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Hunting stories

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HUNTING STORIES

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Dave Storment

Spring 2016

THESIS OF DAVID STORMENT

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Hunting Stories

J.R. wades into the slough and tells Cotton to wait with the gun. Water cinches his waders tight as he throws the decoys in a horseshoe pattern. *Leave 'em a place to land.* Past the soybean field, the headlight of a train creeps across the slowly brightening horizon. He looks back at the dog and sees her swimming after him, decoys dragging behind her on the surface. He'll have to untangle her from the stringed anchors, but that's all right. She's still young, and he's not in a hurry.

It killed J.R. to leave Ranger home this morning. He's had him since before he and Sheri were married. The old dog is still sharp as a tack, but his arthritis won't tolerate the cold any longer, and there's no keeping him out of the water. He'd kill himself to fetch a duck for J.R., and J.R. knows it.

With the decoys in place, he sits on a five-gallon bucket in the cattails next to Cotton. The water is only as deep as his ankles. The sky is clear, only the brightest stars still visible. Cotton looks at J.R., waits for him to throw her rubber bumper shaped like a greenhead, but he's placed it under the bucket. Pretty soon she'll get the real thing. He lowers a mask of camouflage netting to hide his face and protect it from mosquitos. Even in November, they're biting.

J.R.'s father Reggie grew up using live ducks for decoys, even after they were outlawed. He told J.R. about the days before limits, when you could shoot into a cloud of ducks and knock down five or six at a time. You either had four dogs working at once, or you left the dead where they fell and got them later by canoe.

J.R. checks his watch. Legal shooting time begins half an hour before sunrise, *but I'll shoot 'em as soon as I can see 'em* and the orange disk of sun is just beginning to rise above the train track. A group of ducks circles the slough, too high for J.R. to shoot or even tell what species they are in the slowly fading dark. Mallard or gadwall. Big ducks. They drop for a closer look and circle again. This time he can make out the green shine of the drakes. Mallards. It's good to see something and recognize it for what it is.

Cotton watches, waits, spins her head to follow them in the air as J.R. places a hand on her back. He wonders if she thinks the live birds are falling bumpers, like the one he's got under the bucket, the one he threw all summer for her and Ranger. He hopes she'll know what to do now that it's just the two of them.

...

The day before J.R.'s ninth duck season, he reaches for his first shotgun, a 20-gauge Winchester with walnut stock and forearm.

"You can carry this one unloaded for a while. Learn to handle it before you shoot it," Reggie says.

It's smaller than Reggie's gun, but heavier than J.R. had imagined. The barrel and action are still oily from the gun shop. He grips the checkered pattern engraved in the walnut, remembers the smell of gunpowder and mud from last year. He's been hunting with Reggie for as long as he can remember, and now at nine years old, he can show him what he's learned, even if he doesn't get to shoot the gun.

Next morning they stand behind flooded cypress trees with the sun to their backs. They wait, without calling or talking, for mallards to drop through the canopy or wood ducks to buzz between tree trunks. This time of year the deepest water barely

reaches J.R.'s waist. Reggie left Scout at home since they can wade out and get whatever they shoot.

This property once belonged to an uncle of Reggie's, a farmer who went bankrupt sometime in the forties. When the money was gone he sold everything—nearly five thousand acres of rice and soybeans, winter wheat, several combines and semis with grain haulers—and moved to town to become a fireman in Two Trees. The owner of the outfit who bought the property had promised that the family could still hunt here.

The strap on J.R.'s shotgun digs into his shoulders. He places the butt of the gun on a cypress knee and leans the barrel against the trunk, wonders if Reggie would call him lazy. *Can't shoot a bird without a gun in your hand*, he might say. J.R. would answer you can't shoot a bird without a shell in your gun, either.

He kicks the water, mimics the splashes of feeding ducks. If he keeps his feet still too long they'll go numb. The rippling waves reflect a canopy of cypress and oak. It feels good to hold a gun.

"Where are they?" he asks.

"Just keep an eye out," Reggie says.

J.R. is always keeping an eye out.

"What time is it?"

They've been standing behind the same trees for hours, but the sky is still a dim gray. It hasn't gotten any warmer.

J.R. flashed his mother a smile last night when he saw her watching from the couch as he tried with sweaty palms to load a shell into the gun. She looked past him at Reggie and asked, "Why did you get those things if he's not going to shoot?"

“It’s all right, Vic,” Reggie said. “Better to have them and not need them, than to need them and not have them.” Whatever that meant. It put a chill on J.R.’s skin.

Behind the cypress tree, Reggie snaps his fingers. J.R. stops splashing and looks. He sees birds just above the naked branches, looking for a place low and out of the wind to feed.

“Get your gun,” Reggie whispers, then reaches in the pocket of his waders, pulls out three yellow shells and tosses them to J.R., one after the other. They feel heavy, sliding over the wool of his gloves. He tears them off with his teeth and stuffs them in a pocket, loads the gun and understands now why Reggie keeps his hands bare. He looks down the sights while Reggie works a wooden call.

On the ducks’ second lap in the air, J.R. remembers the gun is a weapon. He fingers the trigger, adjusts his grip on the stock. He tries to force the idea out of his head, but he can’t help thinking he can kill Reggie. Can kill himself. Though it’s only birdshot, one to the head might just send a man to the hospital, or worse. And that’s what J.R. is: a man. He holds the gun close to his chest, waits for Reggie to call the shot.

...

Cotton stands on all fours. J.R. puts his hand on her back and eases her down. It feels good to be alone, in control. The group of mallards makes another lap, and this time they’ll be close enough to shoot.

He tucks the plastic call in his jacket. This is the part he loves the most. More than watching a dog retrieve a duck, more than pulling the trigger and seeing a bird fall, he loves the moment before the shot, when the ducks are committed, feet down and wings cupped, when all you have to do is wait.

The group of mallards circles back for a last look at the slough. He singles out a greenhead and takes aim. No one else is here to call the shot. He drops the greenhead, the autoloader flicks a shell and loads another, but Cotton has already bolted into the water, tangling herself again in the decoys.

“Goddammit.”

She doggy-paddles back to him and drops the duck at his feet. He takes the bird in hand and sees a metal band with numbers wrapped around its leg, a tracking system between scientists and hunters. He’s supposed to call the phone number on the band and tell them the other numbers etched into the metal. He’s supposed to tell them when and where he killed it. Then they’ll send him information in the mail about when and where it was tagged.

“I’ll be dog,” he says.

He’s only seen a band in person once before, in his last year carrying the 20-gauge. That opening day he got two greenheads and Reggie got four. Twelve years old, J.R. was expected to do some of the work. He was picking up decoys when Reggie motioned for him to stay still, birds overhead.

He kept his face down to the water lapping at his thighs and tried to breathe without moving. Reggie shot and J.R. recognized the distinctive brown head and long black tail feathers of the pintail species before the duck ever hit the water. He’d only seen pintails in pictures; they were as rare as the band on its leg.

“Well I must be the luckiest son of bitch in the whole state of Arkansas,” Reggie said.

Two weeks later the paperwork came in the mail, told them the pintail was banded in Nova Scotia when J.R. was just a baby.

...

Once all the ducks are breasted, Reggie sits in the living room floor to clean the guns. J.R. goes outside to play. He walks game trails in the woods behind the house, reliving the morning as he remembers it, only this time Scout is there. It's been two years since the dog died. The dry timber in the woods at home reminds J.R. of the flooded cypress from that morning. He pictures his footprints in the mud, the dull colors beneath trees, the jungle of Vietnam he's been hearing about on the news. The jungle his uncle James is in right now. When he envisions Vietnam, it always looks like a duck hole. He imagines himself there, somehow older.

The VC rushes, screaming, shooting erratic clips of ammo into nothing. J.R. shoulders his rifle, sees James smoke a cigar and toss grenades into the brush. This is the extent of J.R.'s war—shooting and killing and not dying.

Before his letter came, the whole family thought James would avoid the draft. He was over thirty when he left for deployment, when J.R. saw his father cry for the first time. Reggie acknowledged the reality of James' situation, the dangerous odds of it, while the rest of Vic's family denied everything. Their boy would return. Vic, as well as her parents, had told James to hurry back. They'll see him when he gets back.

...

Cotton jumps the tailgate, circles and lies in her kennel in the bed of J.R.'s truck. He locks her in and tosses the bag of decoys beside her. He's eager to get home and show the silver band to the girls, it doesn't matter how many ducks he shoots. It's not

like hunting with Reggie, standing behind the same two cypress trees until six o'clock at night, stomachs growling, hoping to bag at least one more duck. *I'll hunt 'em till they stop flying.*

J.R. likes to drive through town a while after a good hunt.

Two Trees is bigger now, more red lights. Sometimes he wishes he'd stayed, but back then all the jobs were in Memphis. Reggie wasn't too happy when he announced the move.

"Our kin haven't left this town in a hundred years," he said, shifting the weight of his oxygen tank.

"But there's layoffs at the chicken plant," J.R. told him, "and I'll make more money in Memphis. Besides, Sheri could use the comfort of a city with the kid on the way."

"There ain't a place on earth more comfortable than this right here," Reggie had said.

When he had the stroke, he wouldn't go any farther than the Forrest City ER. Said even Two Trees was getting too big for him. He didn't like seeing other people, and J.R. thought he didn't like other people seeing him. By the time he died, J.R. figured it was as much from his bitterness at the world around him as it was the cancer.

...

The duck blind sits on a flatbed trailer hitched to Reggie's truck. The slough is swarming with mosquitos and water bugs, fish rising to the surface. Opening day is next weekend.

They built the blind this morning around a wooden bench J.R. found outside a dumpster at school. Reggie welded one-inch square tubing for the frame while J.R. tied sheets of chicken wire along the walls and roof, leaving a window just large enough to shoot from.

Once the blind is in position at the water's edge, they slide swamp grass and cattails into the chicken wire. They sit inside and check their fields of sight. Reggie jumps to his feet, raises an invisible shotgun to his shoulder.

"Boom, boom, boom!"

He grins at his son.

Earlier that day, J.R. had used a metal file to smooth down the welds on the blind while Reggie went inside for a beer. He came out with two and handed one to J.R.

"You got, what, five months of high school left?"

"Yep," J.R. said, cracking the beer. As much time as he spent thinking about his options after school, he hated talking about them. Anything seemed possible as long as you kept it to yourself, but working a shrimp boat in Louisiana or a cattle farm in Texas, when said aloud, sounded as farfetched as hopping a space shuttle in Florida.

"Guess you'll find a job, then," Reggie said and snapped the welding hood shut, aimed the wire at a junction of steel pieces.

"I guess so."

"You guess so? What else you gonna do?"

"I thought about applying for some scholarships." He scraped the file across a weld.

Joining the Army would be a delicate subject. He had to know exactly what he was talking about, and why, or else Reggie would shoot the idea full of holes.

“You want to make money without doing any real work, is that it? You gonna be a lawyer or something? Forget how to work with your hands?”

“I don’t know.”

Reggie raised the hood. “College costs a lot of money.”

“They have scholarships so you can go for free.” He didn’t know if this was true.

“You ought to stay here in Two Trees and keep working,” Reggie said, lowering the hood. “The world will always need plumbers and truck drivers.”

J.R. looked away while Reggie sparked the welder.

Vic came outside and watched them. J.R. hid his beer behind a coffee can full of screws.

“Why don’t you let J.R. do some welding?” she asked.

“He’s doing everything else,” Reggie said. He winked at J.R. “Ain’t that right?”

J.R. nodded and wiped a streak of silver shavings across his jeans. A whippoorwill twittered from the woods behind the shop. Learning to weld wouldn’t be so bad.

...

