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Stranded

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Stranded

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
English
Concentration in Creative Writing – Fiction

by

Rachael Smith

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Leaving

Processing

They delivered the news of his death with a sharply creased flag. She was nursing their two-week-old girl-child on the worn couch, lulled by the glow of the television. Then the hard rap on the door snapped her awake. She yanked her breast back into the nursing bra and bounced the squalling baby in the crook of her arm. The NCO stood at the door haloed by the sun. He was wearing dress blues. The golden buttons and white gloves beamed against the terrible sameness of this cul-de-sac. Her mouth was dry.

We regret to inform you. Killed in action. Your husband. In service to this nation and the beloved Corps. His beloved Corps. Regret. Taking fire.

She felt the officer's fingertips as he pressed the triangle of the flag into her left hand.

Identification

She named the girl child Jonathan Rene after her dead father, whose remains were so damaged the Interment Officer touched her wrist and shook his head when she asked him to open the black bag.

"We have DNA testing now."

She smiled, all teeth, and stroked Baby Jonathan's arched lips. "Open it."

The officer pulled the zipper and she peered into the dark slit. A pile of teeth heaped in the middle of a stubbled jaw. An arm with a tattoo of a skull in a top hat nestled against part of a rib cage. She couldn't stop grinning. Her breath puffed in front of her and the skull peered at her through a monocle.

"Where is his heart?"

"Ma'am?"

"His heart? His blood? His tongue? Where did it all go? Where is his cock?"

"We were unable to recover all of the remains ma'am."

She pressed closer to the officer and pulled the baby blanket away from Jonathan's face.

"This is our child. Do you think she looks like him?"

He flicked his green eyes to the door and put his arm around her. She could smell formaldehyde, and deodorant, and sweat, and Big Red gum.

“His personal items will be sent within five to seven days after they are processed, inventoried and cleaned. His weapon will be issued to another soldier. You will receive his uniform. You will also receive a lump sum of one hundred thousand dollars.”

His voice hung around her as she stepped into the light of the waiting room. Jonathan yawned pink and settled into the creases of her own neck. She never cried. She just opened and closed those fat fists and pulled on her momma’s scabbed tit like a calf with that cruel little mouth.

Interment

Lance Corporal Jonathan Selzer’s funeral was brief.

She sat between framed photos of their dead parents and watched some NCO lift the flag from the fiberglass box and snap it in half with another glassy-eyed officer.

She remembered him whole. She remembered him when she was young and he was young, deep in the woods that ran along the river where they fished for yellow mudcats. Before he became a pile of teeth, before he pulled his laces tight, before her pussy stretched and a creature turned inside her, they pinched worms in half and threaded them onto golden hooks. Coors Light nestled in the dirty ice of her daddy’s Styrofoam cooler on the bank of some forgotten inlet of the Mississippi. It was always too warm, and the perch nibbled the worms off the hooks, flashing their yellow bellies as they flipped away from her bobber. A couple of times

she fucked him out there when the fish weren't biting, but the deer flies were. They specked his pale thighs with tiny dots of blood. She liked his resolve. He was a born leader.

She always killed the catfish they caught. He was too softhearted and couldn't stand girl dream about the devil and forget that boy is the way they gaped at him from the cooler. He said it sounded like they were talking to him.

She hauled them out onto a cinder block that they dragged up from the bank and rubbed her thumb over the soft spot on their heads. She stabbed a straightened wire hanger through the weak skin and wiggled it until they quit flopping. She hacked off their tails and bled them in the cooler until the ice was pink and gray. She couldn't let things smaller than her suffer in a crowded bucket, better to kill than to let die slowly.

