves of the trees below. I must have crossed over the ridge. The view from the pull-off faces toward South Carolina, but from this side of the mountain I can see the Buck Creek valley to my right. The mountain I'm on is shaped like a horseshoe it seems, and there, across the cove, close, there is another cliff.

The scream rises, and I think maybe the cat is over there, on that other mountain. But then I see the red flash, a t-shirt, a girl over there, small and standing at the edge of the rock, screaming at the sky.

I look past her, at what she is staring at. There is only Buck Creek. The mountains in full view, blue waves of them, the closest, green and fluffy and shuddering with the tremors of leaves. Her screams rise and fall. I can't tell if she is sad, or if she is angry, or if she is somehow both. But she is there and she is letting it all out. I watch her scream, and I feel that scream deep deep inside me, something strong like the painter, something that makes me want to go lunging forth, teeth and claws out, strong and powerful.

I climb back up the ridge until I see the manicured grass of the golf course. I wander along the edge of the tree line. There is a man up top, out early and silhouetted by the morning, taking swings. I feel as though I am in a dream, pulled forward and unreeling.

I walk until I reach the road and follow it back past the gate, over the fence, to my car.

When Dustin comes in, I am working the Sunday shift alone. I force myself to stare. My hair is wild. My eyes must be bloodshot. I am running on a Monster energy drink and sunflower seeds, and I am still angry. I feel the girl's scream deep inside me, even as my heart beats faster and faster, my body already responding to the details of his presence: his jeans tight on his thighs, his shirt, stained orange with dirt.

I force myself to watch. I remember the painters. Their fierceness. How they stare their prey down with no fear.

He picks up a bottle of Gatorade, fruit punch pink this time. He starts walking towards me, and this time I stare straight at his face. I focus on the zits that splatter his forehead. He is sweaty and sunburnt and looks at the floor as he walks closer. He glances up, then back down. He puts his bottle on the counter and turns to face the window. I stare at him and wait.

He glances at me, then shakes his head in a scoff. He shoves his hands in his pockets; he looks like he might laugh. I take his bottle and I want to unscrew it and pour it all over him. Better yet, hurl it at his face. Instead I scan it. He looks up at me, waiting for me to hand it back. I don't. I hold my hand out for the credit card. I have no intention of looking down this time. He passes it across the table. He is squirming.

I slide his card through the reader and hold on to it. I make him meet my eyes before I hand it over.

"Fuck you," I say. He doesn't look at me. He grabs the bottle and walks out the door. I watch him walk all the way to his car. Behind him, the wind is shaking all the leaves around. I realize I have forgotten to breathe and take a long deep inhale. The air is stale and smells like the cheese danishes that are rotating on the turnstile, melted into their wax paper wrappings. But this time it doesn't matter; I feel something release inside me, and I see his face in front of me, how he looked down when I met his eyes.

## SPATULA

I find the vomit in the morning when I let Ginger out to pee. The wood planks of the porch have soaked up all the liquid, and all that's left is a wide pile of half-chewed orange and red dog food. A whole family of black ants are swarming over it.

The air is crisp and cold, the leaves already yellowing with oncoming fall. It's the time of year cicadas drop from the trees, fat bodies twitching. Ginger, soft-nosed and mostly kind, a full-on fan of nuzzling, lunges for them like a puppy. When she chews, their wings make crinkly sounds like candy wrappers.

Ginger has sniffed out a perfect spot in the grass. She squats and her leg muscles tremble. Her poop is dotted with the red eyes of yesterday's cicadas.

I massage my shoulders, they are sore and stiff from sleep, and when she's done I let her back in and return to the porch with a spatula. I fling the vomit across the yard and down the hill. It lands with a slide on the dewy grass.

Back inside, I wash the spatula off in the sink. Ginger twitches by my ankles, watching. I pull eggs and milk from the fridge. It's Sunday, the day I make pancakes for myself as a reminder of all blessed things in my life. My boys have left town, and my husband died from a stroke two years ago. It was my hairdresser that recommended making daily rituals, something to look forward to, or just something to keep you going. I crack two eggs into a bowl and beat their yolks into a yellow swirl.

Ginger pads around, drooling puddles onto the floor.

It's later, when I am sitting at the table, slicing the pancakes into bitesize triangles, that I notice the ravens gathered in the branches of the ash tree. They are bigger than crows, and not

uncommon visitors. They come for my birdseed. They shell the sunflower seeds on my railing, cracking them with their big, shiny beaks.

I dribble maple syrup in a swirl atop the pancakes and add a smear of apple butter on top. Ginger whines at my feet. She is sitting pretty, hoping for a bite, but her gray-fur-flecked paws keep sliding forward, ruining her perfect pose of obedience. She yanks them back in, gives a whimper, and refocuses her gaze up, to me and my fork.

I watch her, worrying that she has a worm, or worse some kind of stomach disease or cancer. She keeps eating her food too fast and then throwing it all up, hungry again all too soon. I'm getting tired of repeating the cycle, but her eyes always win. *Please, I'm so hungry*, they say, and I'm already up getting the kibble.

She follows me from the pantry to her bowl, then looks at me, tragically. *Oh come on, not that shit again.*

"The vet says this is the kind you need." We have this talk nearly every day. This fancy food, the one she keeps on throwing up, is supposed to help her bones and joints. Osteoporosis, arthritis. We have the same conditions, only she is passing through all the stages in dog-year time. "I know," I say, "It's not fair," thinking, selfishly, it's not fair for me either.

I walk back to the pancakes, and my shadow moving across the window must spook the ravens, for they all rise, black wings unfurled, before settling back down on the branches. A few let out long cawing screeches, and then three swoop down to the grass. I look closer. They are gathering in the grass below the ash, where the frisbee of vomit landed. They yank chunks from the pile with their giant beaks. They pitch back their throats and toss down their food.

The birds, so big and black, remind me of vultures, or the three furies, winged creatures descended to peck life from all flawed, fragile creatures. I know it's Ginger's vomit down there,

not Ginger herself, but it feels too close. I go out on the porch and clap my hands. I wave my spatula, hoping to scare them away, hoping to scare away the deep deep fear inside me. I don't understand myself, but it feels like the ravens are pecking at something inside of me, hollowing out my very core. Ginger and her vomit is the only family left. She sleeps on my feet at night and sometimes crawls up near my pillow, snoring rank vomit breath in my face. I wake up to her farts, deep and acidic. Her legs twitch with her dreams and kick me in the side.

The ravens clear and I return to my plate of pancakes. Ginger is all done with her bowl and still drooling. She resumes her patient pose, knowing that sitting used to equal treats. She paws at my leg, a relict of the old hand-shake trick the boys taught her. I lift a bite to my mouth and she watches, eyes big and yearning.

"The ravens like your food." I tell her. "They say it's a bit soggy though." Ginger looks up, as if saying, *What's it to me if they like it. I am not a raven.* She rolls her head in big, impatient circles, and lets out a long yawn of impatience. *Good Lord lady, come on, this is crazy.* I laugh with her. She's right. I spear a piece of pancake and rub it through the slick sludge of syrup. I hold it out to her and she pulls the bite from the fork ever so gently. She bounces up, tail wagging and thumping against the edge of my chair. She sticks her head in my lap, and all the drool on her chin smears a line down my jeans. *Thank you, thank you! You're the best. Look how nice it looks outside.* I scratch behind her ears and watch the ravens take flight, up and out of the ash tree, one after another. Ginger twists her head away from me and barks at their big black shadows.

## NOODLE THE MOLE

Lacey, my little sister, is playing with her Barbies on the porch, and I am mowing the lawn. The grass in front of me twitches. Just a small patch of it, but in that patch, all the strands quiver up and down.

We've had bumps in the yard all summer now; when you step on one the grass collapses and your foot sinks down a few inches like you've popped a bubble beneath the surface. Dad has taken to standing on the porch frowning. The yard is his third child, arguably his favorite, and now, like me, it's got acne. From the look on his face you'd think the bumps were something more concerning though, maybe even contagious, like the bubonic plague, each bump a swollen node ready to burst.

At first, he blamed me. One day in May he got home from work and told me to meet him outside. He stood on the porch and watched me mow the yard, blaring his air horn when I veered out of line. Mowing an orderly lawn, he told me, is the first step to true vigilance.

So I watch my step, and I notice when the patch of grass starts moving. All of the strands in the patch bounce up and down. I release the gas handle. The motor sputters to a stop. Grass stops spraying. A few birds call out.

The twitching shifts, from one bunch of grass to the next, moving in a line.

I lunge for it, both hands out, without really thinking, until my hands sink through the grass and wrap around something squirming and soft. I pull the thing out and a wad of grass

comes with it in a ridge of green spines. The creature is fuzzy, round, warm, gray, with a spiky plant mohawk on top, just like mine. It thrashes at the air with giant pink-clawed hands.

I move my fingers to its belly, then run to the garage and drop it in the mop bucket. I've just caught one of America's most wanted—at last, pinned down, the tunneling culprit of mass destruction! I feel a surge of something like joy, maybe even justice.

By June Dad stopped blaming me for the bumps and started blaming the moles, but even still, when he surveys the yard he frowns. He looks at me like he thinks I've somehow, knowingly, sabotaged the yard and called the moles forth. Me, Michael, pied piper of the moles.

Now, I've caught one. Solid, real proof: it's the moles, not me. My hands are shaking and I feel more alive than I have in weeks—jumping, hooting, punching at the air, and then—

“Michael?”

It's Lacey. She's nine years old, but developmentally more like five or six. She has Down's, and Dad and Mom are at work. This summer they've decided I'm plenty old enough to watch her, so I'm on babysitting duty. She is holding one of her Barbies by its matted wad of hair. Lingerin in the bright square of the open garage door, she forms a menacing silhouette.

“Michael?” she says again.

I back up, trying to block the bucket, but she walks in fast, grinning like I'm playing a game. I step in front of her. She steps to the side. I block her again. She lurches past, then freezes at the bucket. She kneels down and stares in. I stare with her, quickly realizing that I've got to figure out what to do with it. No way I can show it to Dad, even as a badge of my innocence. He'd kill it for sure.