J.R. comes home at four in the morning, still drunk from the kegger he and his buddies threw the night before. Scout leaps out the front door when he opens it. He must’ve been waiting there, which means Reggie is going hunting. *Never hunt alone. Take a dog if you got to.* J.R. grabs him by the collar, throws him inside and shuts the door. He walks around the side of the house and lights a cigarette, hoping to avoid Reggie on his way out.

Their talk last night hadn't gone well. Reggie had come in from work with a few lotto tickets and a six pack. Vic was making chicken and dumplings for dinner. His timing was perfect, but in the end Reggie dismissed J.R.'s idea of the Army as if he'd asked to borrow his truck and some extra cash for the weekend. It seemed nothing was good enough for J.R.'s future unless Reggie had come up with it first.

"I went to the recruiter's office last week. They seemed interested in me."

"I'm sure they did. You didn't fuck up and sign anything, did you?" They didn't mention James. They never mentioned James. "It'll be hard enough on your mother when you move out of the house."

J.R. stomps his cigarette out when he sees a light come on in the kitchen. He sees Reggie waiting on Mr. Coffee to finish brewing. Buck trots up to him, ready to go. Reggie takes a knee in front of the dog and scratches the sides of his face and under his chin with both hands. He says something, leans forward and brings his forehead to meet the dog's.

J.R. knows he'll never join the Army. On his first visit to the recruiter's office, he was shocked that the soldiers looked nothing like John Wayne. They were short, their bellies round, their hands soft when J.R. shook them. After Vietnam, it seemed like Army life was just drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and that didn't seem so bad. But there was another, older kid in the office. His chin was stubbled and he was a good bit taller than J.R.

He couldn't help overhearing the other kid tell a soldier he hadn't finished high school. His parents kicked him out of the house and his girlfriend had dumped him.

J.R.'s recruiter snapped his fingers. "Are you listening to me, boy?"

The other kid kept talking. “The Army sounds fun,” he said. “Like a place you could meet some cool guys and do some cool stuff.”

Why was it that everything sounded impossible and stupid when you said it out loud? J.R. realized the impossibility of joining this Army when the recruiter asked him his full name: “James Reginald Fuller.”

At home he hears the front door creak open, Reggie whispering to Buck. He sits in the near-frosted grass and cups his hand over the cigarette—Army style—to hide the glowing ember.

“Where you been?” Reggie asks.

“Out.”

“I could smell you from inside.”

“Ha.”

“Get your gun.”

“What?”

“You’re coming with me.”

This could be a trick, like Reggie wants to test his maturity.

“I’ve been drinking.”

“I know you’ve been drinking. Get your shit and get your ass in the truck.”

He drives to the same spot they’ve always hunted—the slough that used to belong to family—and parks the truck with the ignition on.

“Does your mother know you smoke?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy.”

“James.”

He turns off the truck and unbuckles his seatbelt.

J.R. does the same.

“You serious about the Army?”

He opens the door and gets out.

J.R. opens his. “Yeah, I’m serious.”

Reggie slams the door, and before J.R. can slam his, he hears Reggie mutter, “Fuck,” under his breath.

It’s too dark, too early to be shooting. *I shoot ‘em when I see ‘em.* The two birds appear only seconds after J.R. and Reggie hear the whirring of wings. The ducks are too quick to line up a good lead, to even know what happened. J.R. hears one gunshot, but both birds fall.

“Did you shoot?” Reggie asks.

“Yeah, did you?”

“Yeah. Good shot.”

“You too.”

Buck retrieves both birds at once, swims back to his platform nailed to a tree, where he’d been standing out of the water. J.R. wants to tell Reggie the truth: that he’s scared, uncertain, and that joining the Army seems like an easy way to make some money and get out of his parents’ house. But Reggie doesn’t bring it up again. He hangs his shotgun on a tree limb and wades to J.R.

“Here’s your bird,” he says, handing it over.

J.R. will clean it when they get home.

...

On the way back to Memphis, J.R. passes the Citgo where he and Reggie used to eat fried chicken and drink beer after good hunts with a full limit. He pulls in and buys three glass bottle cokes and a bag of shelled peanuts. Vic showed him as a kid to pour them in the bottle, crunch them with a mouthful of Coke. He takes I-55 over the Old Bridge into Memphis. It has a name, and so does the New Bridge on I-40, but nobody knows them.

He wanted to live in the city, quit the chicken plant to go to trade school and learn to weld. So he did. Now he works four tens at the Honda plant. But who knows how things could've been different. He could've stayed in Two Trees, found a way to save up money, even with a baby on the way.

Cotton hops out the passenger door as soon as J.R. opens it. She pees in the yard while he carries the gun and waders to the garage. A leaf blower starts up in the neighbor's yard. An airplane roars overhead.

He wishes he could tell Reggie: you were right. There's nothing in the city for me. I miss Two Trees.

The schools are better here, that's for sure. He and Sheri are saving for college.

Foam spills over the lips of the bottles as he pours in the peanuts and sees Sheri come outside, wearing an apron splattered with paint. June follows, hands and face green blue and red.

"Baby's asleep," Sheri says.

"Good." He turns to June. "Come here, I want to show you something."

The duck's blood has dried stiff in its feathers.

“You like to eat ducks?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll show you how to get the food out.”

“J.R., she’s way too young,” Sheri says, then turning to June, “Let’s finish that painting. Daddy’s manly time isn’t over yet.”

“She’ll never go with me if you keep calling it that.”

“I’m sure.”

He slips the band off the duck’s leg and puts it in his pocket. Years ago he would’ve called the number first thing and reported it, then waited for the mail. Now he’ll just give it to June. *Too many people in the city*. Nothing seems to matter when you do it alone.

When a Bird Is a Bullseye

and winter runoff
floods lowland timber
knee deep in silence

the best day is a cold one
in the shadow of oaks
where acorns have fallen

umbrella winged mallards
empty-crawled and reckless
breaking through the canopy

Charity

My hangover hits me as hard as the sun hits the asphalt, and Kevin's death metal doesn't help. Around Jackson I try to play something smooth, Junior Kimbrough, but Kevin won't have it.

"My car, my music," he shouts once the earthquake drums are back at it.

"How can you listen to this shit," I ask.

He lights two cigarettes and hands me one, hawks a loog out the window. We left Oxford this morning around four. We're hungry, low on cigarettes, and Duck Bay is still how many miles.

Our new slacks and collared shirts itched, the boat shoes cut into my heel.

"Never should of bought these fucking clothes," I said once we took our seats in the student section, waiting in the humidity for the game to start.

Players from both teams warmed up on the field, caught short passes, sidestepped foam dummies while the clock on the Jumbotron ticked to zero.

"Everybody else is dressed up," Kevin said as the stadium filled. It took me a second to get it when he pointed out the Greek kids.

This was the year we thought we'd beat Bama and take the SEC. We drove up that morning, walked the Grove and took food and drinks from one tailgate or another, talked sports and politics with folks who voted. Entire families of Ole Miss grads, three generations. The noiseless generators in their tents ran crock pots and hot plates, blenders full of margaritas. They were dressed like bankers and social workers, asked

what our majors were and where we were from. Nobody had heard of Duck Bay. I wasn't surprised; the only person me and Kevin knew who went to college was the preacher, and we didn't know him well.

Just when we thought we'd have to worry about finding tickets, we stumbled upon a kid, or he stumbled upon us, who was too shit housed to make it into the stadium. We tossed him some cash and went through the gate.

The Grove had plenty of shade trees, but inside the stadium our skin fried, the sun high overhead. Guys sweated through blazers, the girls their dresses. They cracked beers, smoked cigarettes in the bleachers without getting caught.

"Ole Miss is a party school," Kevin said.

But these kids didn't look like they could party. They were clean, wealthy, like they all worked in banks or for the government.

While a jazz lady from New Orleans sang the national anthem, I nudged Kevin and pointed at a girl behind us in a bright dress, legs like a racehorse.

"I'd check her for ticks," I said.

"Right here, baby," Kevin said, hunched over for a better look.

We'd have a chance at a Duck Bay High game. It's easier when everybody knows you.

Bama's new running back gave us some trouble, but we threw a touchdown pass to tie it before the half. The student section blew up, tossed whiskey drinks overhead. Kevin caught some on his tongue like snowflakes while I pushed my hair back, felt the alcohol dry sticky on my skin. I looked behind us at the girl. She sucked whiskey off her

hands and arms, grabbed the guy behind her and licked his neck, her hands clutching his biceps.

I jabbed Kevin in the ribs.

“Now there’s a girl for a party school,” I said.

“What was her name,” I ask.

“Fuck if I know,” Kevin says. “but as soon as I touched her ass, that big fucker clocked me in the jaw.”

“Harry.”

“Sure. Anyway, this girl was even better looking than Charity.”

Kevin always drives too fast. We flick our cigarettes onto the interstate and he takes the exit to Collins, pulls into an Exxon.

“I gotta pee,” he says.

“Grab me a Gatorade. I’m fucking hungover.”

“Yeah, well my face hurts.” He massages his cheek bones in the rearview mirror.

“You want a biscuit or anything?”

I tell him we’ll be home by lunch.

He goes inside and I light one of our last cigarettes. A Ford pulls up with a woman driving, a man riding shotgun. I watch her get out and walk into the gas station, black tank top over cut-off shorts, her flip flops look like they might break at any second and she’d keep walking.

She doesn’t look like the girls at Ole Miss. That college made people look like high cotton, under the live oaks and hundred year old buildings, the sun that won’t quit.

The kids drink beer all day and never run out of their parents' money, not a care in the world. But this lady at the Exxon, she looks like she has a lot to care about. Her hair is thin, greasy, and the backs of her knees are swollen. She looks like someone who's heard of Duck Bay.

The man gets out of the truck and walks to my window.

"Hot out," he says, lights a Marlboro and breathes it over his head. Waves of heat escape the parking lot and the roof of the Ford. Not even ten yet, and the back of my shirt is soaked with sweat and the Listerine from last night. I get out and stretch, smell the asphalt boil, lean against the door of Kevin's truck.

"You boys in school?" the man asks.

"Just came from Oxford," I tell him.

"Hell of a game last night."

We smoke, wait for our people to come back.

"Hear about that shooting in Little Rock?" he asks, studies my black eye, the stains on my shirt. The heat worsens my hangover, and I feel like throwing up again.

"You know," he says, "I saw a bumper sticker the other day, said *Support gun control; aim with both hands*. You better believe I'll put up a fight when the gov'ment comes for my guns."

Halftime, I waited while Kevin went to the bathroom. He came back with two whiskey Cokes, handed me one. It was strong.

"Where'd you get this?" I asked.

“Her,” he pointed at the girl we’d been looking at. “Name’s Charity. Said she’d get us into a frat party tonight.”

She looked at us, nodded, looked away to her friends. I didn’t have to ask. I’d seen it a million times, how Kevin got his way with women. Like he knew some secret that, even if I knew it myself, would be as useful as taking a tennis racket to a hornet’s nest.

He’s told me before that he grew up with his mom and two sisters, that a father was something he never had. I tried to tell him that none of us really had fathers, but then I couldn’t convince myself. Of course we had fathers.

Our buzz was gone by the end of the game. We watched Ole Miss fuck it up in the fourth quarter, and were ready to start drinking. We followed slick haircuts and dresses through the dark, scavenged empty tailgates, but found no booze.

“Where’s this party?” I asked.

“She said the house has a circle with a line through it,” Kevin said, “and then a triangle.”

I kicked over a trashcan. I felt stupid, out of place. How do you get into this school, anyway.

“Looks like they’re having fun in there,” the man says.

Kevin stands at the register with a couple of Gatorades in one hand, giving the lady a malt liquor with the other. The sight of it makes my throat gurgle. She laughs, waves him off. He tosses his hands up and makes what looks like a compelling argument.

My mouth is dry as hell from that cigarette, and the man keeps gargling like he has to spit but never does. Traffic from the interstate blows hot air on us.