Now her husband wasn't. Mist beaded on the Class A casket paid for by the United States Marine Corps. Seven more Marines stood to the left, gripping their rifles in the fog. Twenty-one reports and the brass drone of Taps. People coughing. The rustle of fabric and a General Brigadier kneeling in front of her pressing another flag against her chest. His MO: sympathy, empathy, candor, and grief. He let a single tear trail down his nose, mapped with broken capillaries from nights in foreign bars where he smashed glasses and had his money stolen by laughing whores. She twisted a damp napkin from the Waffle House around her pointer finger and looked at a single stray hair in his right nostril. She leaned into him and wondered if he thought about her breasts touching his shoulder. They put some of Lance Corporal Jonathan Selzer in the ground.

Housing

Weeks passed. Their lease was up. She sat in her gray, manufactured house and listened to an odd, bubbling rendition of *Für Elise* coming from the sticker-dotted ice cream truck. Baby Jonathan jerked her pink hands around, batting at her mother's chest.

The music from the ice cream truck had always made a hard lump stick in her throat. From the time she was six or seven, the tinkling from a music box or the odd mechanical notes drifting through the air made her pull at her eyebrows and bite her thumbnail. She knew it happened on her uncle's dairy farm. Whatever it was. There was a burn barrel and the neighbor boys throwing chicken bones in the air. They chased her to the shed. It was something, something to do with thrown out dish soap in her eyes and hard hands gripping her shoulders. Something to do with a pink, porcelain ballerina balanced on one toe, crushed under mildewed magazines ready for the fire, and the mechanical plinks of a sad song. Something.

Once, when Jonathan was deployed, she sat rubbing her pregnant belly in the same little off-base house and waited for the ice cream truck to come. She stumbled outside when she heard the music, waving bills at the ice cream man, and begged him, "Please please please, turn off your music. I'll buy everyone here ice cream, but please, no more." The children from the neighborhood pressed their hot, little bodies all around her and put their sticky hands on her arms. She looked down at the crusted nostrils and red Kool-Aid stained skin around flaked lips and handed them Tweety Birds with blue bubblegum eyes, and Chocolate Rockets, and orange Creamsicles. The smells of fake fruit, and vanilla, and sun-warmed chlorine drifted around her. She gave the ice cream man her phone number and hoped he'd call her even when he wasn't coming into the neighborhood. He was so young and pretty, with a thick-lipped, gap-toothed grin, his fingers brushing hers as she reached for confection after confection.

Now, she pressed her scabbed nipple against the side of Jonathan's face, praying for a latch this time. Toys and blankets, all in primary colors, were sprinkled over the worn carpet. Unfolded moving boxes leaned against the refrigerator. A straightened coat hanger with threads of hair still clinging to it, from when she tried to unclog the bathroom sink, teetered on the back of the reclining couch. The mail was heaped on the counters, and his smell had disappeared before he had even died. She picked up her breast again and squeezed from the base, just like the nurse told her. A pearl of milk grew and dropped on Jonathan's wrinkled forehead.

"I hate you," She whispered through clenched teeth. "Just fucking eat, God damn you." She wrenched Jonathan up and gripped the limp child under the arms, looking straight into her hazy gray eyes. "Do you want to die?" Her sore tit hung from the unclasped nursing bra. "Your daddy wanted to die. He wanted to die the moment he was born. Maybe you got that sickness too."

Custom and Tradition

She had been sitting on the broken recliner couch for two hours. The baby still wouldn't eat. Jonathan cried and crinkled her forehead specked with scaly cradle cap. The truck was circling the block again. "*All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel, the monkey thought it was all in good fun, pop goes the weasel!*" The low rattle of the cicadas reminded her of her grandmother's story about seeing the devil in the Mississippi woods. The same woods where she and her husband had fucked, and caught catfish, and hooked their fingers trying to impale grasshoppers. She put the baby down on a pillow with a snoozing puppy printed on it and pressed her forefinger to Jonathan's rose petal lips.