“It's a mole,” I say, feeling certain. It scrambles around the edge of the bucket in circles, its claws scratching loud against the hard plastic. I feel a kind of camaraderie toward the



creature, almost jealousy, appreciation. It's gotten to do what I only dream of: wreck Dad's lawn with thorough gusto.

I kneel down beside Lacey and we watch it sniff and shuffle around. It has no mouth or eyes that I can see. Its whole face stretches from gray fuzz into a long, pink, and shiny wet nose, with nostrils at the end like a pig's. I thought she would run out screaming, but instead she is silent. She pushes her tongue in and out of her lips, paying attention.

"It's cute," she finally declares, which shocks me really, because the thing is basically a tiny rat with creepy long fingernails. A creature from a death metal song. I mean, I dig it, but Lacey's favorite pastime is dressing Barbies. I figured moles wouldn't be up her alley.

"What you doing with it?" she asks. It's a good question.

Just the other week Dad said he was going to stop by the store and buy mole poison. A few days later, over dinner, he told us "They only had this silly powder, eighty dollars for a bucket. It soaks into the dirt with rain, makes the soil and earthworms taste bad." He rolled his eyes as he tore a bite from his chicken leg. "Apparently the moles eat earthworms," he said. I picked up a green bean and wriggled it, imagining an earthworm. "An eighty-dollar stink bomb. Doesn't even kill the things. Probably organic or some shit."

Mom sliced the breast off the rotisserie chicken and cut it in small cubes for Lacey. "I mean, Jesus, they'll hide out in the woods for a few days, and be back as soon as the stink wears off." There was a flap of chicken skin stuck to his mustache. "I might just put some good old fashioned arsenic out there," he said. "Like hell you will," was all Mom said. She didn't even look up from her slicing.

I can picture how easy it'd be for Dad to just fill the bucket with water and hold the mole under for a minute. Or just one swing of the axe. It wouldn't take much.

“Can we keep it? A pet?” Lacey is staring at the mole, eyes all wide, mouth open, her tongue running in circles, following the mole’s slow crawl around the edge of the bucket.

“We can’t, Dad hates these animals,” I say.

She looks up from the mole. She’s wanted a pet for years, but Mom and Dad always say no. Before she was born we had a cat, but he died while Mom was pregnant.

“We should let it go, down the road a ways.”

Shit. Her eyes are going all teary; her lips are going all blubbery. She starts crying all the time, usually over something ridiculously small, but as soon as she starts crying, it’s like she forgets she’s crying over something small, and her whole body starts shaking so hard it kicks her straight into an asthma attack.

Last week I called her a fatty at dinner, and she started crying and flailing so hard she knocked three plates into the floor. Lacey got another therapy appointment, I got grounded. I was supposed to get my drivers license before school starts back, but Mom pushed it back a month.

I can’t get grounded again, not over this.

“Yeah, we can keep it, just for a little bit, maybe until school starts. One week? Why not?” I watch her eyes.

She blinks, then smiles. Hallelujah.

“Bubbles!” she declares, staring at the mole. That’s the name of the beta fish at the library where Mom works.

“That’s a fish name,” I tell her. “How about something like Wormkiller, or Bulldozer? Claw? Slayer of the Underground?”

Her eyes tear up again. “It can be anything: Unicorn? Fairy?” I suggest.

“Noodle?” It’s her favorite word, god knows why.

“Sure.”

I go out to the garden shed where Dad has a big storage container half filled with mulch. Lacey follows me as I carry it into the woods and scoop more dirt into it. In the garage I fill up a watering can and get the dirt nice and wet. Then I take the mop bucket and tip the mole in. Noodle slides down slowly, but when he hits the dirt he starts clawing immediately. He disappears in a flurry of dirt.

I go back outside and finish the lawn, careful to press the sod back into the hole I’d torn up. When I finish I’m covered with grass clippings. I walk to the hose spigot, spray myself off, and then spray the lawn til the whole thing is clean-cut and radiant, glittering and smelling of the cut wild onions that grow where the grass meets the road.

When I go back to the garage, she has her hands plunged in the dirt, digging in circles after Noodle. Her shirt is smeared with mud. She can’t do anything without making a mess. I try distraction and offer her some cookies if we find a place to hide the bin.

She agrees, but she wants it in her room.

Mom still helps her go to sleep and pick out outfits. There’s no way that’ll work.

“Listen Lace, Noodle is scared of Mom and Dad, and Mom and Dad are scared of Noodle. If they see each other, they’ll all die.”

She doesn’t say anything to that, but doesn’t fight me when we put the bin in my room instead of hers.

Mom comes home first. I’m listening to music on the porch, texting my friend Jake about how I caught a mole with my own bare hands. He asks for proof, which makes me realize the

only witness was Lacey, and she was probably too busy dressing her Barbies to notice. I'm about to go upstairs to take a picture, when Mom pulls in. I wave, then head in quick.

Lacey is in my room, only she's brought her Barbies with her and is prancing their mud-smear'd bodies across the tub of dirt.

"Lacey! Mom's home!"

She looks like she doesn't want to move.

"Remember, Noodle and Mom are scared of each other." She looks at me with big wide eyes.

"Let's go wash your hands."

We're doomed. Hopeless. Her fingernails are caked with black soil, and she washes her hands slow, not scrubbing hard at all.

I walk back downstairs and Mom is in the kitchen, pulling a wine glass from the cabinet.

"Where's Lacey?"

"Upstairs. She got her Barbies dirty earlier, so I was helping her clean them," I say, feeling my blush start to rise. She has to know I'm lying.

She just nods, goes to the fridge, and pulls out the Tupperware of leftover chicken breasts. She starts shredding the meat for a salad.

Then Lacey walks downstairs, hands still wet, muddy hand prints on her shirt.

Mom asks how her day was, and I'm already angry that she's going to fail and the mole will die and it will be all her fault—but she just says, "Good," and shrugs. No mention of Noodle. Incredible. Usually, Lacey likes to blabber about everything.

Mom finishes chopping the chicken and starts making a salad. Lacey ‘helps’ by adding all her favorite pink foods: dried cranberries, radishes, grape tomatoes. Once she put sprinkles in our mashed potatoes, and Mom made Dad and I eat it.

At dinner, Mom and Dad chew slowly. The sound of their chewing seems louder than usual. Dad talks about all the people at work, but no words are going in—I’m just thinking how we are sitting here chewing and swallowing right under my room, right under my bed and the tub of dirt under the bed, and Noodle the mole burrowed deep in the dirt. I’m imagining Noodle above me, maybe hungry, and how we’ve got to get worms. Noodle, and what if he somehow burrowed through the plastic of the bin, dug straight through the wood floor, flew out the popcorn ceiling, and landed on a plop on Dad’s plate. I start laughing.

Mom looks me hard in the eyes like she’s trying to search for any redness from drugs.

The only time I’ve ever smoked pot, Mom caught me and postponed my license for three months. Now she’s always sniffing my hoodies, turning my pockets inside out, grabbing my chin and turning it so she can look deep in my eyes. I grab my corn cob and shove it in my mouth to stop laughing. Dad gives me a hard glare.

The only pet I ever had was Jasper, the cat that died a month before Lacey was born. He was an outside cat, a hunter, not a cuddler. He brought home dead things often: goldfinches, small deer mice, sparrows.

One morning I opened the door to fill up his water dish, and there was a baby rabbit lying on the welcome mat. It was crying in high pitched yelps. I picked it up, and carried it to my room. Its little body was the softest thing I’d ever felt. I placed it in my blankets, but it tried to

leap across the bed and fell on its side. As it fell I saw the stripes where Jasper's claws had sliced through his fur and the pink red of its muscles poked through.

My parents found out later that night. The bunny was still alive, but my Dad said it was bound to die. With wounds like that it would get an infection. Dad picked it up and told me to come with him. He told me how when animals are in pain, it's best to put them out of their misery. We walked outside to the stump where he split firewood. Then he told me to look away, and he killed it with a shovel. I started crying, and he tried to make it better by giving me ice cream, but I still wouldn't talk to him for days.

Lacey is stacking her cranberries in small towers. Dad spears a tomato, and the juice spurts. Noodle isn't injured, but he's a mole, which to Dad must be even more damning.

That evening Mom and Dad go on a walk, and Lacey goes with them. The house is quiet. I lie on my bed googling moles and texting Jake. We've got an Eastern Mole. They're common, not special or endangered at all. In fact, Wikipedia says golf courses provide them with ideal habitat, which means Dad should be proud of his mole population. They make his yard on par with golf courses.

I send a picture of Noodle's tub to Max, and he's not impressed.

The next morning Mom drops me off at Billy's Gas and More where I work. The morning is a slurry of lottery tickets, coffee cups, and slurpees, but at least Sonya's working with me, and she makes shifts pass quick. She's never seen a mole, so I show her pictures from Google. Together, we discover naked mole rats (holy shit! talk about creatures from the satanic

punk scene). At the end of my shift I put three bucks in the register and grab a tub of nightcrawlers from the cooler full of bait we sell to fishermen.

It's my one true afternoon off all week, but Jake is working at the grocery store stocking inventory and Nick is on some fancy-nerd Boy Scout trip, and those are pretty much my only friends. I start the two mile walk back to my house. I'm seventeen, driver's-license-less, and lame as they come. Cars blaze by, spewing gravel.

At least this day I don't have Lacey with me. Most days I pick up Lacey from the library's morning summer camp and we both walk back to the house. She's slow as hell, and she likes to just stop and stare at things every few steps. Maybe it's my mohawk, or maybe it's her wide-set eyes, but something makes people slow down and stare when they pass us. Sometimes she walks so slow I hold her shoulders and just push her forward. People give me mean looks, as if they would never dare to do such a thing.

A few of the football players roar by without even slowing. Their truck is missing the muffler and spews out a cloud of brown exhaust.