I see Kevin stop talking and point to the ceiling. He starts dancing, slow and playful, grabs the woman by the waist, both of them grinning like possums. I shake my head and watch him do his thing. The lady's man grunts as if I said something.

"Gonna look for some sunglasses," I say.

A bell jingles when I go inside, the rush of cool air prickles my arms and neck.

"This guy knows what I'm talking about!" Kevin says. "What was that big fucker's name last night?"

"Harry."

The whole night's a joke to him now.

"Yeah, Big Harry."

The lady laughs. I turn to look at her man by the truck, but he's smoking at the edge of the road. He waves as a motorcycle passes, the rider's hand stretched out in a greeting. The wind catches his open palm, fingers pointing our direction as he shrinks away.

I try on a pair of sunglasses, check the mirror on the rack.

Kevin's talking to the woman in the tank top. "So while this is all happening," he says, "Harry's got this guy drinking Listerine through a goddamn funnel!"

The woman laughs, leans against the counter and puts a hand to her chest. Kevin takes a peek. I put the sunglasses back. After all the shit last night, the drive this morning.

We stood out back of the house and watched the others go in the gate so we knew what to do. A stage was set up in the courtyard, where a band was due to start. From the limbs of a tall oak tree, a guy in pink slacks yelled, "It's my birthday! Go to hell, LSU!"

The kid working the door asked us our names.

"You're not on the list," he said.

"Check again," Kevin said.

Somebody in line said who the fuck are these guys.

"Look," Kevin got in the dude's face. "We were in this fraternity six years ago. We don't need your goddamn list." He walked into the crowd flooding the courtyard. Even as I watched, he disappeared. He didn't need me.

The kid behind the table looked at me. I looked back, gave him the finger and told him to fuck himself, then reached for a cigarette and went to find Kevin.

Upstairs, kids clustered in tiny bedrooms to play drinking games. The hall smelled like booze and sweat, the sound of glass clinking, floors pounding. College kids leaned in dark corners of the hallway, flirted against walls and shouted over rap music. You never would've thought we lost the game.

The hallway ran about twenty feet and took a hard right, and I wondered if I followed it, would it be like those endless hallways in movies where the doors all look the same, and if you open the wrong one you get eaten by wolves, or fall off a cliff, or walk in on your parents having sex.

I passed a room where two guys sat on coolers across from a girl on a flowery, beat-up couch. She bounced a quarter off a table made of two-by-fours into a plastic

cup. The walls were bright yellow, Sharpie scrawls of girls' names and Greek letters, profanity, inside jokes. Someone had stacked a pyramid of beer cans on the bed. The room was shitty, somehow intentionally.

"Playing quarters?" I said. "Can't hear a goddamn thing out there."

I sat on the arm of the couch and introduced myself, tried to look friendly. The guys said their names were Jake and Harry. Jake was tall, with black hair that nearly touched his shoulders. Harry was even taller, and looked like a rugby player.

"Elizabeth," the girl said, scooting over so I could sit down.

I remembered playing quarters when my parents would leave town in the popup camper on three day weekends. They'd go as far as Pensacola or Lake Charles and I'd be left with the neighbor, a retired airline pilot, big Willie Nelson fan, who spent his afternoons shuffling cards for the hell of it. He'd open a bag of Skittles into a wooden salad bowl and we'd bounce quarters in a lowball glass for a Skittle a shot. By the time my parents got back I'd be laid up on the couch with belly pains and a sore tooth. They'd toss me a coconut carved into a monkey's head with *Pensacola* over the top, or a wooden whistle from New Orleans that sounded like a train. My room was full of knickknacks from places I'd never been, and after those weekends we'd eat ham sandwiches for a week because no one felt like cooking.

I bounced a quarter into the cup.

"Drink," I said to Elizabeth. The guys cracked their knuckles. She took a pull from the Jack and held it out to me.

"You drink," she said, but Harry intercepted the bottle.

"That's not how it works," he said.

“Can I get a beer, then?” I asked.

“I’ll give you one if you funnel it,” Jake said.

“Deal,” I said.

Harry went to the bathroom where the funnel lay curled in a sink. Elizabeth smiled at me, and I wondered what my chances were.

Harry came back with the funnel and a half bottle of Listerine.

“I’ll give you a beer if you funnel this.”

Jake laughed. “If you funnel that,” he said, “you can have every goddamn beer in the cooler.”

“I’m not fucking doing that,” I said.

“You want to drink tonight or not,” Harry asked.

I was glad Kevin wasn’t there. He would like these guys.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

I took the Jack from Elizabeth and pulled on it.

While Harry poured the Listerine I looked at her. We heard screaming from the window out where the crowd was.

“Oh shit,” Jake said. “The band’s starting.”

“I just want a fucking beer,” I said.

“Fuck you,” Harry said, and poured the funnel of Listerine over my head, in my eyes and mouth. It burned, my shirt stuck to me. By the time I could take a swing at him they were already in the hall, where a flood of people ran out like a bull was loose. I wondered if these fuckers ever stopped moving, if maybe that’s how they get so rich.

Let ‘em have the band, the party.

I opened a cooler with Greek letters and the name *Harry* painted on the lid, cracked a beer and chased a shot of Jack with it, but still tasted Listerine. I hated these motherfuckers, poured half the Jack into a water bottle and stuffed it in my back pocket, closed the door. I took the Jack bottle to the bathroom and pissed in it to replace what I had taken out. When it was back in the cooler, I went to the window. I only had a second to look before someone flung the door open, but I thought I saw a dude take a swing at Kevin. I turned to the door. It was Charity.

“Oh, nice,” she said. “There’s the funnel.”

“Thank you for the dance,” Kevin says, bowing to the woman.

“Hey, any time,” she laughs.

“Take care now.”

“You take care,” she says, touching Kevin’s bruises.

A big grin spreads across their faces. When the bell rings behind her, Kevin tosses me a Gatorade and says let’s get the fuck out of here, and only now that the woman is gone does it seem like he got his ass kicked last night. I’d like to kick him around some myself.

Charity downed the beer, stopped when the tube was full of foam, and stood up. I didn’t ask why she was inside when everyone else was out there, and she didn’t ask me. I went to grab the funnel, empty it in the shower, but she pulled away and blew foam onto the bed.

“Fuck you, Harry,” she said.

“You know Harry? I fucking hate that guy.”

She laughed. “I saw you at the game, right? With that other guy?”

I played it cool and said, “Don’t think so.”

The band was still going in the courtyard. I looked again and the kids were still dancing, but three or four guys, including Jake and Harry, crowded around Kevin.

In Duck Bay you grow up fighting. You have to. You’re at a bar and somebody talks shit to your boy, you fight. Somebody looks at your girl, you fight. Rent’s due in two days but you need a drink now, you fight.

Charity asked if I knew what was going on out there. I told her I didn’t.

The chill of the gas station fades in seconds. I realize I forgot to buy sunglasses, but walk to the truck anyway. The sun is higher overhead, and hotter, and my mouth is thick and dusty, despite the Gatorade. Kevin starts the engine.

“My face,” he groans. I don’t offer to drive. He waits until the semis and minivans leave room enough to pull onto the highway, peels onto it and tosses me a fresh pack of cigarettes.

“Light one for me,” he says.

“Oh baby,” Charity says. She holds the bottle out to me.

“Grey Goose, nice.”

“How many rooms is that? Six?”

She throws it in her purse full of stolen liquor bottles. We hear thundering upstairs; the fight is over. I kiss her, grab a bottle of what turns out to be tequila, step back and take a gulp.

We hear stomps and shouts in the stairwell.

The first room we raided, the one next to Harry's, had a combination padlock on both the fridge and the coolers. I pried the hasp and screws out of both, thin plastic over Styrofoam. The other rooms were easier. One had a wet bar, now missing a crystal decanter of brandy, we think.

"Look at this shit!" she had said, holding it under a lamp. The diamond tread pattern cut into the crystal shined spots of light on the wall behind it.

"This son of a bitch is rich," I said.

She went through his closet, checked under the mattress while I went straight to the fridge.

"Anything good?" I asked, squeezing four expensive longnecks between my fingers.

"Oh yeah," she said, and held up a long fur coat on a plastic hanger.

I told her to put it on, we had all the time in the world.

"What's it like in Duck Bay," she asked, slipping her arms through the sleeves.

"Quiet," I said, and noticed the house was too.

It covered her dress, and with the front pulled together, I imagined her naked underneath. I stood in front of her and slid my arm between the coat and her waist.

"Do you wish you were in college?" she whispered.

"No," I said, and kissed her neck.

She pulled back. "Come on," she said, placing the coat back on its hanger.

"There's more rooms."

We hear footsteps, shouting, the party returning.

"Where do you stay?" I ask her.

"In the sorority house. No boys allowed."

"What about men?"

She laughs, and I can feel something familiar with her. Just when I think I'm about to get somewhere, I realize I'm not feeling anything familiar at all. I'm watching myself pull a Kevin. The smooth talk, the bullshit. But I'm stuck and I realize that, no matter how many times I've seen Kevin get lucky with a girl, I still have no idea what I'm doing.

From the hall: "If you're not a girl or a guy in this fraternity, get the fuck out!"

"Come on," she says. "Back to Duck Bay with you." As if I were a puppy she picked out at the pound, and realized she couldn't keep.

"Come with me," I try on a sly grin, but it doesn't fit.

How is it Kevin causes waves everywhere he goes? I swear to god he's never gone unnoticed.

"Go out the front door," Charity says, "There's less people to pick on you out there." And it's all back the way it was, party on.

Outside, I look for Kevin. It doesn't take long. A police cruiser has its lights on, Kevin leaned against the door in handcuffs.

"That's him," I hear him say to the cop.

“He belong to you?” the dope asks me.

Something like that.

“You boys got a place to stay tonight?”

“Yeah, we got a place,” I say.

Kevin’s nose is stuffed with tissue, a bandage spans his forehead. After the cop undoes his handcuffs, we walk back to the truck parked off campus. They don’t call it a bed for nothing. I think about telling him about Charity, but I don’t feel like talking. He’s got cuts and dried blood on his mouth, might’ve bit through his lip. I’ve seen worse on him. I remember the whiskey in my pocket, the whiskey from Harry’s room. I unscrew the water bottle and take a pull, hand it to Kevin. He swishes it a minute, spits blood. I’ll tell him about Harry, about the Listerine. But not Charity. That’s something he wouldn’t understand.

Noise

I wake in my apartment, thirsty. Your bedroom window is an arm's reach across the alley from mine, your light still on. I want to get out of bed and pour a glass of water from the tap, but I'm sure you'll hear the faucet running. My husband Frank could hear like a bat.

I know you hear the TV's lowest volume, the turning pages of a book.

When your light finally goes dark, I wait seven minutes before rolling over to face the wall. I know how long it takes a man to fall asleep.

I breathe softly so as not to wake you.

I know you hear me every time I open a pill bottle, and I'm thankful you won't flush the capsules. Frank dislocated his shoulder and insisted he fix it himself. He dislocated mine and insisted he fix it for me.

I still whisper into the phone. I forget you don't care who I talk to.

I think you're quiet, but really I'm louder than people should be. I know this. The glass clinks, the faucet runs, and I wonder if your fists feel like swinging at the noise, if your knuckles are sharp and wind-chapped.

I will never recognize you—your blinds are always closed—but I picture a mustache and tightly muscled shoulders. Fists that never open.

Sometimes I wonder how much of me reaches you, if you really can hear everything.

I wonder if you even know I'm here.

Two Trees

First time in over a year I saw Ronny, I was down at Frankie's playing pool with my buddy Greg. Frankie's is one of those bars by the railroad tracks where you can smoke inside and won't get carded long as you got a beard or a nice rack. Course there was never any girls at Frankie's.