“Shhhh, Jonathan, I’m a tell you a story about the time that The Son of The Morning came and told Meemaw just what she needed to do. She was only a little girl, just a few years older than you. She was playing in the woods by the river because the grownups in the house told her that her momma needed privacy. They didn’t know Meemaw had scarlet fever, so they sent her into the bright sun with her rag doll and told her to be back for dinner. Meemaw felt so warm and tired that she sat down by the creek and started to cry. She was so very hot, and her knees and elbows were just hurting from the fever. Then, from the other side of the creek, she heard someone crying. She saw a tall man with hair so red and skin so pure, sitting, sitting just like she was, crying. She asked him why was he crying, and he said his momma was with the angels just like hers was. She told him that he must think she was someone else because her momma just needed privacy, because Santa Claus was bringing her a little sister for an early Christmas present. The red-headed man said he’d show her where her momma was and that all she needed to do was come with him to the deeper water. When she asked who he was, he laughed, and his laugh sounded just like a tinkling music box, it was so clear and pretty. The man came across the creek to her and offered his hand like a fancy gentleman, and his hand was as soft and creamy as a lady’s. He even had perfect, filed fingernails. Meemaw said she don’t remember where they went, but that his hand was as cool and smooth as magnolia petals. They found her half-asleep on the bank of the Mississippi, nestled in the cold mud. Only thing that had kept her from burning alive from the fever, they said. And guess what? Her momma, my great-grandma, was with the angels. She had died from giving birth to my Great Uncle Eustace. He died in World War II. Isn’t that something?”

Absent Without Leave

She twisted down beside her now sleeping baby on the faux velvet couch, only to be awakened by her now intact husband crouching in his desert fatigues beside her, holding a catfish by the gills. He smelled like gunpowder and dirt, like little boys do when they've come out of the sun. His black hair was dusted with pale, powdery sand. He put his finger to her lips and raised the catfish up with his other hand. It spoke in the static silence of the room.

"I am," it said.

Blood soaked her husband's sleeve. The catfish's tail had been hacked off and a crimson bead formed on the soft spot on the top of its gray head. Jonathan grinned. His nicotine-stained teeth gleamed.

"See? They sound like they're talking."

The catfish sounded just like Jesus in those church films they watched in Sunday school sometimes, when Ms. May was sick and couldn't teach. "Let the little children come unto me." The catfish flopped out of Daddy Jonathan's hand and shivered on the floor, its gills working open and closed until her husband pushed her eyelids closed with his warm palm and pried her mouth open with his tongue. She wasn't asleep. This was not a dream. He was here again.

Until he wasn't, and she was holding Baby Jonathan to her stretch-marked breast trying to force her to eat again in the dirty living room. Jonathan's silky, baby skin was very cold and almost slick. A diamond pool of blood on her baby's head streamed in long ribbons and pooled in the crevices of her elbows. A straightened coat hanger was caught in the fabric of the couch and dangled over the stained carpet. It was coated in blood. The setting sun filled the room with strange light and long slotted shadows from the blinds

Separation

She felt a warm calm and knew where to take her child. There would be no caskets or paperwork. No flags or death-quelling Lilies of the Valley. She would not sit in a plastic chair in a glinting forest of framed, dead faces. No. She would take Baby Jonathan to the mighty river and let her tiny body feed the turtles and the fish, and maybe get swallowed whole by a great mudcat. And when that fish was wrenched from the water and eaten by some family by the delta, they would drink beer and play cards in the front yard, until the night closed over and the warm fat raindrops drove everyone inside hollering. Mommas hushing the drunk men and the teenagers with their fat titties, eyeing their daddy's friends with that wetness. "Don't y'all wake them babies. You hear me?" The frogs burping love songs and the patter of rain on the tin roof of some trailer. Maybe her blood, mixed with that catfish blood and sweetish, malty Coors would make some girl dream about the devil and forget that boy with resolve.

The Bull

When I got out of the Marines, riding bulls was all I could do. It was the only thing I remembered how to do when I walked out of discharge in a pair of blue jeans, toting my floppy King James Bible.