I'm playing guitar in my room when Mom comes home with Lacey. I don't even know they're home until Lacey has swung my door open and walked right on in.

"Noodle." She says, smiling.

I've forgotten to give Noodle worms, forgot he was even there, and I get angry at myself, at the whole situation. What if I kill him, all because I didn't want Lacey to throw a tantrum?

I yank the tub out from under the bed. It reeks musky soil smells. I'm going to get grounded for this, and god knows if I get grounded again I'll never get my license. I grab the tub

of worms out of my backpack, and decide my best hope is to gross Lacey out. I open the tub and dig a handful out.

“Look Lacey.” I hold them close to her face. I want her to run from my room, but instead she just looks at them and then at me. Damn. Maybe once I toss worms to Noodle he will tear them to shreds and suck their long writhing bodies up, and then Lacey will be horrified.

I use the trowel to dig through the soil until I break through a tunnel and nudge into Noodle’s body. I scoop Noodle out of the dirt. He comes up clawing, brown and wet with dirt, his tiny pig snout rooting through the air.

I toss a worm in. Noodle lunges forward, his nose darting back and forth until he finds one end. The worm flings itself into the air, and Noodle thrashes with it.

Lacey starts clapping, squealing. She’s delighted. What the hell? I watch her instead of Noodle. Lacey’s always liked princesses and dolls, but now she’s watching a mole slurp up a worm and laughing. She grabs another from the tub and flings it in. Then another.

Hell yeah! We cheer Noodle through five worms. Then he digs his way back into the dirt, and I toss a few worms on top so he’ll have plenty to eat in case he gets hungry.

Over the next few days, I water the dirt and add more worms with Lacey. Noodle is cute and doesn’t try to bite us. Miraculously, Lacey doesn’t say a thing to Mom or Dad. I start getting kind of sad that we’ll have to get rid of him.

Then, two days before the first day of school, I google “pet moles,” and find a video of a mole swimming in a pool. Freaking adorable, and who would of thunk that moles can swim through something other than dirt? I watch the video: the mole swimming in the clear blue pool paddles with his snout sticking straight up in the air. And he’s so clean, so dirt-free!



I go back to the google search, and the next hit is less cute.

*Moles are not good pets and die quickly in captivity.* Another article says they can die within just a few days from pure stress. Another gives them two weeks max.

I imagine Lacey going to search for Noodle, scooping through the dirt, and unearthing Noodle's cold and stiff body. Keeping Noodle won't work. My room already smells like dirt and something else, underneath that, something rank and distinctly mammalian. I think about the video of the mole swimming, and think maybe that's what I need to do. I'll throw a pool party for Noodle, a send off that will make Lacey happy and willing to let him go.

I introduce the idea to Lacey. She has always loved pool parties, so I tell her she'll get to take Noodle swimming, and I'll have cake or something, and then we'll have to let him go. He's a wild animal, it's only right. I almost feel like my Dad, dispensing, in what must sound like his patient methodical voice, another moral lesson. She doesn't look at me for a while, but eventually she nods.

"It'll be the best thing for Noodle," I say, and she nods again.

The day before school starts up, I pull the inflatable kiddie pool out of the garage and into the lawn. I can't remember the last time we used it. It's in the shape of a pineapple, bright yellow with a green spiky sprig on top. I blow it up until it is tight to bursting and then let Lacey fill it up with the hose. We carry Noodle's tub down to the stairs, careful not to spill any dirt.

It's around noon and starting to really heat up. I walk inside to get water and pull out the Zebra Cakes I snagged from the gas station. Every pool party deserves cake.

I go back outside and watch Lacey dig Noodle out of his tub and hold him. She strokes the back of his head and then leans over the pool and drops him in the water. He paddles around,

surprisingly fast for such a small, dirt-dwelling dude. Lacey climbs over the pineapple's rim and splashes in the water. She sits down and pulls Noodle up on her belly. I watch, stressed for Noodle, hoping he doesn't take this moment to up and die, but he seems to like it. He scrambles off Lacey's stomach and back into the water. I carry the tub of dirt into the woods, scoop some out, and return it to its place in the shed. Lacey and I eat some of the cakes and even offer some to Noodle. He eats it with the same head-thrashing vigor that he uses when attacking worms.

I go to the porch, take off my shirt, and settle into the shade. I'm reading there, trying to finish my summer assignment for English class, when I hear the sound of Dad's Jeep pull in.

Lacey is half asleep, with Noodle curled on her stomach half hidden in the shade of her hands. She has her back to the car, and she doesn't seem to see him or hear him.

I freeze, thinking maybe if I don't move, time will stop moving too. Visions of the future flash up: Dad seeing Noodle, Dad picking Noodle up, Dad taking an axe to his neck, Lacey crying uncontrollably, Dad blaming me for Lacey crying uncontrollably, me never getting my driver's license. Noodle, dead.

He gets out of the car, "You guys swimming?" He grins. "I got off early. I'm gonna take you guys to get some school supplies."

I don't need school supplies. I stare at him, try to smile, look calm, and think of something to distract him with. He opens the back door of the Jeep and starts looking for something.

I turn to Lacey. Her eyes are open now. She's heard his voice. She tries to cover up Noodle with her hands.

I feel certain that she won't do anything, that she will sit there not moving until Dad walks over and finds Noodle. She will stare at me the whole time, making sure, without meaning

to, that I know this is all my fault. Worse still, I can see her holding Noodle in the water, trying to hide him, and drowning him by accident, not knowing any better.

But then Lacey she reaches up, Noodle in her hands, glossy wet with water.

Lacey tosses Noodle out of the pool, and he flies through the air. A fur football with his little legs splayed out.

He lands in the grass that is already long after just one week's worth of growth, and his claws fly forward. Doing what he does best, he plows himself quick, back into the dirt.

Dad is walking over, and I can tell by his grin that he has seen nothing. I watch Lacey, amazed by how much I don't know about her. She is sitting in the pool, in her hot pink polka-dotted swimsuit that is far too small, her whole body tense, but she isn't crying. She's saved Noodle. She knew exactly what to do—just toss him back to the lawn where he would know how to hide. I step off the porch and walk to the pool. Dad beats me there.

“Hey, what's up Lace?” he asks. I turn and watch the grass bump shift across the yard, the strands twitching in a zigzag as Noodle claws a tunnel deep across the yard. I look back at my sister, smiling now as Dad asks her what school supplies she wants.

## THE DEER

The roof was so hot Nathan thought the bottoms of his shoes might melt. The black shingles, soaked in sun, powered all the heat straight up to his face. It was like standing in a parking lot on the hottest day of summer, only twenty feet off the ground.

He pried the next shingle off with his garden shovel. The heat and exertion of roofing wasn't new to him, in fact he found it meditative. When he'd told his wife Sheryl this, she'd laughed real hard and told him he was like the hippies in Asheville with their Hot Yoga, only roof-style. But he meant what he'd said. The repetition, the exertion, and the constant drip of sweat pounded and sanded all his thoughts into something slick and simple. After hours of prying and hammering, he'd climb down into the shade, take a deep swig of water, and suddenly all the fine-laced details of the world would flood back—the serrated fringe of a birch tree's leaves, the float of a swallowtail butterfly, every droplet of water that slipped from off his sandwich bag when he pulled it, ice cold, from the cooler. It was the closest he ever got to feeling enlightened. Nathan decided that when Buddha sat under his fig tree it had to have been at least ninety degrees.

This was a good job, an average-sized house with a flourishing colony of moss eating away at the shingles. His coworker Dale didn't understand the heat, sweat, love relationship Nathan had, so he'd chosen the other side of the roof where a big hickory tree splashed the house with shade and the moss grew thick. Nathan shifted to the next row of shingles, almost done with the sunny side. The shingles were thin and worn. His thoughts were already slowing, but the morning was taking longer than most to melt away. He'd woken to Sheryl standing by the bed, holding the bag of gummy vitamins, chewing and looking out the window. When she turned, her

lips barely twitched with good morning. At breakfast, she had poured her coffee slowly with a long sigh. He could tell she was trying, and he was trying too, but it seemed with every passing week it took longer for her to dredge up a smile. He pried off another shingle, turned, and flicked it toward the pile in the yard.

He turned just in time to see the car, and the deer in mid-bound, turned just in time to hear the screech, crash, and squeal of the tires as the deer slipped under the front wheels.

The car sped away. The deer's hind legs had been caught and flattened at the knees. It was moving though, not dead. Frighteningly alive. It pulled itself forward with its front legs. It dragged itself across the shoulder and down the thick weeds of the bank, smearing a line of itself into the yard.

Another deer, a small buck with budding velvet antlers, pawed at the loose gravel of the opposite shoulder. A dump truck roared by. Dale was somehow already up and over the roof, butt-sliding to the ladder. The buck across the road stepped forward, ears erect and twitching. Dale hopped down to the grass, and the buck froze, then twisted. Its whitetail flagged high in the air as it leaped into the tall pokeweed of the far bank.

The deer that had been hit was making sounds, high pitched yeaning gasps as it dragged itself into the yard. The deer had thin front legs. A doe most likely. Nathan could see her ribs from the roof. The sounds echoed with the heat, off the shingles and up around in the big blue of the sky. The deer and her sounds were the only things moving in the still August heat.

Dale had stopped in the driveway and stood watching. The deer's cries careened, and with each cry Nathan could see her rib cage heave.

Dale started taking slow steps towards the deer, talking in a calming voice one might use when trying to grab a dog's collar. The deer's eyes locked onto him. Her ears froze, and then,

somehow, she went silent, as if she had sucked all of her pain, all of the sounds, and all of the sky deep deep inside her. Dale took one more step and the moment broke. The deer lunged as if trying to bound away. Its front legs scrabbled and thrashed in the weeds.

Dale backed up fast. Nathan placed his shovel in the gutter and backed down the ladder. Off the roof the grass breathed up a cool fresh scent. He walked toward Dale, watching the deer's black eyes twitch back and forth. He could see every white petal of every Queen Anne's Lace flower, all the wings of the bees and flies and gnats that hung rising and falling above the grass, and every bead of blood that clung and dripped from the leaves and stems.