Everybody knew Ronny had run off to college after our class graduated high school, but as far as I knew, nobody had seen or heard from him since. I had just missed a bank shot and was about to order another beer when the door opened, shining harsh summer light into the darkest corners of the room. Ronny stood in the doorway, a scrawny dude in a collared shirt and fancy leather shoes, the kind you wear to church.

"Is that who I think it is?" I asked Greg.

"If it ain't old Stringbean," he said.

I'd never heard anybody call him that before, but it seemed to fit.

He let the door slam shut behind him and walked to the bar. A tan and white beagle trotted behind him, but got distracted with smell and came to check out my feet. I scratched him behind the ears and he rolled over for me to get his belly. He looked young, but from good stock.

"Biscuit!" Ronny hollered after he got a beer and saw the dog wasn't next to him. I think it was his plan all along, to bring a dog to the bar and make some friends.

"Biscuit?" Greg laughed. "What the hell kind of name is that for a dog?"

Ronny bent down to pet him. "Well he's tan like a biscuit. With little white spots like clumps of flour that ain't mixed in well." He never did have much of an accent, kind

of talked like a yankee. “Guess we might as well get a pitcher,” he said, “seeing as there’s three of us.”

“Well there’s two of *us*,” I said, pointing a thumb at myself and Greg. “And one of you.” I took a cigarette from my pack and lit it. The dog ran circles around pool tables, sniffing damn near every surface in the bar. It was cute, sure. But being cute isn’t what dogs are for.

“Hey,” I said to Ronny, “shouldn’t you be in school?”

Greg laughed because that’s what folks used to ask us when we’d go to the lumberyard or the gas station in Jericho to buy booze and cigarettes, live crickets for fishing Wapanocca Lake.

“I had to drop out,” Ronny said, voice gone dreary and sad.

“Better late than never,” Greg said and raised his glass.

In Two Trees, you really got to work your ass off to go to college. And that’s what Ronny did. While the rest of us were spending our weekend money on field parties, floating kegs and trying to get laid in the beds of our trucks, Ronny was taking extra classes and going to the community college in Wynne for god knows what.

I went to the bar and nodded at Frankie for a beer. He put down the dirty rag he was cleaning with, the smell of cleaning solution once the water’s dirty, and poured a glass, slid it to me across the counter. I was feeling sorry for Ronny and thinking it might be nice to have a dog around when Frankie yelled, “Hey!” and snapped his fingers. “Get that fucker out of here,” he ran out from behind the bar, the wooden half-door swinging behind him.

I turned and looked, spilled some beer on my shirt. The dog was pissing on the carpet under the pool table.

“Biscuit!” Ronny yelled, but didn’t move a muscle. “That’s a bad Biscuit.”

Greg stood there clutching his ribs while Frankie threw the dog outside into the hot light with Ronny chasing after, begging him not to hurt his Biscuit.

I threw six bucks on the bar, figured that was enough, and followed Ronny to his car.

“How old is that thing?” I asked as he opened the front door for the dog.

“A little over a year.” He shut the door with the dog inside. Even if it was just for a minute, him not leaving the window cracked for that dog was pretty fucked up. It was panting like all hell.

“And he’s still not house trained? Goddamn.” The sun beat down on us, and I could feel my neck burning redder.

“I mean, he gets nervous in new places. The breeder said he has social anxiety.”

“Christ, almighty!” Greg yelled as he crunched across the gravel. “You of all people would get a dog who’s too nervous to sniff another’s ass.”

“Hell, ain’t nothing wrong with this dog,” I said, opening the door for him. He hopped out and sniffed me. I scratched him on the neck real good. “He just needs to be trained.”

“Well, he ain’t coming back here, that’s for sure. I never seen Frankie kick out a dog before.”

Ronny spun his keys on his finger. “How would y’all like a Macallan 25, on the house?”

“Who the hell is Mack Allen?” Greg asked.

As we pulled out of Frankie’s in Greg’s truck, he asked why the hell we were hanging out with this guy. “Thinks he’s educated, but he don’t know up from down. He’s a nerd, is what he is. Can’t even keep his dog trained.” He spun the wheel hard into the parking lot. The dreadful sound of gravel churning.

“Well, that nerd has a whole building full of liquor,” I said, “so keep your damn mouth shut.”

We sat in the floor of the liquor store with the lights off, sipped bourbon from the bottle. Ronny chased the scotch with a two liter of Coke while the dog snored, its head resting on my boots.

“So you’re running your dad’s store now?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Ronny said, “now that he’s dead and all.” He handed me the bottle.

“Shit,” I said. “I’m sorry, man. We didn’t know.”

“It’s alright,” he said.

I don’t think Ronny really gave a shit. There’s this social pressure sometimes to feel sadness when you don’t feel any at all. I felt it every time I watched a movie with a girl.

“Are you going to sell us liquor underage now?” Greg asked. I could’ve wrung his neck. Asking that question just then was like running up to a deer with an airhorn and saying, “Are you going to let me shoot you now?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ronny said. “I don’t care how old my friends are.”

Me and Greg shot each other looks at that word.

A car drove by, its headlights nailing one row of bottles after the next, brown and clear liquid in them reflecting off each other.

To be the owner of a liquor store.

“You’re not hiring, are you?” I asked Ronny.

“Don’t think so.”

Round that time my dad was threatening to throw my ass out if I didn’t get a job. “Can’t afford to keep you,” he’d say. I’d tell him I was out looking for work when really I was cruising town, drinking and fucking whatever I could get my hands on. One morning I got out of bed to piss and ran into him in the hallway.

“Job searching today?” he asked, a cup of coffee in one hand and a slice of pecan pie in the other.

“Yep,” I said and closed the bathroom door behind me. I pissed for two solid minutes. When I opened the door again he was still there.

“Job searching,” he said with a mouth full of pie. “Yeah, right.”

Not long after Ronny come back to Two Trees, Greg found out he knocked up Sissy. “Her daddy’ll kill me if I don’t marry her,” he said. So for the next nine months his folks wouldn’t let him go anywhere but work, church, and Sissy’s house to kiss her parents’ asses.

Meanwhile Ronny was out spending what little money he made at the liquor store, buying all my booze for me so I’d hang out with him. If I was a girl I’d say he was trying to get in my pants for sure. But I liked his dog and his free booze, so I let him tag

along with me while Greg was on house arrest. Frankie still wouldn't let him bring Biscuit to the bar, so I asked if he wanted to go to the dirt racetrack in Crawfordsville. There was more girls there, anyway.

I pulled my truck up to the edge of the wall outside the track and we sat drinking beer on the tailgate and watched stock cars fly by, counting beers instead of laps. We knew some of the drivers were from Two Trees, but there was also guys from Heber Springs, Pine Bluff, even Memphis.

The truck next to us had folding lawn chairs in the bed with two good looking girls in them. Bikini tops with the number 17 painted on their flat bellies. Every now and then I'd sneak a look, pretend I was looking for someone farther on down the row of cars and trucks.

I remembered I still had a rubber training bumper in my truck, the kind that looks like a duck so you can teach dogs to fetch birds. While Ronny watched what must've looked like Daytona 500 in his eyes, I drank a longneck with one hand and tossed the bumper for Biscuit with the other. He bounced through the weeds and dandelions growing through the gravel, and every time he brought it back I'd pour a little beer into his mouth. The girls saw me and giggled.

"Cute dog," one of them said.

"Thanks," I said and tossed the bumper again. A V of geese honked overhead and the dog barked at them. To get a beagle to retrieve a fat goose, now that'd be a trick.

"He's my dog," Ronny said to the girls. "Biscuit, here." But the dog came straight to me—he wanted that beer. I poured some out for him.

"Your dog's name is Biscuit?" the other girl asked. She was the brunette.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Dude,” I said so only Ronny could hear me.

The sun went down just before the race ended, and by the time we got onto the road behind a caravan for four-wheel-drives, the clock on the dashboard read ten-thirty.

“All right, Ronny,” I said as we pulled onto the highway. “Let’s go hunting.”

The wildlife reservation was far enough from town that nobody would hear a gunshot. And even if they did, they wouldn’t care. You never could tell what direction it came from, anyway. You might think somebody was shooting from the levee road east of town, when really they were out west by the cotton fields and the Saint Francis River.

I got out and dropped the tailgate, unlocked the toolbox where I kept a .22 long rifle in case of emergencies. The dog pissed on a tire while Ronny watched me, and I doubted he’d ever seen a gun that close before.

The full moon was the only light shining through tree branches, as it was cloudy everywhere else. The dog ran around clueless and untrained, bouncing in heaps of fallen oak leaves. Had to chew on every pine cone. While Ronny walked hunched over with the gun in his hands like a goddamn grunt, I took a beer from my back pocket, tossed the cap in a creek bed.

“See if you can’t find any coons up in them branches,” I said.

I held my hand over Biscuit’s head and taught him to sit, again with the beer. He took a liking to it—don’t we all. At one point I spit a mouthful of brew into the air like a fountain and he jumped to snap at it.

Ronny peeked around tree trunks, as if you couldn't hear us from a mile away, turned and looked over his shoulder as if the coons were sneaking up on us. Then, without a word, he shot into a tree. The .22 rimfire snapped, echoed off tree trunks. We heard a thud, a rustle of leaves.

"I got one," he said and looked at me bug-eyed. "I got a raccoon." I snatched the gun from him and put the brass shell in my pocket. This is what it felt like to be a dad.

Biscuit beat us to the bloody lump on the ground. Ronny walked slow and stepped on sticks. Goddamn, this kid made some noise.

"Oh," he said when we got to it.

It wasn't a raccoon, it was a damn owl.

"That's illegal," I said, pointing where the blood ran between feathers, pooled in the concaves of oak leaves. "You know that, right?"

"At least I hit it."

The worst part was he didn't see the big deal. I didn't know much about Ronny's folks, but they sure as hell didn't raise him to be a sportsman. Biscuit chewed a bloody pine cone, sniffed the shit out of that owl. I snapped my fingers at him and he stopped so I could wash his snout with a little beer. He sat still and wagged at me.

"Are you training my fucking dog?" Ronny asked. He held the rifle tight to his chest, but he hadn't reloaded it.

"Somebody's got to," I said. "You can't drink, can't train Biscuit. Sure as hell can't shoot straight."

"Fuck you, man." He shoved the rifle at me. Suddenly, a population of cicadas chirped up the way they do, instantly, as if they'd been waiting all night to fill the woods

with noise. Me and Ronny couldn't hear nothing but each other. "You're a fucking dick, you know that?" he said.

When I got home I went to get a beer out of the fridge, but Dad stopped me. Pull your own weight, he said. Stop dicking around and get a job. Buy your own damn beer.

The next morning he came in my room while I was sleeping and blasted a wooden duck call in my ear. I shot up and hoped I wasn't sticking out of my boxers. "You ain't looking for no job," he said, "so I got you one at the chicken plant. Terry said you can start today. Your mama and me can't afford to keep you forever," he said. I stared at the wall, rubbed dirt out of my eye corners.

I couldn't argue with him, there was never much point to that. He lived with his folks till he was thirty, home cooked meals and only worked enough for playing-around money. You can tell when a man was spoiled as a child, even when he becomes an adult. Now when he didn't get his way, instead of pitching a fit like a kid, he just got mad. He knew he could get his way if he got mad.

Terry was Greg's mom and the floor manager at the chicken killing plant, and when I got there around noon she gave me my jumpsuit and rubber gloves, showed me the machinery and explained which parts of the chicken killing process they performed. The place smelled salty like blood, sour, and that bird-shit yogurt smell. It'll put a fist in your gut.

“You’ll be in the Evisceration and Internal Cleaning room,” she told me once I had the blue surgical mask wrapped around my ears.

“Sounds fun,” I said.