When I was a kid, Daddy used to take me to the rodeo every spring. I knew the bulls were everyone's favorite part. Folks lusting for conquering and blood. The cowboys straddled the gates, gripping dented Dr Pepper cans that sloshed with brown spit. They'd push a bull into the chute, and the cowboy would lower himself right behind that muscled hump, and chuck his spit can to the side and work those ropes tighter. The bulls' eyes all looked the same. Small and wild. My daddy asked me the same question every time.

“Merrill, when you see a herd of cattle out in the pasture, which one has shit all over its ass?”

“The bull,” I’d say.

“That’s right, son.” He slugged from his Coors tallboy. “Cows never do. Cows are fine and sweet. Like your momma.”

The bulls’ muscles bunched and heaved in the pen. I didn’t tell Daddy, but I thought they were the finest creatures God put on this earth.

The cowboy licked his lips and tipped his hat. We didn’t wear helmets in those days, even after Jay Jr. went blind after being kicked in the head. The crowd hollered and whooped, and warm April air filled with dust and the smell of cheap beer. The American flag popped in the breeze. Daddy kept pointing at girls warming up their barrel ponies in the side arena, but all I could see was that cowboy arching his back and tapping the bull with his spurs. He was powerful. He was powerful like our preacher standing at the pulpit. He raised his hand, and the buzzer would sound. The bull sometimes would just trot out to the center of the arena and stand there under the sodium lights. The cowboy would tear at its hide with his heels. Sometimes the bull would hurl itself out of the gate and spin and buck until the cowboy tumbled into the arena dirt, and then chase him with stubbed horns and pink eyes. The clowns danced and bolted into barrels. As soon as I was old enough, I was sitting on those bulls and watching, just watching the other boys with their hard hands and soft lips. The preacher said what I had was a weakness.

“And if you do feel lust in your hearts and desires for things you shouldn’t be desiring, it’s weakness. And what do you do if you have weaknesses, people?” Brother Lee asked.

The congregation was always quiet.

“Repent.”

“Amen. You repent. And who do you need in your hearts to repent?”

“The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

“That’s right. That’s right. Because if you don’t have him in your hearts today, I can tell you where you’re going right now.”

He looked at me when he said it, shaking his thick finger and rocking on his heels behind the mic stand. Daddy squeezed my leg.

“God is good,” Brother Lee whispered into the microphone.

“All the time.” My voice sounded small.

Until that moment, I didn’t know what lonely meant.

The first bull I ever rode bull shivered under me as I lowered my weight onto him. I yanked the ropes around my hand, just like I’d practiced on the tipped-over oil drum in my backyard. I guess I was about thirteen. The muscles in the bull’s back rippled, and it lowed, long and deep. His black hide was specked in dirt and shit. His spine pressed into my tailbone, and little shocks shot up my back. I looked at the cowboy on the gate, then at the crowd to see my daddy. I couldn’t find him in the sea of hats and Cartharts.

“You about ready, son?” the cowboy sitting the chute asked.

My heart flooded my ears with rushing blood. “Yeah.”

He was handsome. His blue eyes softened.

“First ride?”

“Yeah.”

I raised my hand. The bull crow-hopped out of the gate and shook his wooly head. My shoulder nearly jerked out of its socket.

Eight seconds is long time to hang on. My head whipped up and down and my teeth cracked together. The rope pulled the folds of my leather glove together and pinched the flesh of my palm. The crowd milled in the stands, and I thought I saw my daddy's snuff-flecked grin.

He had given me half of a Budweiser before my first ride. The bitter froth tickled my nose, and I choked. Daddy slapped me hard between my shoulder blades and laughed.

"Go on, boy. Puts hair on your chest."

The bull slammed down, and my hand turned loose. I flipped over its thick neck and tumbled into the dirt. I popped up and dashed to the fence. The bull trotted back to the chute.