"What do we do?" Dale said.

Nathan knew a guy named Mike who lived down the road. They'd gone to school together back in the day, and Mike had always been a deer hunter. They'd been best friends in middle school before they got in a fight over a girl. Mike would bring antlers to school for show and tell. In high school he tied a rack to the top his truck. Around Christmas he attached his girlfriend's red cheerleading pom-pom on the front grill so it looked like his truck was Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

They'd been one of the couples that got married a few weeks after graduation and then got divorced a few months later. Nathan and Mike weren't close, but Nathan's wife Sheryl knew Mike's second wife through church, and Mike had a smoker in his backyard that he'd let Nathan's inlaws use once or twice for making deer jerky. Nathan knew him well enough to have his phone number. He lived less than a mile down the road.

The deer made another screech, and Nathan called him up.

"Could you come kill it?" Nathan said.

Mike laughed, said, “You can’t kill it yourself? Man, you a pussy or something?” All good fun of course.

“I don’t got my gun at work. We’re on 64, near Kiese Gap, thought you’d be closest.”

“Aw shit, I’m over in Brevard putting in a generator,” Mike said, then, “Is it moving?”

Nathan turned back to the deer. She wasn’t thrashing anymore, but her ribs puffed up and down. Every minute or so, she let out another series of screams.

“Yeah. Making these godawful noises.”

“Aw shit, I don’t know. Whatcha got?” Mike asked.

“Huh?”

“What could y’all kill it with?”

Nathan looked around. There was the shovel in the gutter, his pocket knife in the glove box, hammers in the back of the truck, and then, well, there was the truck. *Not the truck, not after already being hit, only to see it coming at you again, not the truck.*

“Well, hammer’s got potential I guess,” Mike said.

“Dear god, no.” Nathan stared up at the sky, begging, *Please God, don’t make me do this.*

“Knives don’t cut through deer-skin easy,” Mike was saying. “How about you strangle it. That’d be the quickest. You got Dale or John there to help you right?”

Nathan nodded. “Yeah, Dale’s here.”

“Alright, good talk,” Mike said, then hung up.

Dale watched, eyebrows raised, but agreed to the idea, saying, “If Mike thinks this’ll be the quickest, let’s get it over with.”

They both already had work gloves on, and now they pulled them tight. They walked toward the deer. It was definitely a doe, small and young. The skin on her face was smoothed flat against her skull. Blood pooled at her ruined knees.

They crouched around her. Nathan couldn't help but look at her eyes, at the wildness in them. She kicked her front legs like weapons.

"We've got to pin her down," Dale said.

"Nose goes," Nathan said. He put a finger to his nose and waited. He'd learned the trick from Sheryl. He pictured her now, across town at the salon, trimming hair.

"Oh shit, this is that thing. My nephew plays that."

So Dale was the one to pin the front legs to the grass with his boot. Her body still heaved. Nathan kept glancing back at her hind legs. Blood oozed out into the grass and gleamed on the strands like the drops of the hair dye Sheryl used. He thought of her scrubbing someone's head in the deep steel sink, her fingers frothed with clean bubbles. She liked to sit on the porch and watch the deer that visited their backyard. Last spring she'd come across a deer giving birth near their mailbox. She said the mother had licked the fawn clean until every spot of white shone. The baby had been able to stand after just thirty minutes. Sheryl still brought it up every now and then, saying it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. A miracle. She wanted a baby soon, they both did, but the babies didn't want to stay. He thought he needed to get her something nice tonight.

"Come on, she's pretty strong," Dale said, and Nathan looked back at this doe, thinking in a moment of horror that this could be the baby Sheryl had watched be born. Dale's boot that was holding down her legs shook.



Together they reached their hands toward her head. Her eyes rolled and reared. They stretched their gloved fingers around her neck. Nathan couldn't see how the day had come to this, and yet here they were, hands wrapped and squeezing against the doe's strong tendons and the pulse of blood in her jugular. Her throat pushed against his gloves, seeking air.

It took too long. Much longer than he'd expected. She kept tossing her head hard enough to take small sips of air, and the longer it went, the more wrong it seemed to let go. It took long enough for the sun to collect again on Nathan's ball cap and the back of his shirt, long enough for his sweat to run in trickles down his face and down his neck. He didn't feel dazed anymore, he felt painfully aware, wrenched back to the details he didn't want to see—the doe's eyes, wet, bright, and black, heaving and then going still.

## HERNANDO

When we reached the shore of the lake, I went to pull my towel from my bag, and a peach fell out with it. It landed on the loose gravel and dirt and rolled straight into the blue-green water with a splash. Dammit. I had stuffed peaches in the towel to give them cushion and packed them as part of the plan. A sweet, sexy fruit to help set the mood right.

Now my towel was slimed with patches of furry peach skin, and the peaches themselves, skinned and bruised, were spotted with the green towel's fuzz. Fabulous.

I'd thought the lake trip would be a good idea, something casual and fun that would squeeze out all the tension that had built over the last few days. We'd have a picnic, swim in the cold water, and be forced to cling to each other for warmth. We'd crawl from the water laughing, and realize we were fine, that our relationship was still casual and fun and well worth continuing.

But when Hernando got in the car, he barely said a word. He got in with a nod, placed his flip-flopped feet on the dashboard, buckled his seat belt, then crossed his arms—his strong, tan, beautiful arms. I spent the drive trying to jump-start the conversation. I kept changing the radio station, hoping for the perfect song to play. I desperately tried to think of something funny, witty, or brilliant to say. Everything got the same response. Variations on a syllable: huh, heh, mm, ah. The rare two syllable gift: uh-huh.

I stopped trying. The radio station flickered in static and he turned it off.

Friday had been a mistake. We'd gone out to eat at DJ's Diner, the place where summer tourists like to eat. It wasn't the food that made it special though, we were used to fancy foods.

We worked together at Buck Creek's Mountain Market, where our tradition was to snatch a bottle of the fancy wine after closing and make love in the storage room.

Friday was new though. We'd never gone out together, not like that. It was Hernando's idea, and even though the waitress—a real bitch I knew from high school—raised her eyebrows, being served like that, together, felt extravagant. Afterwards we'd gone on a walk down the path that twists alongside the creek. When we stopped to sit on the shore, he said, "I love you."

I did like him. He liked to read and could really make me laugh. At work, he'd glance at a customer, then at me, and then, as if pretending to mind-read the customer, whisper hypothetical thoughts. I did like him.

I just hadn't known what to say. He still lived with his parents in the Oak Forest trailer park with the other families from El Salvador that had moved into Buck Creek and worked for the construction crews and the country club up at Hemlock Heights. I still lived with my Dad, who thought Trump's plan for a wall on the border was a brilliant idea. It wasn't that I didn't like him, but love wasn't something you could just blurt out when you wanted to.

We parked off the side of the road by the boat ramp. The joe-pye weeds were so high that the pink flower-heads slipped in Hernando's open window. Big, bushy things, buzzing with small beetles and one fat bumblebee. Hernando lifted the flowers back up and out the window before rolling it up. He opened the door, and closed it carefully, as to not to slam it on any of the stems. He was always quiet and deliberate, but this time it felt like his silence left too much unsaid.

We walked through the woods, through the kind of weeds copperheads and ticks thrive in, and I thought, *well, that would make it easier*. If one of us got snake-bit, maybe the whole thing would be so traumatizing that we'd never want to see each other again. Nice and simple.

But we made it through. I stopped at the bank, proud of myself for leading us straight to the swimming spot. My cousins and I hadn't gone in years.

A large boulder stretched into deep green water. The lake was smooth and empty like I'd thought it would be on a Tuesday like this, and the trees of the far bank were dark green and inviting. Their reflection formed a line of bright shimmering green on the water.

The peach rolled into the water; he lunged forward and caught it.

"You brought peaches?" He smiled. And I thought, *yes! I do know him, I do know what he likes*. His softness, and the way he stood facing the water, the way he pulled off his shirt, the way his muscles moved as he did so—

I stripped off my clothes fast, so fast I caught my foot in the leg of my shorts and tipped over into the dirt. My bikini, an old, striped, too small thing, now felt ridiculous. He laughed and helped me up. I could feel my anxiety rising up in waves. There was no way he couldn't smell it.

The water could wash it off. I stepped back from him, ran across the length of the boulder, and launched myself into the cold water. I let myself sink down in it, away from his gaze. God he was beautiful, standing there. But so quiet, too quiet. Every work shift since Friday he hadn't said much. I couldn't tell if he was sad or annoyed. I let myself twist in the water, feeling more soft, fluid, and flexible than I'd ever be on land. Eventually, I needed air. I burst out: back to the light, all the green, and Hernando standing on the rock.

He stuck his toe in the water, made a face like he wasn't going to jump in, and then hurled himself up in a cannonball. I ducked under, laughing, to avoid the splash. Maybe this would work, maybe the swimming would wash away all this quiet, and we'd return to the shore and make love on the towel. It'd be calm, easy.

He surfaced and swam past me, heading out to the center of the lake, swimming with his head out of the water. I followed him with long, froggy strokes.

We swam far out, away from the shade of the trees, to where the water reflected all the sky. His glossy black hair gleamed back all the blues and whites.

He was still quiet, but at least we were moving now, with something to yank and pull at. The water felt especially thick. I caught up to him and dove down beside him. The water chilled and smoothed back my hair. The lake was fed by mountain streams, so that even in peak August heat, the water was cold.

The lake felt empty, as if there were no fish or turtles or other creatures underneath us at all. As if we were the only two bodies in the whole mass of water. We were near the middle, where the water dove deep deep into an old valley. I remembered the stories I'd heard growing up, how there were old houses down there, even a graveyard with skeletons. People had been flooded out from their homes.

I shivered, feeling the irritation of the drive ease away to a cold numbing fear. The lake was deep and cold, and I wanted to swim close to him. I didn't want what we had to end. I remember thinking, *I don't want to die alone*. Drama queen. But it felt real.