“Greg will show you the ropes. You boys will have fun, I think. It’s not pretty, but the pay is steady.”

Smelling blood and chicken shit, I waited for Greg to show up. I listened for the clucks of dying chickens, but all I heard was the machines going and the black folks talking. Aretha Franklin belting from a radio somebody had hid while Terry was in the room. Now that the boss lady was gone, things went back to normal. Near the end of the room, where the chickens were carried to the final cleaning stages, I saw somebody slip a pint into someone else’s pocket. Maybe this would be alright after all.

A few minutes later, Greg came in with an air of authority and the makings of a full beard. I didn’t realize how long it’d been since I’d seen him last, or how old we were getting. I suspected that, even though I’d never wish it for myself in a million years, the prospect of becoming a dad put some kind of spell over Greg. Like he thought he was boss now.

“He’s all right,” I told him when he asked about Ronny. “Except the other night he shot a fucking hoot owl. Thought it was a treed coon.” The black guy next to us looked at me and tossed some entrails into the trough that swept them out of the room with a rush of water. “But I think he’s getting used to town again.”

“Still working that liquor store?”

“Far as I can tell.” I plunged my hand into a chicken’s ass. “How’s Sissy doing?”

“She’s good, man. Been going to the doctor damn near every day.”

“How far long is she?”

“Ain’t showing yet, but she says her titties’ll start getting big soon.”

“Nice.”

We cleaned chickens and pulled guts till it was the only thing we knew. When it was time to shut down I asked Greg if he wanted to get a beer and shoot some pool, but he reminded me he had to go straight home.

“Got to get you church’d up and straightened out.”

“Like it’ll make a difference now,” he said and winked at me, handed me a flask from his pocket.

“You dirty dog,” I laughed and took a pull. Moonshine. “Mmm,” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “That’ll put the grease in your pan.”

On the way to Frankie’s I stopped by Ronny’s mama’s house and asked if he wanted to join.

“Oh, he went out, I think,” she said. “Haven’t seen him in a few hours.”

I saw his car with the Razorback sticker parked in the gravel lot. The sky was overcast, gun metal gray, and a warm wind blew circles around the lot, flinging gravel dust in my eyes and mouth. I found Ronny inside, legs up on a barstool trying to talk some poor bastard in overalls into selling him a gun.

“I got plenty of cash,” he said. “I own a goddamn liquor store.”

I went up and ordered a beer. As soon as Ronny’s attention was on me, the overalled man pulled a wad of cash out of his bibs, dropped a few bills on the bar and

walked out, muttering something about a city slick motherfucker. Frankie brought me a beer and grabbed the cash, told me to take care of my friend.

“Where’s Biscuit?” I asked Ronny. I hadn’t seen the little beagle in days.

“I want a gun,” he said, red-eyed and sweaty. His t-shirt was stained under the arms and chunks of blue mud clung to his boots. His hair was getting ratty and he hadn’t shaved. If you didn’t know him, you would have thought he never left Two Trees in his life. You would’ve thought he was happy here like the rest of us, if you could call us that.

“Give me a gun!” he yelled. Two big guys playing pool stood up straight and looked at us over upturned beer glasses.

“Get that shit out of here,” Frankie said to me.

“Let me finish my beer,” I said. “I’ll shut him up.”

Frankie shook his head and went to check something in back. The guys at the pool table were ten years older and a good fifty pounds heavier than me and Ronny. Their hands looked like catcher’s mitts wrapped around pool cues.

“Come on,” I said to Ronny, “let’s smoke one out back.”

The patio was enclosed by a chain link fence with red chili pepper Christmas lights strung through it. They weren’t plugged in. The train thundered by as we sat on a wooden picnic table under a big umbrella, propped our feet on the bench. I had to light the Camel under my shirt on account of the wind.

“Give me one,” Ronny said after the train was gone and we could hear each other. I handed him a cigarette and my lighter, but as he lit it I smelled burnt cardboard. The dumb shit had put it in backwards and lit the filter.

“Fucking Christ,” I said and ripped it from his mouth, tossed it over the fence into the grass.

“Sorry,” he said. I gave him another and he lit it right, coughed a cloud of smoke. He held his arm out straight and stiff, brought it to his lips with the delicacy of a taxidermist. “Will you teach me to shoot?” he asked.

“No.” I spit on the ground. You don’t just ask a man something like that. It’s like asking him to grill your steaks for you at a cookout. Ronny might look the part with his greasy hair and boots, but he didn’t know shit about dogs or guns or cars. Might as well have been a foreigner in Two Trees.

“But I hit that owl,” he said.

“Don’t matter if you hit something if it’s not what you’re after.”

I kept thinking about that dog. He deserved a better owner than Ronny, but I knew he’d never give him up. For some reason I was reminded of church and fishers of men. I tried to remember if that old saying about teaching a man to fish was from the bible or not, but I guessed it didn’t matter.

“I bet you never caught a fish before, neither,” I said. A mockingbird lighted on the fence and mimicked the shrill squeak of a blue jay. I wondered if Ronny knew it claimed to be something it wasn’t, or if he thought all birds sounded the same.

“No,” he said. “I’ve never been fishing.” He glared at me, sheepish. “I’d like to, though. If we could get a boat.”

If *we* could get one.

...

I was hungover and late to work the next morning, showed up around ten. It wasn't the first time, and I never got in trouble for it before, but this time Greg sure chewed my ass out, dragged me straight to the floor. He grabbed the back of my head and turned it left and right, forcing me to look across the room. He spoke low enough only I could hear him.

"You're five hours late," he said. "These niggers here show up at five on the dot, every damn day. They work their asses off and when they go home they get shit housed and play cards or whatever the fuck they do. But you can't even do that. You're a fuckup."

"What's up your ass?"

The others worked along with chicken asses to their elbows.

"You're fired," he said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"You got to get your shit together, man." He put his hands on his hips.

"Fuck you," I said. He thought he was hot shit just because he didn't live with his parents after we finished school. Acting like getting Sissy pregnant made him an adult.

"You got half an hour to get your shit and get out," he said.

After he left one of the black guys at work named Chris said he was sorry and asked if I knew a guy named Slim. I told him probably not.

"You'd know if you knew the Slim I'm talking about," he said. Some of the other black folks laughed at me not knowing who Slim was. It didn't bother me.

"Slim owns this junk yard, see?" Somebody slowed down the machines, the chickens hung waiting. "Slim will trade you *anything* in that yard," Chris said, "for some

fresh game. Coon, possum,” Chris grinned even bigger, talked real loud so everybody could hear him. “Might even take that hoot owl your boyfriend shot. Put your hand in his ass and bring it to him!”

The women slapped their knees and repeated Chris’s last few lines, to keep the laughs going. I told them what to put up their own asses when I left, but they were still laughing at me.

“What kind of meat?” Ronny asked when I got to the liquor store and told him what Chris had said.

“Any kind, I guess.” I took a dog treat from my pocket and tossed it to Biscuit. He snapped it out of the air and broke it to pieces on the ground, nibbled at the chunks.

“How do you know he has a boat?” Ronny asked.

“Slim’s got a boat.”

“You act like you’ve been there,” he said, stocking tubs of something on a shelf by the door.

“What is that stuff?” I asked.

“Margarita mix.”

I couldn’t remember if Ronny had always had thin hair, or if I had just noticed for the first time, the gleam of sunshine on his scalp as he bent to grab another tub.

“Who the hell drinks margaritas?”

“Mexicans,” he said, “and college students.”

“Which are you expecting?” I asked, wondering what a college student even looked like.

“Don’t matter to me,” he said, “long as they spend some money.”

That evening me and Ronny pulled up to a singlewide with wooden steps and a front porch made of plywood. You could see it shaking in the wind, where an old black man cut the breasts from a mound of dead dove. He had a pistol drawn on us before we got out of the truck.

Ronny whispered out the side of his mouth: “*Any* kind of meat?”

I opened the truck door and stepped into a black puddle, the first needle-sharp drops of a thunderstorm striking my face.

“You Slim?” I hollered from the yard.

“Who’s asking?” he yelled.

“Friends of Chris, from the chicken plant.”

There was four rusty cars in the yard with weeds and wildgrass grown around them, whipping in time with the wind. A diesel motor was perched on a concrete block.

“Yeah I know Chris. How you boys doing today?” he said. He wore a white apron stained pink and brown, old and new blood. “Looks like a storm coming.”

“We need a boat,” Ronny yelled with his hands cupped around his mouth, the trees swaying, grass rustling, wind racing circles around us. Slim tried his best to light a Black & Mild.

“We heard you might trade us one for some fresh game,” I added.

“Come round back,” he told us.

Out back of the trailer was more junk, rusted bodies of big bulbous cars from the forties, huge olive green containers with yellow serial numbers that looked like they come

from the military. I was just thinking I might like a few hours to walk around a look when Slim brought us to a rusty pirogue laying upside down in a knee-high patch of weeds. No idea how he found it, must have been buried in them for years, because when me and Ronny flipped it over there was only bare dirt and grubs underneath.

Just then the clouds broke, thunder clapped, and the bottom fell out. Even as we stood there, the boat filled with rain. It didn't bother me none, it was just water, but Ronny looked at Slim and said, "Can we get in out of the weather?"

"Got that boat off a fella sixteen years ago," Slim said once we were inside the trailer. Like most homes belonging to old folks, it looked like we had stepped into the sixties. An orange, brown, and white crochet blanket lay over the top of a white couch with little pink flowers. "Give him a Remington twelve-gauge for it that I got in a dice game in Baton Rouge, back in '78 when we thought the mayor was fixing to get impeached."

While he talked, I studied a mounted gray squirrel on a work table. Amateur job, but still pretty good. The squirrel wore a tiny cowboy hat, chaps and boots, and was mounted in a saddle atop a house cat. Next to the couch, four possums sat around a milk crate playing poker.

Slim caught me looking at them.

"Done those myself," he said. "I get a good price for them at the flea market in Searcy."

"They look awful nice," I said. "Reckon we could deal on that boat?"

"Tell you what. Y'all bring me a good size buck, and you can keep that there pirogue."

On the way home I told Ronny that Biscuit was our only chance. I told him about the time I went hunting with Jackie Franklin and his cousins, a pack of six dogs running some public land just north of Natchez. Jackie took the dogs to one side of a fifty acre plot and the rest of us went to the other end with our rifles and walked that way. The dogs drove a herd of whitetail to us, but only one of the cousins dropped a nice six-point. The rest of us were too drunk to shoot straight.

Before dawn the next Saturday, me and Ronny went to the same spot he shot the owl at. I convinced my dad to let me take his .30-06 because he thought I still had a job. We let Biscuit run around and get his bearings in the dark, and after a while I figured the public land was hunted out. Eventually we came on a fence that bordered some private land. It didn't look like it was being farmed, though, but the fence and a few trees had fluorescent pink ribbons tied on, to let you know you were trespassing. The dog didn't pay it any mind, though, and jumped through the wooden beams of the fence. In a little clearing just past the property line stood a small wooden shack with a few cords of wood lined against it.

"Biscuit," Ronny hollered in a whisper.

"Come on," I said, "he's on a scent."

"Who put you in charge?"

"I'm holding the gun."

The roof lacked half its shingles, the wood siding was spotted with mold and rot. Ronny peeked in a window, turned and shrugged at me. I told him to head the dog to the other end of the property. "Don't worry if gets away from you. He'll catch a deer and

drive him this way.” That dog never listened to Ronny. He had a better chance of finding me another job in those woods than a deer, but I sent them off anyway.

I smoked a few cigarettes and walked the pasture in the dark. I was leaned against an acorn tree at the far end of the clearing, thinking on Sissy’s titties getting bigger when the sun finally came up. This was going to take a while. I told myself I’d smoke a cigarette every half hour and wished I had asked Ronny to stop at his store on the way. I realized this was the first time I *needed* to kill something. It usually doesn’t bother me not to get anything. Why they call it hunting instead of killing.