I thought I'd never find my balls after that, they were so far up inside me.

I learned killing better than bull riding. That's the tragedy of it, I suppose. Killing came natural. Killing came easy. Bullriding hurt me, but I just wanted to be close to these animals, these hunks of muscle and froth. I wanted to be close to the cowboys.

I hadn't even finished high school when I joined up. I had been drinking and taking pain pills that I stole from Momma's drawer. I swilled cheap whiskey and looked at the underwear models in the JC Penny catalogue in my bedroom, stroking their stubbled jaws through the glossy pages. Their big hands just raising their T-shirts above rippled bellies and half-hard cocks. I imagined myself twined around them, inside them, inside me.

Daddy caught me once. He picked up the catalogue, and his jaw throbbed. I was drunk. The space heater hummed in the corner, and my throat snatched. He flipped to the lingerie section and shoved high tits and sulky lips in my face.

"You been stealing your momma's magazines? To look at this?"

He pressed the pink pages against my cheek.

“You been drinking too?”

“Yes sir.”

I smelled the sharp, sour beer on his breath. He whipped the magazine up and ripped up every page, sprinkling the pieces on the floor.

“Don’t you ever do this again.” He crouched in front of me and leaned in. “You were looking at girls. Girls in their panties. You just want to look like those guys, right?” He voice trembled. “You want muscles too, huh?” He grabbed my shoulder and dug his fingertips into my skin. “Don’t you, boy?”

“Yeah, Dad. I just want to get big.”

“Sure, sure. Clean this shit up.” He rubbed my buzzed head and lit a cigarette.

I hated him.

I hadn’t been to school in months. Me and the boys would hop in my truck and tear through country roads with them in the bed. We downed cases of beer, and their hair whipped around their faces as I careened around curves and opened it up on long stretches of empty road. The oxys pulsed behind my eyes. Once we pulled over to shoot beer cans off the fence with an old .22, and we shot a cow on accident. Shot her right in the head. Her skin rippled and her legs went stiff. She flopped over, her calf scooting around her and bawling. The calf dashed to the herd and back to its momma. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I looked at my buddies.

“Well shit,” I said.

They peered at me drunkenly, wetly. Bubba started to cry. Nearly eighteen years old, and he’s crying about a cow.

“It’s just a little baby.”

I flicked his ear.

“Bubba, shut the fuck up. It’s a cow. What are you? A fag?”

The others guffawed and slapped his back. His huge chest hitched and he grabbed the .22 from me and hurled it into the ditch by the pasture. He balanced on the side of the truck, opened the door and squeezed into the cab. He curled onto the passenger seat, propping his knees against the window and stared.

The calf bleated and bumped the cow’s body with its head. We could hear a truck coming from the back pasture. The rest of the boys piled into the bed, and I sped off. The cops caught us for speeding not thirty minutes later, and we were all arrested. Reckless Driving. Driving Under the Influence. Destruction of Property. Possession of a Controlled Substance. Passing a Physical Barrier. Speeding.

Bubba’s daddy was friends with the drawling, sag-jowled prosecutor. He stood in front of the judge with a chipped grin.

“I think that if these boys agree to serve our country in the Armed Forces, they could probably avoid jail time, your honor.”

The judge nodded and acquitted us of all charges on the condition that we join up. Bubba went to the Air Force. Jessie and Jared went to the Army. I went to the Marines. The few. The proud.

I thought the service and sniper school would pull the weakness out of me. The weakness for strong hands and scruffed faces. The weakness I tamped down with painkillers and booze, then with seven-hour stints lifting weights, then with scripture, then with sniper school. But it didn’t. I always knew I needed something more.

Something in me snapped like a long strand of chewing gum when I made my first kill. I felt like the pillar of fire that swept through Sodom and Gomorrah and turned Lot's wife to salt.

God loves killing. God hates queers.