He was floating on his back, face turned up, eyes closed. My whole body strummed like a guitar! He was so beautiful! Dear Lord!

Still floating on his back, he said, “I feel like I can feel my whole skeleton.” And it was true, the cold felt like it was pressing past my skin and muscles, all the way to my bones. He looked goofy with only his head sticking out of the water. I saw in a flash, his whole body as only bones under the water. My body too, only bones. Both of us skeletons.

I dove deep until the line where the water gets colder. I let my limbs twist and pull and then spiraled up with my own bubbles tickling. I really did like him. I wanted to be worthy of him.

I splashed up for air just in time to see him cupping his hands around something in the water. I swam closer. It was a beetle that was spinning in frantic circles. Its wings had to be waterlogged.

It was a simple black beetle. About the size of his thumbnail, with brown underwings like greasy cellophane. Perhaps it had tried to fly over the lake and ran out of steam halfway.

I watched as he pulled it from the water. It scrambled around his palm, dripping, and still far too wet to fly. I watched as he reached up and placed the beetle on his head, in as quiet and deliberate as any other act he made. He placed it carefully, not even looking at me, not knowing I was watching. I knew deep down, that he would have done this no matter what, that if, on the shore, he had known the beetle was out there, he probably would have swum out and saved it, even then.

It clung to his scalp, blended right in with the shine of purples and blues.

He started swimming, head held high, pulling again at the water, back toward the towel and the peaches that lay on the shore. I followed, feeling a wash of smooth certainty as I watched his head float, a raft above the water, with the beetle drying on top like a crown. I did love him. It sent a thrill of raw, cold fear through me. I did love him.

## THE SNAILS IN THE TANK

I was studying for my biology exam the last night I saw my brother Corey. Well, half-brother. Unit 5: Mitosis and meiosis. I flipped through the flashcards, passing through the stages of cell division.

Outside, snow fell in a wispy dust, more ice crystals than snow. The setting sun cast through the snow-fog lit the air in a mauve-gray haze. Winter was giving a final kick, and I felt sorry for the few leaves that had budded early. Every thirty minutes I checked the school website for closings.

I finished a run through the stack of flashcards, checked again, and saw there was a two-hour delay. The next day's high was predicted to be fifty-five, a fine March day, and the district officials must've figured the roads would be clear by ten. I headed to the kitchen for a celebratory mug of hot cocoa.

Corey was sitting at the kitchen counter swinging his feet against the legs of his stool. I hadn't seen him since Christmas and had liked it that way. Before I could turn back to my room, he looked up, and his face froze a second and then split into a wide grin. He jumped off the stool.

"Hey, hey? Lil sis, you're not even gonna say hi? Come on, give me a hug!"

He walked, more of a bounce really, across the room with his arms outstretched.

Mom had him when she was eighteen, ten years before she met my Dad. He was thirteen years older than me and looked it. To use a vocab word from school, he looked haggard. A bit less skeletal than at Christmas when Mom had slid him full cups of non-spiked eggnog, but still swimming in his clothes. Then he had his skinny arms wrapped around me. He was cold from

the snow, and his hoodie felt sticky. I held my breath, not wanting to smell his cigarettes, or weed, or alcohol.

When he let go, I looked at him hard, making the calculations I knew to make. His eyes, less sunken, looked bright, focused in a way opioid highs didn't allow for. Buzzed short hair, clean-shaven, no sores on his cheeks, only scars.

"Oh come on, aren't you glad to see me?" He grinned again, rubbing his hands together before reaching for my hair.

In early December I'd left school early with a fever and came home to his car in the driveway. I headed to Mom's bathroom for the Tylenol and found him there, sticking his fingers in her bottle of arthritis medication.

No, I was not glad to see him. I turned and walked back towards my room.

He followed me.

"What's up in your life? Did you finish that school project, the one with the what's it called, terra, the, the aquarium but for moss and shit?"

"Terrarium. I finished that six months ago," I said.

"Hey, hey! Good job, yeah, of course you did. You're the smartie." He walked into my room with his hands thrust deep into his jeans' pockets. "Hey, you still the valedicwhatian, huh?" He bounced from foot to foot. Valedictorian. I nodded. He liked to remind me that I was the "smart one." As if. He was smart too, smarter even. It was something Mom always brought up in his defense. He'd skipped second grade, and in elementary school he'd had piano gigs all across town, hailed Buck Creek's eight-year-old Beethoven. But every time I saw him he called me the smartie, just cause I worked hard and got As.



My Dad had helped me hang the terrarium from a hook by the window. It dangled on a thread of thick fishing line. Corey circled underneath, looking up at the plants inside.

Corey lived beside the dump. I'd found the glass jar with him there, in the pile of glass recycling. Since then, he always mentioned the terrarium, taking a certain pride in the fact that he had "helped" me. Not like he had been there for perfecting the soil composition, or regulating the moisture, or transplanting the moss, the maidenhair ferns, or the wild ginger.

It hung above us, a whole tiny world of plants still alive after the winter. There were even a few gnats buzzing around, carrying on whole lives inside the clear walls. This was his first time seeing it complete.

"This is really good." He nodded. "The moss has even got those orange seed things."

"Sporangium. Mosses don't seed."

"Heh, yeah, that." He walked around it once more. "I got an aquarium a few weeks ago," he said. "That makes us twins or something. My aquarium's got snails, freshwater snails, four of 'em. They're super cute."

I smiled a bit despite myself. "Snails are cute," I said.

"Hey, you should come over sometime? Sister-brother bonding," He knocked my side with his elbow. "Dinner or something."

I was sure he didn't mean it; he was the king of saying things he never meant. I walked over to my notes all spilled across my bed and started flipping flashcards, thinking if I stared at the terms hard enough I'd will him out of my room.

It worked, in a way. Corey kept commenting on the plants, and he had a loud voice. Dad must've heard. He came in and asked Corey to come to the kitchen.

Corey gave the glass jar a tap and then walked out of the room. I looked up from my flashcards and watched the terrarium sway.

The next morning, I woke up later than normal. The glory of two-hour delays. I thought Dad would have already left for work, and Mom would still be finishing her night shift at the nursing home. I'd have the whole morning to myself. I'd drink the hot cocoa I'd never made the night before, and dunk Oreos in. Call it breakfast. I headed to the kitchen.

Dad was sitting at the counter in his pajamas. I thought maybe his office was closed for the snow. With him home, Oreos were a no-go, so I grabbed the box of bran flakes from the pantry.

Dad cleared his throat.

"Josie, I need to talk to you." When I turned to look at him, really look at him, he looked exhausted. "Last night, after you went to bed, I got a call." He paused, and he looked so serious. I didn't want to look at him. I pulled a bowl from the cabinet.

"Here sit down." I turned to him, then back to my bowl. "Josie, look." I turned and I watched him tell me that Corey had died. In a car crash.

I poured bran flakes into the bowl. Flakes scattered slow from the box. I shook it harder. There, the bowl was nice and full. To the fridge, to the milk. My face felt hot. The jug of milk, cold. He repeated himself.

I poured the milk up to the line where the flakes stopped, capped the milk, put it back in the fridge, stared at the bowl of cereal, then stared at it harder. I was missing the banana. I needed to slice a banana on top. The bananas were on the counter by Dad.

He grabbed my wrist as I reached for one. His grip was gentle, too soft almost, as if he was scared to squeeze too hard.

“Josie?”

He let go of my wrist. I looked at him and his eyes were full of such concern, confusion, and pain, that I had to look away. I stared at the bananas spotted with brown. I felt like he was searching for something in me, and if I made eye contact he’d surely see it wasn’t there. He’d see I didn’t feel anything.

He said the police called around 3 am. Corey’s truck crashed on Highway 64. It was icy. He was under the influence. Dad’s hands started to tremble at the edge of the counter.

I grabbed a banana, split it off from its bunch, then walked back to my bowl. It was expected, well not this, but something like this. Under the influence. I yanked the peel down. The banana had an oozing brown bruise all down its side. I sliced it into the cereal anyway, waiting to feel sad.

“He hit a tree, no one else,” Dad said.

*Good*, I thought.

My bowl was ready but I didn’t feel like eating. Dad told me we would have to leave soon. After the call, Eddie, the sheriff, had come and picked him up so they could drive slow, in a car with chains, and tell Mom together. Mom had stayed at the station, and Eddie had dropped Dad back home so he could tell me when I got up.

“We should leave in twenty minutes or so,” he said. “The roads are safe now, and your mom and I have to identify the body.” He must of seen the look on his face. “It’s Corey, no one else. Just a legality.” He said I could stay in the car if I wanted.

I swallowed hard. Any other morning Mom would be driving home, exhausted and ready for pancakes and ice cream, her favorite breakfast-dessert combo before heading to bed. Now she was sitting in the police office, waiting to see Corey's body.

The bowl of bran flakes sat there, waiting. The fridge started rumbling. Dad closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was still in his flannel pajamas. I wondered if he had moved since getting home, and then I felt I must move, had to move, needed to move immediately.

I walked to my room, grabbed my flashcards, and stuffed them in my backpack. I couldn't go with Dad; I needed to get to school and take my test. I brushed my teeth hard, moving felt good. I brushed them harder. My gums started to bleed, and I stared at the blood in the mirror, stared at my face full of cells dividing fast, flipping through the phases of growth and division in rapid succession. Interphase, prophase, prometaphase, metaphase, anaphase, telophase, cytokinesis. I blinked. *Keep moving.*

Dad was still in the kitchen, so I took the hall to the door. The driveway was blindingly bright. The sun was out and the snow was already soft with melt. I walked down the driveway to the highway that led to the school.

Corey was 13 when I was born. When I was five he moved out of the house. Two years later he dropped out of Western and moved to Asheville, where he lived for three years before losing his job and moving back home, skinny and addicted to narcotics. I didn't know about the drugs at the time. I was ten. I just knew that when I got home from school, I'd find him dazed out on the couch listening to music. Every night our parents would yell.