I figured me and Ronny would fit in that boat easy with a case of beer and a couple fishing rods. I’d take him to the lake, show him to read the water and find big pockets of bream. Hell, I’d take it myself without telling him.

As the sun came up, I sat under the shade of the acorn tree and pictured the pirogue in open water, empty, but really I was laying in it. An arm peeking out to flick a cigarette in the water. The arm going back in. I saw me inside with a sixer and a dirty magazine, maybe a joint from that guy Greg knows. Sun beating me to sleep. I saw me in there with a girl. With Sissy before Greg put it in her.

I remembered what I was doing when I heard barking and leaves crushing. I looked to the tree line and saw a big doe bolt into the clearing with Biscuit on her heels. I could barely make out his ears flapping in the wild hay, growing nearly waist high. I was awful proud of that damn dog. I looked through the rifle scope at an open shot, and was about to whistle so the deer would stop and I could take her down, when a black and white pony broke through the tree line and caught up with them, a big German-looking motherfucker on top aiming a snubnose revolver at the deer. He had blonde hair and

wore overalls, and for a second I thought it might be the man I saw at Frankie's that night Ronny was so piss-ass drunk, but he wasn't nearly big enough.

The pony looked like a rocking horse under this guy's massive legs. He passed the dog and caught up with the deer, rode alongside her like a racecar going two deep. I knew what was coming, but still. He shot her in the neck point blank and she rolled like a zebra being took down by a lion.

I lowered the scope and asked myself what the fuck did I just see. All of a sudden I had to piss. I raised the scope again. The dog had stopped where the deer fell and was sniffing, licking at its blood-stained neck and face. The man with arms like white railroad ties hopped off the pony and kicked Biscuit in the ribs. I could've shot the son of a bitch right then. I should have.

Biscuit splayed his legs, I saw his lips curl in a growl, bone white teeth flashing. The man barely gave him a second look, just cocked the hammer and shot him one time. I dropped the rifle and buried my face in the grass.

I couldn't get a cigarette lit quick enough by the time he slung the deer over the pony's back and walked it past the tree line. My hands shook, my mouth was dry. When Ronny came back I tried to explain it to him, but he just yelled and called me a sick jealous motherfucker and then walked his ass home. I had no choice but to take Biscuit with me.

Half of his jaw was missing and there was a hole blown out of his side with guts and bone where the exit wound was. A drone of crickets started up with the sun's heat, and I saw a few hopping back and forth in the wild hay. I found a creek running just

south of the tree line where the man had run off with the deer and pony. I carried Biscuit to it, made sure I didn't touch anything but fur.

It was cooler under the trees lining the creek. The branches on both sides nearly merged overhead, providing shade all day except high noon, which was still an hour away by the sun's position. I slung the rifle crossways over my shoulder, cradled the little beagle in my hands and dipped him in the cold water. A cloud of tadpoles flushed around me, avoiding the stream of blood washing from Biscuit's fur. I tried to remember the last time I cried. I didn't care if the giant and his pony caught me trespassing. Let 'em try to kill me.

Back at the truck, I dug a blue plastic tarp out of my toolbox and wrapped the clean, wet Biscuit in it. I'd find a place to dump him tomorrow.

"Give me that gun, boy," my dad said when I got home. He looked at the blood on me. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Nothing." I reached for a beer in the fridge.

"Got your ass fired, I know that much."

"Terry call?"

"Mm hmm. Get a job or not, I don't care, but get your ass out of my house. I'm done yelling at you."

"All right," I said, cracked the beer and went back to my truck.

...

Slim was on the porch playing a game of checkers against himself, drinking from a sweaty glass and puffing a Black & Mild. “What you doing here?” He broke into a wet laugh and then a coughing fit. “Don’t see no deer in the bed of that truck.”

“I was wondering if I could get the boat now. See, the deer won’t be good until it cools off in a month or so, but the fish are still biting.”

“Done traded that boat,” he said. “Man give me a bobcat for it.”

“I thought you said you wanted a deer.”

“Hell, I want lots of things.”

I thought about the things I wanted. Like a dog, or a place to stay. A buddy who owned a liquor store. I took Biscuit out of the toolbox and unwrapped the tarp.

“You want this dog?” Blood had caked into his fur, his limbs were stiff and he smelled red and brown like the earth below our feet. “Can you make something of him?”

“Shit, poor little dog.” He looked the body over, tilted the chin to check the dog’s missing jaw. “Can’t give you much for him.”

I imagined God or somebody talking about me this way.

Can you make something of him? Poor little dog.

“That’s all right,” I said, walking back to my truck. “Ronny will pay you when you’re done.”

ran a three week production of my father's death. Every night sold out in advance. I begged the ticket lady for standing room: It's *my* father, I said. I deserve to see how it ends. She shrugged her shoulders. You'll have to wait, she said. But I wanted to be a son who cried. I wanted to see it now.

If You Have to Ask

We always drive separately. *Just in case*. Of what, though, he never says. I think he likes a quick escape, an Irish Goodbye. You get used to those. I can see when he's had enough, when he can't stand to be around me, most often when he's drunk or stoned. It takes everything he's got just to look at me. I can tell right then we're not having sex that night, and because I can't outright *ask* him to come over and fuck me—we never speak directly about anything—I get in my car and he gets in his to follow me home. He honks twice once I've locked the door and sends a text the minute he's safely behind his own. I could be doing much worse.

Another one of his *all-time favorite bands* is in town tonight and he bought us tickets. He called me at work this morning to tell me we're going. I'd listened to the band a little before we met, but I wouldn't call myself a fan. Now, on the downswing of success, they're selling out smaller venues to thirty-somethings, college grads.

When he's done with the guys, he comes to pick me up, by which I mean, he stays in his car while I follow him to Murphy's, this pub we like. Outside, he circles until there's two empty spots so he can put change in both our meters. See, he's thoughtful. He orders me a gin and tonic, bourbon for himself.

"How are the guys?" I ask.

"The guys are good."

"That's good."

"Mm hmm."

He takes a sip.

He shows me his ideal set list, the songs he'd choose for the band to play tonight if he could. It's good. He's a smart guy.

When the waiter comes again, he orders a grilled cheese and I get a roast beef panini with extra mayonnaise-based chipotle sauce. I'm proud of myself for getting it. He orders meals that don't require utensils—doesn't trust the dishwashers. He still thinks he got food poisoning in college from a dirty steak knife.

"How's the panini?"

"Good. The grilled cheese?"

"Good."

We try to think of something to talk about.

He's a fantastic eater. I've never once seen him spill on himself. On the rare occasion he does get a knife-and-fork meal, he takes one bite of chicken breast, one bite of green beans, mashed potatoes, cornbread, one sip of whatever he's drinking. It's like he's trying to balance his palate. I think he doesn't want any part of the meal to feel left out.

"Hey. Do we know that guy?"

Sitting at a table in the corner is a fat bald man between fifty and sixty. He's got a goatee. He could be one of our landlords.

"I don't recognize him," he says.

He takes another bite of grilled cheese. He's got two ways of looking at me: eyebrows raised, skin tight around the eyes, ears pushed back—he can move them on command—bringing the corners of his mouth into a self-conscious smirk, or the exact opposite. Everything hangs loose, though his face is square-shaped and not that fat, in an

expression that makes his eyes look like train tunnels. He looks at me like a physics problem.

“I swear to god I know that guy.”

“An ex?”

He can really make me laugh.

“Do you have a dentist?” he asks.

“No.”

“Hair dresser? Mailman?”

“Yeah, but that’s not him.”

“Walk over and ask him, if you’re that curious. I’ll go dunk my head in the toilet.”

“Okay. How early do we need to be?”

“Will call starts in half an hour. No opener, so I’d say we have time for another drink or two.” At least he never acts like he’s in a hurry. He knows punctuality is important to me, too, though I’m not as good at it. Never says anything about chivalry or women drivers.

I keep looking at the man with the goatee, hoping he won’t look back, when our pinot gris arrives. This is something neither of us decided—to mix liquor, beer, and wine. We’d always done it this way, even before we met.

“If you ride with me, we can pick up a pint for the show. Put it in my purse.”

“Yeah, but you know.”

His eyes look like snake holes. I have a few ways of combatting his nights of waning sex drive. There’s no tablecloth, so I can’t slip my shoe off and rub his crotch with my toes. Instead, I start rubbing my neck, not so absentmindedly. This is how I

look sexy. Work a couple fingers under the ear and along the jawline, down the front of my upturned neck.

His eyebrows raise when he makes eye contact with my clavicle. I'm hoping he wants to place his hand where mine is, or replace my neck with his neck. It's tiring being the only one to initiate sex, but it's fun sometimes. I get why guys like the chase.

"He looks like my uncle."

"What?" I drop my hands to my lap.

"The guy over there."

Despite myself, my hand is moving.

"It's weird he's eating by himself."

"Maybe he has no choice."

Like driving by himself.

As the crew sets up the stage, I remember who that man was. It's been a few months, so I'm not surprised I didn't recognize him at dinner. He was the Santa last year at the valley mall. I'd pass him three or four times a week on my way to the Sunglass Hut, where I was bumped down to part-time. To compensate, I took a seasonal job at the Civic Center where they showed such nightmares as Disney on Ice, SpongeBob on Ice, Muppets on Ice, My Little Pony on Ice. Three thousand stinking, dripping, red-faced kids high on cotton candy.

"Wonder what they'll open with."

He puts an arm around my shoulder and offers me a flask from his back pocket. Sneaky bastard. I turn around and take a pull, discreetly, and suddenly my scalp is itching

and tingling like when everything is hot and crowded and drunk. I squeeze my way to the back of the room, hoping he's too distracted to notice. I go through a swinging door that leads to the bar area and find an empty stool. They're all empty; the show is about to start.

I order a beer, wondering if he's noticed yet that I'm gone. He'll be disappointed I'm not there, but not enough that I should worry about it the way I am. I know it doesn't matter. But I want him to have a good time, to be in a good mood. I'm still trying to get laid. I decide that once I cool down, I'm going back and telling him how much fun I'm having, and thanks for the ticket. By the end of the show, he'll think *we've* had so much fun *together* and that *we like the same things*, and we'll go to his place and fuck each other's brains out. And who knows, maybe if I pretend to have a great time, I'll trick myself into it. I've read articles about smiling that suggest something similar.

I weighed 200 pounds in the eighth grade, but he doesn't know that; we only met a few months ago and I don't like to talk about it. I always felt forced to feel sorry for girls who threw up in the bathroom after school lunch. Like if it's that bad, just work out. Diet and exercise. Worked for me.

I've heard there's three types of fat people: the used to be fat, the soon to be fat, and the perpetually fat. But I've added another category. Those who will never be fat. Maybe their fatness lies somewhere else, a mental fatness. My mom used to tell me fat builds character. I know it builds patience. Waiting to speak after climbing a flight of stairs because you're out of breath, getting in and out of chairs made for *average* sizes,

your fat, cumbersome body getting in the way of itself. Other peoples' judgment is the easy part, just getting around is the nightmare.

"You okay?" He's joined me at the bar.

"Yeah, it's just hot in there."

"Oh."

"Let me get you a beer and I'll be right back."

"Okay. Want me to wait with you?"

"No, babe, go see the band. I'll find you."

The thing about being one of the fats is that all the nonfats think you're dumb. Big dumb stupid girl. Tuba music. They imagine all the fats floating down a sidewalk, eyes closed, lips smacking, beckoned by the visible scent of hot food, a hand gesturing: *follow me*. A cartoon. They think if a fat person is presenting research at a conference, they can only speak behind a podium until the donuts arrive. They try to look unassuming as you reach for a few apple slices and a cup of coffee. They make jokes about how many donuts they're going to eat, to let you know they're down with the gluttony. They won't judge you for eating too much, just for looking like you do. For breathing audibly and sweating year-round.