He lived at home two months before finding a job at the gas station and a room for rent in Oak Forest, the biggest trailer park in town. He didn't come home much, except for money. Mom would ask him how he was doing, and Dad would start in on straightening up, going back to school, and acting like an adult.

"We are a successful, smart, hard-working family." This was Dad's favorite line. He loved to repeat it. Dad was one of the few doctors in town, and not Corey's biological father. To this day I don't know who Corey's dad was, or if Corey knew either. I just know that Dad liked sending out Christmas cards where we all had matching flannel shirts and looked healthy. He liked the "my child is an honor student," bumper stickers. He doesn't like complications or imperfections, and Corey was the problem child and knew it.

When I was in eighth grade, the trailer park flooded and he moved in with us again. A few months later he got caught selling narcotics outside the high school. Dad paid for a lawyer who worked out a bargain for three months in jail and then six months in rehab.

He came back when I was fifteen. He'd put on weight. His face was round, and he talked about how he'd started cooking in jail and was thinking of going to school for "culinary arts." "It's a fancy-dancy word for a degree in chefing. AB Tech's got a good program," he said, and he seemed serious. He'd start a restaurant. Have open mics and live music.

He tried out eggs for me in the mornings before school. Scrambled, poached, and sunny-side up. I liked watching him jump around the kitchen. He'd always been hyperactive, but that winter it seemed like his energy was directed into something. He made big pots of soups, handing me the stirring spoon so I could taste-test the new combos of spices he'd add. Over dinner Dad would ask about job prospects and Corey would say, none yet. Mom would say, well that's fine for now. We'd all get real quiet, and I'd eat the soup too quick, scalding my tongue.

Dad finally talked to the owners of the DJ's Diner and got Corey a job there in the kitchen. He moved out of the house and started renting the place by the dump. For nearly a year he seemed okay. Mom was smiling and whistling all the time for no reason. It drove Dad half crazy when he was trying to read his medical journals, but I could tell he was glad to see Mom so happy.

Last August he invited me over to his house for home-boiled peanuts, saying "I remember you like them, right?" Like was an understatement. They're the food of the gods, my own personal ambrosia.

Mom and Dad were both working that Saturday, but I'd just got my license, and they said I had to go.

When I arrived he'd already boiled the peanuts. We ate them on his porch with big glasses of water on ice. When the wind blew, the smell from the dump was strong and rank with rotting food, but his place was still nicer than I'd expected. The grass was tall with flowering weeds, and the fence between his yard and the dump was tangled with kudzu vines. The kudzu wove the fence into a thick green wall, and the wind carried the smell of the kudzu too, and its sickly sweet purple flowers. Corey joked that he had a new life plan. He'd solve both invasive species control and world hunger in one go, so maybe it'd be ambitious enough for Dad this time. Easy too, he'd just harvest kudzu flowers and make kudzu jelly. He'd never run low on supply; he'd start his own canning company and everything. I popped the peanuts from their soft shells; they were swollen, salted, and spiced to perfection.

He asked me about school that had just started up, and I told him about my terrarium assignment for Earth Science. It was his idea to check the dump for containers. The glass pile reeked, but we found the large jar near the edge of the dumpster. He climbed in to pull it out.

When we got back to his porch he seemed fidgety though, nervous like he was trying to impress me. I didn't know what to say. I told him I had homework to do and left without going into his house.

Less than a month later, Eddie called Dad up. He'd grown up with my Mom, and by this time knew our family well. Corey had been in a bar fight, and Eddie had him at the station. When Mom brought him home, both of his eyes were swollen and purple, the same color as the eggplants he'd sliced and fried into fritters just months before.

The cycle restarted. He lost his job at the diner. He lost weight. I'd see him walking down Main Street, sucking hard on a cigarette. He found a job twenty miles away at the bowling alley in Cullowhee, serving drinks and hot dogs to drunk college students.

Then, in December, I'd found him with his hand in the pill bottle. He put the bottle down fast. I was scared of him then, his eyes looked wild and I thought for a minute he might hit me or something. Instead he started smiling. His eyes twitched and he twisted his hands back and forth.

"It's not what it looks like."

"Like hell it isn't."

He started laughing, nasally and forced, "Please, c'mon Jos, be chill, don't tell Mom," and I knew I wouldn't because I didn't want to make her any sadder that she already was. She'd already started taking night shifts because she said she couldn't sleep at night anyway.

"You're a selfish dick," I said, and it felt good. He laughed, as if trying to deflect, and then pushed himself past me and ran out to his truck.

A few weeks later I heard loud sounds in the kitchen. I thought it was Corey drugged up on something. Maybe he'd been stealing the candlesticks Mom kept polished in the dining room. Maybe Dad had caught him in the act and now he was beating Dad over the head with the

candlesticks, killing him. He'd never been violent, but I still sat on my bed imagining the whole thing before tiptoeing into the kitchen to see Mom just reorganizing the pots and pans.

I squinted as I walked into the school parking lot. The pavement was salted and sanded into a dirty slush. Cars were already pulling in, and the light shone off the windows.

I passed a jeep and saw my reflection in the window. I'd forgotten to brush my hair. My cheeks were red from the wind. My eyes were still cell-dividing, not crying. *My brother is dead*, I told my reflection. I'd always considered myself an only child, and now I was one. The thought felt sudden, terrible, and cruel.

People were getting out of their cars. Lydia and Jami, laughing. A few guys from the baseball team, dressed up for an away game. The light shone up off the cars, bright and blinding. Too many people, too many bodies all moving and laughing and making too much noise, too much light.

I walked past the parking lot, and off the pavement onto the school practice field. The snow had melted to small white clumps in the grass. All the thawing had turned the field soggy; my feet sunk in and water seeped through the canvas of my Converse and into my socks. Last week had been rainy but warm, almost hot, and frogs had laid eggs in the puddles of the field. Now the eggs were half-frozen in hard murky lumps.

Corey lived about a mile from the school. I walked in that direction, faster and faster, out past the line of school buses and along the highway. Water ran down the sides of the road in mud-gray frothy streams, full of bubbles from the slosh of cars. I reminded myself, over and over, *Corey's a dick, a royal, selfish dick*. I walked to the rhythm of the words.



The night before, I'd listened to Dad and Corey talk in the kitchen. Dad asked if he had the night off. Corey worked evening and night shifts at the bowling alley. Their voices got louder.

Corey said he'd been clean for a month.

Dad asked how someone who is clean would be dumb enough to lose his job, again.

Corey said, "Come on, you know my boss. He's scum. I'm better off without him."

Dad said, loud and clear, "You think Dave Shull's a lowlife? Jesus, what does that make you?"

Corey with his soft, skinny belly and jeans that didn't stay up, addicted to pain-killers, now jobless. I wished he hadn't come by. I wished we could all just forget that when we ate family dinners he was probably sitting in his house by the dump, half wasted on beer and Vicodin, microwaving a hot pocket, sliding it onto a Styrofoam plate to eat alone in his kitchen.

They kept talking, Corey saying, "Oh, come on," asking when Mom would be home, and then starting to laugh in his pinched, sing-song way, as if trying to pull Dad back to his side, as if really wanting to find something funny.

Usually he waited until he got money or waited until Dad pushed him out. The night before, he'd said, "Look, I gotta get back to my house," and then walked out the door on his own.

The door of his place was locked, but the front steps were clean and slippery with ice that hadn't yet melted. I walked around back. The chain link fence was a mess of tangled, leafless vines. I could see right through to the piles of aluminum cans and the dumpsters topped with

snow. The back door was locked too, but I pushed at one of the windows, and it slid up easy. There were no screens. I hopped inside.

It smelt good, like incense almost. I'd expected B.O., or the smell of food gone bad, but it smelled part-cigarette, part-perfume. There was a blue bin by the door full of empty plastic bottles. He was recycling like I'd told him to. The room was cold, less cold than outside, but by no means warm, and there was a keyboard against the wall and a guitar on the couch. I'd forgotten that Corey played music, figured it something he'd given up long ago.

I flicked the light switch, but the lights didn't come on. I walked to the kitchen, and those lights didn't work either.

How long had the electricity had been turned off? How long had he been without a job before finally coming to our house for help the night before?

I walked into the kitchen. It was clean. A bunch of yellow-green bananas sat on the counter. There were glass jars arranged in rows, but not beer bottles, pretty blue ones he must've found in the dump. Bright red sumac seed heads stuck out in winter bouquets, just like the ones Mom likes to make. There was a pot of water on each of the stove's burners. A lighter on the counter. The oven was open. Even then I wondered if this was some sort of lab set up, for meth or something. Corey was smart enough to figure out the chemistry.

I squatted down. There was a tank of water inside the oven. An aquarium.

I stood back up. Gas stoves didn't need electricity. I picked up the lighter, moved a pot of water off the stove, and lit the burner. The flame rose up, blue and white. I held my hands just above it, letting the warmth rise, remembering how Corey had left the house so quick into the argument with Dad. How he said he needed to get home to something. How he'd told me he had new pet snails and invited me to dinner.

He must've been using the stove and oven to keep the aquarium warm.

I pulled the tank out of the oven. The sides were smeared with fuzzy green algae and cleared, slimy mucus trails, but I didn't see any snails on the walls. Bright orange pebbles lined the bottom. In the middle sat a fake plastic shipwreck. No snails there either.

Then I saw them. Four of them, bobbing at the top of the tank, under a film of murky, white ice.

The ice was easy to break through. I reached in and scooped the snails out.

A few years back, when Corey was living at the house during the good period, the cooking months, two chickadees had hit the kitchen window and fallen to the porch. A hawk had spooked the feeder, and they'd fled straight into the glass. Corey and I were sitting in the kitchen, and at first, he made a joke, "Oh my, star crossed suicide!"

But then he hurried outside and picked them up. He told me that Mom had taught him this trick years back, that when birds hit windows they stun themselves and, in the winter, without moving, they'll freeze to death. If you pick them up and keep them warm, they often live.