The band is dripping with sweat by the time I get back. He's wrong about the encore.

We're going to play a song from our new album. The last thing a *real* fan wants to hear, so he doesn't even let them start. Just grabs my hand and walks us out.

"You didn't want to hear the end?"

“Neither did you.”

He walks me to my car, which is really our two cars parked together, and we make out against the door of my sedan for two seconds.

“Thanks for coming.”

“I had a great time.”

“I’ll follow you.”

“Yeah. Honk twice.”

“As always.”

I start my car and turn the radio off. Enough music tonight. I might’ve thought he’d sleep with me if he wanted to get a drink and talk about the show, or at least grab my ass a little. It’s six blocks to the edge of downtown and another three miles to my place. I have no idea how drunk he is, but his headlights keep bouncing on the bumpy roads downtown. It looks like he’s flashing his high beams. For whatever reason, I decide to take a route that’ll put us in a more *dangerous* part of town. For a second I think he might call and ask where I think I’m going, but he follows patiently. He’s great.

On the way to my place, we pass three different cop cars with their lights on, investigating a vehicle or a vagrant. Each time, he speeds up to put less distance between his car and mine. I interpret his driving as a means of communication. He puts his blinker on first, though he’s behind; he thinks I should signal sooner. He tells me how cool and self-confident he is by rolling his window down and tapping his fingers along to whatever music he’s playing. I speed up a little, turn on my radio and catch the beginning of a Red Hot Chili Peppers song on the radio. I want to win. I want to fuck him, to make a point of it.

He changes lanes to let me know I'm driving too fast. He thinks he knows the best and right way to do everything. *He's* the one deciding how long we stay at Murphy's before the concert. He assumes that, even if I *could* think of the right amount of time to stay, it'd be the same amount of time *he* chooses, and it'd be the right amount of time because of *his* choosing it, not mine. So he never asks.

I watch him, or what I can see of him, in my rearview mirror. Headlights bouncing like two eyes in the dark, eyes looking down, giving me anything but words. We're over halfway to my place when I decide to run a red light. I know he won't follow me, and, of course, his car pulls to a stop. He looks so stupid, sitting there with no traffic going the other way.

I enjoy driving without his headlights bouncing behind me, telling me I'm too close to the curb or that I stop too quickly. When he rides in the car with me, which is almost never, he jerks his head back and forth like he's on a goddamn carnival ride. I pull into my spot and get out of the car. I don't feel like waiting for him to see me inside from the car. I'll send a text.

Someone clears their throat behind the hedges lining the entrance to the building. I grip my key between the knuckles of my index and middle fingers.

"Late night?" It's the old lady from my floor. She smokes a pack a day in this rock garden by the entrance, reading books on a bench.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Let me ask you something," she says. I can practically *taste* the phlegm in her throat. "When's the last time you been in a church?" I have to think a second. I hadn't pegged her for a Christian.

The last time I was in a church was for the wedding of a friend from school. A Methodist church, but whatever part that played in the ceremony, I can't say. I remember sitting in a pew with some friends, watching our buddy next to the minister, fake smile and everything. I remember the bride, her long brown hair. But the thing I remember the most, the thing that comes to mind when the old lady says the word *church*, is this one uncle of the bride. A few members of her family had taken their shoes and socks off and were in a circle, doing some redneck hokie-pokie dance.

"It's been a while," I tell the old lady. She nods, and we stand there a minute, watching her smoke curl under the orange lights of the apartment building.

This one uncle of the bride had the hairiest feet I'd ever seen, like they were wearing toupees. I wondered how he had the confidence to show them. A 200 pound eighth-grader has nowhere to hide. And yet this man was out there, hairy feet and all, among family and strangers, church-goers who might equate those feet with cloven hooves. During a slow song his wife danced with him, her bare feet on his, like a little girl dancing with her father.

A pair of headlights goes by, the car itself indistinguishable in the dark. The driver doesn't honk twice, doesn't flash his lights. Doesn't say a word. Above us, linen curtains ripple out an open window. "Might ought to go back," the lady says, stomping her cigarette, twisting her heavy toes.

Poking at the Loop

Hip deep in a river too fast
I poke at the dry fly's loop with my tippet.
The hole is small and difficult.

My waders leak
boots filling with a river
just squeezed through the city.
I've been here stepping over beer cans
plastic soda bottles Ziploc bags
full of chicken bones.

The sun grows warm yet my toes are numb wet
like when I was duck hunting
with my dad and uncle
embarrassed to tell them
how cold I was.

I struggle with the river's weight
the slick rocks underfoot
and the poking of the loop.

Farther downstream
a much older man
casts a smooth bullwhipping line.
I assume he's using
the right fly catching all
the right fish.

I hope his wizened eyes
haven't found me here
in my useless waders
falling over rocks
poking at the loop.

Sarah and the Squirrel Man

I tell the real estate lady I want a steak for a yard and potatoes for a house. She brings me to a little three-bedroom that was foreclosed in an old neighborhood not too far from town. The yard is overgrown and the wooden siding needs paint, the roof new shingles. I ask if the neighborhood is ethnically diverse.

“It’s a very clean neighborhood,” she says. “Everyone pays their taxes.”

The Filipino couple across the street sees us through their blinds and comes to get the mail together.

“They don’t talk much,” the real estate lady says. “Husband doesn’t speak the English.”

I wave. They seem nice, like they’re dressed for church. A gray long-hair cat sits on the porch waiting to be let in.

“Apparently the wife’s half white on her dad’s side,” the real estate lady says.

“And there’s a black family around here somewhere.” She looks up and down the street, as if she’ll catch them peeking out from behind lampposts.

“There’s too many white people in Alaska,” I say.

“Plenty of those here, too.”

As we walk to the front door she says I don’t sound like no Alaskan and I tell her I was born right here in Two Trees, that I’m coming home to roost. This house used to belong to my parents.

“What brought you to Alaska?” she asks. “Fishing? Logging?”

“My sister’s deadbeat husband.”

The front door is stuck in its frame and she asks if I feel like kicking it in, but instead we walk around the side. The grass runs knee-high against exterior walls, the fence leaned inward. The landscaper in me is making a work list, envisioning a future for the property. Everything is wet and gray and lifeless, but not for long if I can help it.

“Halloween is just around the corner,” she says. “The place would decorate nicely before you start to fix it up.”

I walk the backyard with my thumbs in my belt loops, wondering if the snakes are hibernating yet and how much it costs to rent a bush hog from Home Depot.

“Plenty of single women around,” she says.

The toolshed out back is splotched with peeling blue paint, the gray weathered wood exposed beneath it. Green and black mold crawls up the walls, and I assume the inside will smell wet with several dead or live animals.

“Is it locked?” she asks as I high step through the grass.

It isn’t. The door swings easily on its hinges, spreading light across the interior. I smell shit, wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkest corners. I feel like I’m trespassing. It looks inhabited. Maybe it’s the full bedpan in the corner, the dead squirrels lined up on a workbench. The fixed blade knife lying next to them.

She hangs up her phone as I step out of the shed. “What do you think?” she asks.

“Tell me about the squirrel man,” I say.

“Squirrel man? I think there’s a pest & rodent guy in the neighborhood.”

“No, in the shed.”

“He can spray out the shed.”

...

All month long I cut back the grass and trim the tress out front. I think about planting holly bushes, flowerbeds with hydrangeas. I plan on daylilies in the summer and think of Alaska as little as possible.

I never go back to the shed, and don't touch the backyard at all. I assume whoever is responsible for the squirrels in the shed will appreciate the density of vines and tall grass, the hiding spots for squirrels and snakes and small trappable animals. And yet my yard is the only one here without little trees shooting up from long buried pecans. There are no squirrels in my attic.

It's been a warm winter, so I figure on planting early. I strap my feet into the spiked soles for aerating the yard and begin walking across the cut lawn, reminded of snowshoes and eternally damp clothing. The black family from the cul de sac are out riding their bikes they got from Santa when one of the kids skids to a halt in my driveway.

"What are those?" she asks.

"They make the grass healthy," I tell her. Her training wheels rattle over the drive.

"Sure made a lot of progress on that yard," her dad calls out from the street. He parks his bike and walks up to shake my hand. "Name's Jeremy. That's my wife Crystal."

"We've been so happy with what you've done out here," she says. "That house has been an eyesore for so long."

They have me over for honey baked ham and ten kinds of sides for dinner. I'm tempted to explain how nice it is to befriend people of color after the overwhelming whiteness of Alaska, but decide not to bring it up.

"So what do you do?" Jeremy asks me while salting his butterbeans.

"Landscaping, in the past. Right now I'm just living off savings."

"That explains the yard," he says.

"And you live alone?" Crystal asks.

"I need the space. My apartment in Alaska was only three hundred square feet."

"Alaska!"

"My sister Sarah lives there. I just came back to thaw out."

They laugh and distribute peach cobbler while the kids show me their toys.

"What does your sister do?" Jeremy asks.

"Stays inside, mostly."

I think of the squirrel man. Crystal sends me home with Tupperwares full of sweet potato casserole, homemade mac & cheese, and a slab of ham. I leave them on the back porch and find them untouched in the morning, carry them to the fridge.

Sarah calls me on the phone.

"Happy New Year," she says. "Your southern vacation is almost up."

"I'm not going back," I say. "You want my help, you come to me."

"Is this still about that awful house?"

"Goddamn right it is."

“Just give it up. Why would you even want to live there?” She was diagnosed allergic to sunlight as a baby. Her skin boils, her retinas burn. She melts like the wicked witch. “It’ll be light season soon. This isn’t a game.”

“I’m not going back. It’s too damn cold.”

I hang up and go to my bedroom. I wouldn’t expect her to know why I want to live in our parents’ old house, the house we grew up in. After our parents died, years she moved to Alaska and got married, I was left to deal with their possessions.

I invited a few buddies from the Two Trees Landscaping Company to come over and get drunk, go through my parents’ shit. I told them to let me know if they found anything worth keeping.

I wasn’t about to rummage around my parents’ old bedroom, so while the guys were working on it I sat in the living room and got drunk, wondered what might be in that blue shed in the yard. At one point I heard a burst of laughter come from the bedroom and imagined that this was my family now.

J.R. came out with my dad’s compound bow and Greg took a few of my mom’s things for Sissy.

“Don’t tell her you got ‘em from a dead lady,” I said.

“All you’re keeping is the pellet rifle?” J.R. asked.

“And mom’s typewriter,” I said.

The guys shook my hand on the way out and said they were sorry for my loss. They’d left me some frozen dishes from their moms and girlfriends in the freezer, some cold beers in the fridge. I drank one with the door open, thinking about Sissy wearing my dead mom’s clothes. I wondered what Sarah’s husband looked like.

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Soon I'm finding dead squirrels all over the place. Caught in traps I hadn't noticed before, or with small bullet holes in their little bodies. I only find them in the unruly backyard, but I don't move them. They're never there for long. One January morning I stand at the bay window overlooking the backyard and sip a mug of coffee. Tiny drops of snowflakes scatter across the lawn and melt instantly. I think I'll bring the squirrel man some coffee. I deserve to see his face.

I tuck my pajama pants into a pair of rubber boots, dig my Alaskan parka out of the closet. Even now, the coldest day of the year, its goose down is too heavy for Arkansas. I knock on the shed door, sip the squirrel man's coffee to check the temperature. I must be the only man alive who has to knock before going into his own shed.