He handed me one and we took them into the kitchen's warmth. The one in his hands had blood on its beak, and I thought it was a goner. Mine was soft and still, but its eyelids twitched, telling of life. The feathers were more finely laced than I'd ever imagined feathers could be, and after twenty minutes mine was squirming in my hands. I took it back to the porch, and it stood up, its tiny talon feet tickling and scratching my palm before it stretched out its wings and flew off to the closest tree. Ten minutes more and even Corey's was moving, taking twitchy steps up and down his forearm before hopping into a fluttery flight to the porch rail.

My hands were wet and numb with cold. I slid a pot of water over the burner and placed my hands in the water, trying to warm the snails.

I looked out the window. A few crows rose up from the dumpsters and then settled back down. I wished it was still August. Even with the smell of the dump, at least the fence and grass would've been green, the air would've still been warm, and no ice would've formed in the tank or on the roads. I willed the snails to move, just a little. *Come back*. But even as the water warmed from cool to hot, the snails stayed still as stones. I turned the burner off, and felt the tears, rising fast.

## FAT MAN

Joe, my boss at the McCandler Christmas Tree Farm, is outside reading the bible when I crest the hill. He has his shirt off, and his rolls of pink belly shine in the sun. He's lying out on his favorite red pool chair, a liter size Styrofoam cup cradled in the crook of his arm. He must've just got back from Billy's Gas and More where he buys a Jumbo Cherry-Coke slurpee nearly every morning. He says it's his summer caffeine fix—cold and delicious. To me, the red-brown slurp looks like the pureed pulp of some poor animal.

He's picking up the cup and taking a long suck at the straw when his shit-head son Bailey walks out the door.

Bailey's fifteen and already skipping school and stealing beer. I find small piles of crushed cans under the trees. He's skinny as hell with his head shaved near to the skin, and what's more is that he's done this to himself. It's not like his Dad forces a razor on him like my uncle did to me in some military desire to keep me from smoking pot or ever getting a girlfriend. Bailey must think it makes him look tough, and it does. The skinhead, the leather jackets, the combat boots, his scowl—people step off the sidewalk for him. Even now, on such a hot day—a nice day really, full of sun but windy enough that it's not too hot—out he walks with thick jeans and heavy leather boots. I back up into the line of Fraser firs. I don't want to deal with him, not today, not when I've finally gotten my gut up to walk up here and tell Joe I'm quitting.

Bailey stomps down the steps of the porch and walks across the lawn past his Dad, head jugged forward, fists pumped deep in his pockets. Joe puts down the slurpee.

“Hey, where're you going?” he asks.

“Nowhere, Fat Man.”

That's what Bailey calls his dad, and that's what his dad let's him call him.

He keeps walking across the yard, headed for his moped that's parked in the ditch of the gravel driveway. You don't need a license for a moped. People call them liquor slickers cause most riders are alcoholics who've lost their licenses. But, Joe, in a real stroke of genius only Jesus could explain, bought one for Bailey's fifteenth birthday.

"You need to move the trash to the truck so I can take it to the dump today," Joe says.

"Do it yourself, Fat Man," Bailey says, knowing full well what a feat that would be, for Joe to lift those trash bags and carry them across the yard. Walking with a cane is hard enough for him; Joe's the kind of fat that requires special order clothes.

Bailey walks into the weeds of the ditch, heading for the moped. His Dad is heaving himself forward as if considering standing up. I crouch in the line of trees, getting angrier by the second.

Most fifteen-year olds I'd cut some slack, but a few months ago I found a dead bunny near the trees, polka-dotted with shots from a BB gun. I've found dead songbirds too. Once I even found an indigo bunting, its blue feathers spread out like a paintball explosion. Joe gets calls from the school every other week about Bailey getting in fights, and he should've been expelled by now, but I think the school feels bad. They know the McCandler family, they know Joe, and they know Bailey's Mom died from breast cancer seven years ago.

But, I don't know, my own Dad died when I was fourteen, and it certainly didn't make me want to hurt anyone or shoot birds from the sky.

Plus, about a year ago, Bailey found my pot plant. I grew it at the back of the McCandlers' property, far enough in the woods I thought no one would find it. I'm not a stoner, but one of my classmates gave me the seeds, and I wanted to try my green thumb at it. Bailey

saw me going into the woods one day and followed. Said, dry this for me or I'll tell my Dad.

This spring he knocked on my door, demanding more, and this time, enough to sell. I told him that he pulled up the plant before it went to seed, so I couldn't grow more. The kid glared at me, unfazed, and said he didn't care, that if I didn't get more seeds, he'd tell his Dad about the last one. He said he had pictures he could show the cops.

His plants, all five of them, are tall and healthy, nearing their August peak.

I'm watching Bailey through the branches of a fir tree. He steps into the ditch, and I get a feeling right before it happens. I'm the caretaker of the Christmas tree farm, so I've been in charge of all the mowing, and he's walking on the side of the driveway I haven't touched. Yellow jackets are always sipping from the puddles of the driveway, and that side of the bank swarms with them, all of them buzzing in and out of one spot in the grass.

Bailey takes another step.

He starts flailing, starts screaming a blubbering series of "B-B-B-Bees!" Voice high-pitched and keening. His limbs flip up and down, flying like one of those puppets on strings. His boots no longer seem so heavy; he's lost his hunched tough guy slouch.

If you've never seen someone step on a nest, you might think it cruel to laugh, but painful as it is, it's funny as hell. The poor soul looks like a chicken or bird, squawking and flailing and slapping themselves.

So Joe starts laughing, and Joe's got the jolliest laugh of all time. He dresses like Santa when we sell the trees, and while it's the only time his body works in his favor, it's his laugh that puts the cherry on top.

He falls back into the pool chair, laughing loud. His laugh ripples and hoots, and suddenly I'm laughing too. I can't help myself, Bailey's gone wild, yelping and leaping back and forth, slapping at his thighs, and then turning.

He's panicked, but his panic seems to solidify in his face as he turns to face Joe. His eyes slow and harden, and then he runs toward his dad. Joe's whole body is jiggling with laughter. But the bees are still on the Bailey and following him, and Joe sees it coming: Bailey and the bees. He stops laughing; I see his eyes go wide. Again, think me psycho, but the look on his face, it made me laugh.

He starts heaving back and forth trying to get out of the chair. Not quick enough. Bailey and the cloud of yellow jackets have already reached him. Bailey trips over the foot rest of the pool chair and rolls in the grass. I'm dying by the tree, laughing so hard I can't breathe. But now I'm the one being loud, and I can't stop laughing even when Bailey turns and I see his eyes, burning with pain and hatred, meet mine. I start side shuffling and running back down the hill through the rows of trees. I look back and see Joe has finally rocked himself out of the chair. They are both flailing toward the house.

I collapse in the grass. Everything is suddenly quiet; all the air seems to swell in the space left behind. I'm crying from laughing so hard, and the sky swims in my tears. I lie in the cool shaded grass, listening to the crickets and staring up at the wide blue of the sky, replaying Bailey's face and the coldness in his eyes as he turned and saw me laughing.

I've been the caretaker at Joe's farm for two years now, and it's been a good gig. I get free rent, Joe pays me extra most weeks, and the hours have been flexible enough for my forestry



classes at Haywood Tech. Only, I finished up my last exams on Friday, and I've been telling myself all summer that by the time I took the tests, I'd have told Joe I'm quitting.

Joe was waiting for me when I got home from the exams. I live in a three-room cabin—kitchen, bathroom, bedroom—at the corner of the highway and Joe's driveway. The Christmas trees start at my place and grow all along the mile stretch of his driveway, up the ridge to his house. When I pulled in he was sitting in a camp chair, painting our shared mailbox bright red. It's part of his newest project to transform the cabin into an “elf-workshop.”

As soon as I finished my cigarette and got out of the car, he started whooping and cheering, “Yoohoo! You're done with classes, attaboy!”

He put down his paintbrush, rocked himself from the chair, grabbed his cane, and started walking over. His excitement was nice, truly. It reminded me that, yeah, I *should* feel excited. He gave me a hug so sweaty I felt damp when he let go, and then he asked if I wanted to come up for a celebratory dinner on Sunday. I couldn't tell him I was quitting, not then.

Now it's Sunday. This morning I got up, fried an egg, and started packing my clothes and books, trying to spur up enough momentum to tell him I'm quitting. I walked up the hill so quick that I had to stop at the edge of his yard to catch my breath. I arrived just in time for Bailey, and the yellow jackets.

Now, I pull myself up from the grass and walk back down through the rows of trees to my house, half mad that I still haven't told him, half-thankful that I didn't have to.

I really do have to leave Buck Creek. I've been stuck here since I was fourteen. My dad and I had been living in Asheville where he was the bonsai curator at the arboretum. I was into skateboarding and graffiti. I'd recently discovered pot. Then dad was t-boned by an eighteen-

wheeler. My mom had drug problems, and was never really in the picture, so I got sent to her brother, my uncle's place, in Buck Creek. My cousins, twin girls, were eleven and already obsessed with daily makeup routines. My uncle, an ex-Navy Seal, runs outdoor survival expeditions for tourists, and my aunt lead the church choir group. They didn't like my skateboards or long hair.

Once I turned sixteen I dropped out of school and spent most days just wandering around in the woods, hoping my uncle wouldn't ship me off to military school, listening to punk music and dreaming of running away. Good music, but classic teenage angst. I never ran away; I didn't have any money or any place to go.

I met Joe through the church my aunt dragged me and my cousins to. Bailey was ten and already a menace, and Joe was hoping some God-fearing would do him some good. I snuck out of the service one day and found Joe outside in the garden, sitting on a bench reading the bible. He looked up, said I had the right idea, outside's more of God's temple. It reminded me of my dad.

He was the first person to give me real work, and after two years of working part-time, he convinced me to go to forestry school and be the caretaker for him full time.

Now I'm twenty-two though. I want to go to California, get a job with a fire crew and see the aspens and sequoias and the ancient bristlecone pines. Go out to bars with loud live music and people with big ideas, who rock climb, read books, let their hair grow out all crazy.

I pass by the Fraser fir saplings I planted this year. Fraser firs only grow this far south on the high mountains, and Joe's place, up on a mountain ridge a few hundred feet higher than Buck Creek, is perfect for the trees. I walk toward the largest ones that Joe planted himself nearly twenty years ago. I'm on high alert for the balsam wooly adelgid, fuzzy white aphids no bigger

than pinpricks that attack the trees as soon as they're old enough for the trunks to start cracking. They're small, but invasive, and enough of them can kill a tree in one year.

The trees look relatively healthy from afar, but I've seen the aphids, fuzzy and white like snowflakes dotting the trunks. They're on Joe's favorite tree too, Mr. Blue, a tall straight specimen with a unique blue tinge to the needles. Joe dreams of Mr. Blue being picked for the White House Christmas tree, but he doesn't like Trump, so he says the tree's gotta stick with it a few more years. Wait for a president who actually understands the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Joe was diagnosed with diabetes around the same time I found the aphids this spring. At this point, I don't know if either will last until this president he's dreaming of: Joe or Mr. Blue.

I smush the few aphids I can reach, and I'm trying to focus on the trees, but I keep thinking about how Bailey met my eyes, and how even in all that spastic leaping his look was cold and calculated.

When I reach my place, I start packing again. Without any homework, the house feels lonely. I look out the kitchen window. All summer there was a big yellow garden spider, nearly three inches across, that built its web on the outside of the window. I named him Steve. Every morning over coffee I'd say, "Good Morning Steve, I like your weave today." Then he laid an egg sac, so I guess Steve was more a Stevina. I showed a picture of her to my professor, and he told me that when the orb weavers mate, the male sticks its penis into the female, the penis inflates and then the male dies there with his penis stuck so she can't mate with anyone else. I've only ever dated one girl in Buck Creek, and she's already left me for Florida. My love life is more pathetic than Steve's, and Steve disappeared mid-July and is probably dead.

I only last an hour in the empty house before heading back up. I'll check in to make sure Joe is okay, and then deliver the news as kindly as possible. Then I can help take the trash to the dump.

When I reach the house, Joe's car is still parked out front and Bailey's moped is tipped in the ditch, but when I knock the door, no one answers. I push it open.

The house smells like Christmas wreaths year-round. I take a deep inhale then call out Joe's name. No response. Usually Bailey's in the living room, sprawled in the Lazy Boy blowing up monsters on his X-Box. The TV is off though; his nest of blankets is strewn in a pile. I walk to the master bedroom, and there's no one there either. I grab the trash and head to the kitchen.

There are three balloons piled up against the ceiling, the fancy, shiny, helium ones they sell at the grocery store. Two silvers, and one blue that reads, "Congratulations." Maybe Bailey got a job or something. I heave the trash bag out of the kitchen can, check the bedrooms, then the bathrooms, and then head outside. I'm starting to feel creeped out. Joe and Bailey aren't the types to go for a family walk together. I start thinking about the yellow jacket nest, Bailey seeing me—how I must have been smiling when he turned and saw me laughing by the line of trees—how Bailey doesn't take kindly to being laughed at—

I start running, shit shit shit, through the stumps of last year's harvest, hopping from one to the next until I reach the edge of the woods. There's a faint trail you might think a deer made if you didn't know. It twists through the trees, down the cove, across a creek, and then straight to the weed plants. I run fast through the underbrush, feeling a panic rising up. I've tried so hard to get my life together. I finally got a degree and saved up enough money—it's all too easy to picture Bailey catching me laughing at him, thinking the weed's not worth it, and deciding it would be better to frame me as a criminal to Joe, the one person who has a tiny bit of faith in me.

I stop at the creek and hop the stones across. I wonder if I should run to my house and leave, but that would make me look even more the criminal. I see a shine up ahead, the back of Bailey's shaved head, glowing in a spot of sun. Joe's wide yellow shirt forms a mosaic with the green leaves and red flowers of the bee balm. This has to be the farthest Joe has walked all year.

I take a few steps forward. They're looking at the plants. Joe has his hands on his hips and sweat stains have spread in wide splotches all across his shirt. I take a step back, and land on a stick that cracks loud and splits the silence.

They turn. Bailey's left eye is near swelled shut—the mark of a yellow jacket—but he's grinning. Joe face is flat and deflated like he's got nothing to say. In the silence the space between us feels as if it is something green that's swelling and preparing to burst. I know I have to say something, but it feels as though something irreparable has broken that I won't be able to repair with words, and the air swells and swells, stuffs itself down my throat, branches into my lungs, slips in my stomach.

"I," it surprises me, my own voice, "Look, I—" I'm about to say I'm sorry, thinking that even if Bailey's to blame, saying so sounds like a lie or an excuse. But then I look at Bailey. He's grinning with this swollen and sloppy smirk all twisted across his face.

I walk towards them.

"I," the air again is thick. Joe is waiting. I swallow hard, "You won't believe me, but he," I point at Bailey and feel like a child, "made me grow it for him."

Joe's eyebrows raise, and I think of Joe's favorite bible quote, Corinthians 21: *For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.* I decide on full honesty. I describe how Bailey came to my house, blackmailed me, and made me

grow more for him. I explain how I saw Bailey step in the yellow jacket nest, how he saw me laughing, how that's why we're all standing here.

He looks at me and then at Bailey who is still grinning. Bailey can't seem to wipe the smirk off his face, and Joe just looks at him hard and then turns to the plant.

"I smoked some back in my twenties. I even grew some myself when Elaine was sick." He's speaking as if he's talking to the plant. "It helped with her nausea."

He turns back, his face blank and calm. I must be gaping. Bailey is too. "None of us need this, so I'm gonna burn it. Not smoke it, but burn it like a bonfire." He turns to Bailey, "You call the police, I'll say it's your patch."

"You can't do that."

Joe doesn't respond, but this time his silence doesn't feel like submission. He simply shrugs, as if a response isn't worth it.

Bailey stares, lock-jawed. He stares and stares and then turns and stomps off through the woods.

Joe and I tear up the plants without speaking. When we reach the creek, I put the plants down and pull leaves from the jewelweed growing on the bank. I stop and wait for him.

I make myself look in his eyes and feel my whole face flush red. I force the words out, "Thank you," I say and hand him the jewelweed leaves, "This helps with bee stings."

He looks at me and then starts laughing, classic Joe. I pick the weed back up and we walk slow up out of the woods and back to his yard.

The fire pit is right beside the pool chair Joe was sitting in just hours before. I lay the weed down, and Joe walks inside to grab the fire starter and matches. While I wait, I balance the

logs in a small teepee above the weed, wondering if it will burn, as wet as it is, and as it burns if the smoke will be enough to make all of us and the surrounding birds, squirrels, and rabbits high as can be.

He comes back carrying not only the basket of fire starters, but a big box in his hands. The three balloons I'd seen in the kitchen swing above his head.

"I was gonna wait til later, but hell, what a day." He hands me the fire starter, ties the strings of the balloon to the arm of his pool chair, places the box on the armrest, and then collapses into his chair. He opens up the box, and it's a cake covered in bright blue icing that he must've had done at Al's bakery. It reads in curling ruffled-icing-*You've done it!* I feel a wave of shame. The cake, the balloons, Joe's planned celebratory dinner, and me, about to tell him I'm quitting and leaving him alone here on this hill with his shithead son.

He looks at the fire pit, "I don't think this changes much. You still got your degree, and I'm proud of you." Then he looks at me, real serious, and says, "I mean, I heard Jesus smoked weed."

I'm back to laughing so hard I can barely breathe. I get the fire started and we're lucky we're far out of town cause it smells like the biggest joint ever rolled is being burned. Joe cuts big slices of cake.

I've not had a cake just for me in years. He didn't bring plates out, so I just grab a slice with my hand. We're making small talk about yellow jackets and telling stories of old stings. Joe says he's got them in places he can't even see. I take a bite of the cake, and the blue icing melts in my mouth and makes me feel like I'm eating the sky.

I tell him I can help him get the stingers out, so he takes off his shirt all the way off. His belly is marbled pink and white, stretch-marked with stray black hairs that twist and curl. Three

red-raised welts bulge out around the pit of his belly button. On his back are five more, big angry stings. The smoke washes over us, and I lick my fingers clean. The fire has made the air hot, and Joe's back is slick with sweat. When I touch the stings, his skin is even warmer than the air, hot and tight from swelling. I press and pull the stingers out, and Joe lets out a yelp-chuckle. I feel I cannot leave, that I cannot possibly tell him, not now.

I'm pulling out the stingers when Bailey stomps up from the woods. His face is swollen. He looks at his dad with a look of complete disgust. I cut off a slice of cake, feeling kind and almost guilty in my victory. I hold out the slice, thinking, maybe he'll want some. After all, he is human?

He walks by with a sneer, grabs the cake and then throws it in the fire. The icing hits the flames and glows in a bloom of yellow and green. He walks straight to his moped, swerving wide where the nest is, hops on and speeds down the hill in a spray of gravel. Joe and I watch him leave. The moment we'd had is already broken. The smoke is burning my eyes, and his too, and I can't help think that Bailey will find some way around this, some way to swing this in his favor. There is so much I could say that I cannot think of anything to say, so we sit and watch the flames and say nothing. Eventually, I stand up to get a hose and douse the fire down. All that is left of the plants are charred and shriveled leaves. Joe is lying back on the pool chair, eyes half-closed, the sun and smoke drifting him into an afternoon nap. I take one last look at Joe, the man who has been most kind to me in this life, and then head down the hill through the trees.

That night I pack the back of my truck high with boxes. I empty the fridge out, I sweep the floors clean, I wash and fold my sheets. I leave a letter in the bright red mailbox that tries to explain what I can't really justify or explain to even myself, and then I back out the driveway and turn onto the highway. The sky is brightening to the pale shade of dawn and the birds are



already singing as I drive past DJ's Diner, past the grocery store, down Main Street, past the Chakroun's horse field, and over the bridge and the fog that lingers over Buck Creek.