A dirty pinstriped mattress is shoved into one corner, opposite a full bedpan. Nearly a dozen skinned squirrels hang from lengths of twine strung on the rafters, their skins mounted and drying on a wall. Next to the bedpan sits a five gallon bucket full of used coffee grounds that nearly mask the smell of shit. I worry what will happen if the squirrel man finds me here.

Back inside my parents' old house, I down the squirrel man's coffee and watch the snow fall. I think I see a human-sized rustle in the tall grass. Anyone else would've cut it by now. After I dump the rest of the coffee in the sink, I think of something I can do for the squirrel man. I go in my closet and fish out the old pellet rifle and a round tin of pellets. I smile, thinking of the joy this will bring him, the ease of procuring food. I carry it outside and prop it against the house where he'll easily find it. I go back for my

mother's typewriter and carry it out as well with a stack of clean paper. Before I go back in, I type a message for the squirrel man: *Take the gun. Let me know how it goes.*

I get a package in the mail from Sarah. She hasn't called again, but I know what she's doing, sending me things. Under the packing peanuts lies a vacuum-sealed pack of reindeer steaks and a four pound bag of salmon jerky. A note attached: *Don't you miss the food up here?*

I go out back to check the typewriter. My message is gone, no paper in sight.

"Crystal wants to hire you to do the lawn, once it's warm enough," Jeremy says. He's pulled the scarf down from his face so I can see his lips moving while he talks. "I'd rather do it myself, though. Maybe you could show me a few things when you start on your backyard?"

"You've seen the backyard?"

"The vines and weeds hang over the fence."

"I'm not sure I'll get to it anytime soon."

"What's the first step?"

"I mean, I'm more focused on the house right now."

"I have some hedge trimmers and a weed eater."

"Tell you what, I'll call you as soon as I start on it."

"Let's just take a quick look."

"Sorry, man. I've got some painting to do."

I shut the door and go look at the shed. Nothing moves.

...

“We need to talk,” Jeremy says. The Filipino man stands behind him on my porch, crying with the cat in his arms. It’s maroon and sticky with blood.

“Oh my god,” I say.

“Do you know anything about this?” Jeremy asks. I tell him I don’t. “Mr. Ocampo here says he found his cat in your yard this morning.

“Your yard,” Mr. Ocampo says.

“We think it’s been shot,” Jeremy says.

Sure enough, I find a tiny entrance wound with no exit—the pellet rifle. And how do I explain this? I want to be a good neighbor, not the white guy who got someone’s cat killed. To make things worse, it’s obvious that I’ve never talked to the Filipino couple, didn’t know their names until just now.

It seems as if the squirrel man is always watching. The next day the Ocampos bring me to their front porch. Where the cat used to sit, a live squirrel is tethered to their doorknob by a length of twine. A message, typed on a sheet of paper, is tucked into the doorframe: *Sorry bout you’re cat.*

Mr. Ocampo glares at me. Mrs. Ocampo asks if this was my doing.

“Of course not,” I say, “but you have to admit it’s impressive, whoever did it.”

I take out my pocket knife and the Ocampos startle back, but relax when they see me cut the twine and release the squirrel.

“If there’s anything I can do,” I say.

I walk home and crack a beer on the back porch, watch the grass and weeds swaying in the wind. I notice the shed door is ajar, and before going back in, I type another message for the squirrel man: *Don't kill pets.*

Another package comes. A wooden handle ulu knife with the word *Alaska* and an image of the Big Dipper etched into the wood. A whalebone carving of a whale, a pair of snowshoes, fur hat. *Don't you miss the culture?*

I decide to leave the ulu for the squirrel man. He's probably never seen one, and he'll need it more than I do. Outside, a dead German Shepard lies in a path of grass cleared in the backyard, as if by machete. A noose hangs round its neck like a snared rabbit. I sit on the cold ground with the dog and read the collar. Sparky, what a name. I've never seen this dog, never heard anyone mention it. I have no idea where the squirrel man got it.

I want to stay here though my parents have been dead ten years and all the neighbors I used to know are gone. If only my sister's deadbeat husband hadn't run out on her. If only she hadn't run off to Alaska, to go outside in the winter, the dark.

I put a padlock on the shed. He'll only leave if I starve him out first.

The next day, I suffer a terrible stomach ache. I chug Pepto and eat soda crackers the way I did when I was sick in this house as a child. I watch as a gray squirrel crawls across the top of the fence, stopping every few feet to look for the squirrel man. I follow its eyes, also hoping to catch him.

I wake and find squirrels running in the backyard, barking from the tops of trees, digging holes in the dirt. Perhaps I'd taken the squirrel man for granted. I hear them clambering over the roof when I'm not retching into the trashcan.

On the third day, by the time I get whatever it was out of my system, you'd think I was raising a squirrel farm. They're eating everything in sight, producing pecans from god knows where and throwing them at windows. I hear them in the walls.

"The sun was out for four hours today," Sarah says. "I need you to come back."

"I'm not going back."

"I'll buy your ticket."

I hear squirrels in the chimney.

"I've still got a lot of work to do on the house. You should see the backyard."

"Just come back for the summer. The house will be there six months from now."

"I will too."

I hang up the phone. I haven't seen Jeremy, Crystal, or the Ocampos in weeks.

This time, just an envelope. I open it with my pocket knife and inside I find a one-way ticket from Memphis to Fairbanks and a handwritten letter: *Don't you miss ME?*

And here's where all my problems are solved. I leave the envelope on top of the typewriter, type a short message: *Time for you to go. Sarah will get you in Fairbanks.*

I imagine Sarah and the squirrel man, whatever he looks like, meeting each other in the airport. I think she'll take care of him as much as he'll take care of her. I unlock the shed and run inside before the squirrel man can get me. He must be hungry.

In the morning I find the shed empty, save a few squirrels who chewed their way in. You'd think there had never been any squirrel man. I don't wonder how he'll get to the airport, or if he has any I.D. I wonder how much it is to rent a bush hog from Home Depot.

Summer has come and is going, the days getting shorter, nights colder, and I still haven't cleared the backyard. In fact, the front has grown up again. Something about the dense brush of it appeals to me. The squirrels are gone; I've eaten them in stews and on skewers. A few still hang from the rafters in the shed, their furs nailed to the outside wall for the others to see. Warm evenings, I sit with a whiskey drink and the pellet rifle, waiting for any squirrel who hasn't received the message.

Life After Death

He quit the hard stuff.

It made his hands uncertain.

Put gaps in his dovetail joints.

He wants his hands to know the wood, the wood to trust his hands.

For better or worse.

They buried her in steel.

Now he canes rocking chairs.

Monticello Penny Keychain

A penny and two quarters, you chose Monticello. Turned the crank and watched as the silver cogs spun, interlocked, until finally the penny dropped into the tray at the bottom of the machine. The mansion's front dome, its pediment and columns, now set in copper-plated zinc. A paper-thin souvenir.

In the back seat of your parents' Plymouth, you rubbed your thumb across the surface of the penny, flattened warm like a smooth stone in the sun. At home you wondered what to do with it, kept it in your pocket most of the time, but found it sliding out when you sat on couches and car seats.

After losing the penny at a baseball game and searching both dugouts, combing every inch of grass and infield clay until you found it *under* first base, you went to your dad's garage and drilled a 3/32" hole into it. A keychain for some time in the future.

You listened for mufflers screaming outside the school's windows. You rode your bike and imagined pistons pumping instead of your legs, 8-track tapes that the neighbors would hear coming down the street. A fast car with a stereo, that's what you wanted.

That '67 Pontiac was one bitchin' car. Five speed, come-get-some red, you whipped it all over Two Trees until every sucker in town knew it was you behind the wheel. You'd crawl down the main drag at night, calling in songs to the radio station in Forrest City so you and your buddies could drink beers that somebody had gotten from somewhere—as they always do—and holler at the Sonic girls on their roller skates.

Maybe you'd drive along the dam at the lake and spit oozing globs of chewing tobacco off the edge, even though you never saw it land.

Suddenly, getting somewhere seemed like a problem that was outdated, like not knowing how to read, or putting too much lye in the soap. Of course you could go places. Every driveway in the country was connected now.

And, of course, the car wasn't just a means of going places; it *was* a place. A destination for yourself and your buddies, a girl if you could find one. A car was a moveable room with a jukebox and chairs, a bed.

You'd worked two jobs your senior year to buy the Pontiac, ignored homework and spun the keychain from Monticello around your index finger, willing the jangle of hot rod keys into existence. And man, did you use them.

You totaled the car two years out of high school on Highway 64, headed to a field party in Wittsburg where the kids drank keg beer and roasted whole hogs over a smoker made from the front end of a school bus. The dusty smell of hay and smoking meat, here and there a whiff of moonshine.

These were the parties that taught you things. Who your friends were, and how *exactly* to talk to women. You got good at it. You laughed a lot.

For years before the wreck, you'd spin the Pontiac into that same field, kicking a cloud of dust into everyone's open mouths and beers, and they'd still be glad to see you.

Then one night you didn't show up, but none of your friends seemed to notice. The only people looking for you were people along the highway, scrambling down the bluff to your overturned hot rod. People you didn't know.

Some folks in town said the wreck changed you. Your face got harder to read. You grew bitter, condescending, and seemed to hate yourself almost as much as you hated others. Two Trees had always been a town that fostered hostility, but mostly just the benign grumpiness of rice farmers and truck drivers. A lazy, unguided contempt. But not you.

After the wreck, you boiled from the inside like a catfish pond during a feeding frenzy. You ached to go faster, farther, away from not just *this* town, but any town. You needed something to leave behind.

Once you paid off the hospital bills and saved money by living with your parents for what you swore would be the last time, you bought a Ford station wagon. A safe car, 100,000 miles and only one owner. You drove it to work at the chicken plant, fishing trips on the Little Red, all while the Monticello keychain swung from the ignition like a metronome counting off girlfriends and shitty apartments, smoky bars full of young people with no idea what life owed them yet.

You got married. What else was there to do? But there was no marital bliss, no carrying each other across thresholds, but rather a solemn duty to marriage and the chain of procreation. It wasn't what you'd imagined before the wreck. Not that you had imagined much.

After two promotions and as many kids, you traded the station wagon for a new Mazda coupe, a quick little whip that reminded you of that old Pontiac. You slid the penny onto the keyring and started the engine, surprised at how soft and clean it sounded.

Your wife said it looked better in the driveway, but you hated the way it made you feel: washed up, impotent. A car like that was supposed to bring new life, invigorate the rebel inside, but instead it stared at you from the driveway like a clown who doesn't speak English.

And at what point exactly did the copper on your Monticello penny go green? How long had it been staining your thumbs and the insides of your pockets? You kept the Mazda only three years and traded it for a Chevy pickup, something more practical. There was the kids, after all.

You heard somewhere that Thomas Jefferson published a version of the Bible with all the miracles taken out, portraying Jesus Christ not as the son of God, but as a man from earth, a teacher of morals. That sounded about right, you thought, that things became more true, more applicable once the miracles were removed. In your fifties you considered a motorcycle, but decided against it.

You told yourself you'd still have that Pontiac if it weren't for the wreck, though you knew that wasn't true. You wondered why no other car made you feel the way it had, and realized too late that you'd become old and bitter too soon. As a kid you'd been angry, but so had everyone else. Raging with hedonism, because all you and your buddies had wanted was a cool car to impress the girls. But then, decades after you stopped looking at any woman but one, those things seemed so easy to come by. A car? By the time you died, you'd owned six. You never counted women, and when your wife died, just a year before you did, you wished she was the only person you'd ever met.

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Then one day it broke in half. The penny you touched every day for a lifetime. The penny your mother had given you, along with two quarters, to drop into the machine that would press it into one of four designs, the first decision you can remember making. You chose Monticello. You saw the mansion embossed in copper and somehow knew you'd be making more decisions than your child's mind could ever imagine. But you also knew there was something life could give you, if you could figure out how to ask for it.

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