It was beautiful. I had been lying on my belly for fourteen hours, waiting. Just waiting on a roof, counting children through my scope. The high desert wind whipped the smell of shit into my nostrils. I ate a package of animal crackers from my rations and checked the wind. My rifle I was high up, and the wind was controllable. Fine conditions. My spotter licked his palms.

"It's so fucking dry here. Goddamn, my hands are fucking splitting," he said.

"How did you make it through sniper school? You are so goddamned loud."

He preened his eyebrows. "My looks."

I looked back into my scope. My spotter jotted down some numbers in his notebook.

Then I saw him. He walked into my sight and readjusted an AK he had strapped on his back. The Lord had delivered him unto me. It was my chance to earn a crown. To truly become a man of God. To show the father that I was more than my sickness. I squeezed off a perfect head shot. My spotter rushed to his sight.

"Shit! You got him."

The Iraqi kids didn't even notice until they were covered with Uncle Hadji's brains, then they screamed and scuttled around like those little cockroaches you get in the pantry sometimes. I killed so many Hadjis from my nest the boys in my troop called me "The Artist formerly known as Charles Whitman." Motomarine. No one suspected me. I got tattoos of naked girls cloaked in fire. I followed my brothers to whorehouses and bragged about nothing.

One time, when I was on leave, I went to a twink club. To test myself. A slender boy with black curls came over to me at the bar. He leaned over to push his empty glass to the bartender and brushed his hip against my side. His lips curled into grin.

“Buy me a drink? Mine’s empty.” He traced his fingers over my knuckles.

I choked on my beer and jerked my hand away. The soft warmth from his skin lingered on mine. My blood ran hot through me, and I wanted him too. He leaned in and wrapped his arms around me. His cologne mixed with gin and sweat. His thigh against mine. I closed my eyes and saw the redness behind my eyelids.

I hauled back and smashed my beer bottle against his scalp. His black hair slicked over with his blood. I grabbed his head and bounced it off the bar. Some of his teeth pinged off the floor. I scooped them up.

I kept those teeth in my pocket. A canine and a molar. There is power in the blood.

The white bull was my salvation. Sent by the Lord our Savior to cleanse me.

It was a sign. The night before that ride, I had a dream.

I was back in the Marines. I was at home there.

I was in the barracks talking to Rodriguez. Rodriguez with his slender wrists. Rodriguez with his curved calves. Rodriguez turning in his rack. It must have been boot camp because we all had a case of the limp-dick. Everyone knew they put salt-peter in our drinking water to keep those hard-ons at bay. Lord knows, it’s harder to break a man completely if he can still fuck.

Rodriguez was standing in the middle of the room in his skivvies and bare feet. He was telling us how we had to fight it. He said he would go into the bathroom and just think about naked girls and jerk it for an hour. *Oh that’s what you’re doing in there you devil dog you horny-ass Mexican.* We were all laughing, and Rodriguez stuck his fist in his shorts and poked his

thumb out through the fabric. *Watch out he's packing heat.* We gripped each other's shoulders and grinned into the curves of our brothers' necks.

But I knew better. I knew because, at night, when everyone else was dreaming about their girl back home, I held him close while he grabbed my hips through my camis and pressed his tongue against my closed lips until I opened to him. He twined his fingers through mine and called me "Papi," through warm puffs of breath.

Then the door to the barracks swung open so hard it smashed against the wall. We all rushed to the ends of our bunks and stood at attention. In came my daddy. He carried a .30-.30 in the crook of his arm and was in full dress blues. The whites of his eyes were yellow, and he carried the stink of a tanner with him. Flies hummed around his face and lit on his shoulders. One crawled from his ear and sipped the moisture from the corner of his eye.

He stopped in front of Rodriguez and slid a cartridge into the loading gate. He pulled the lever, pointed the rifle at Rodriguez's forehead, and shot him down. His head snapped back, and the smell of brains and shit rose in the back of my throat. The smell of a field-dressed deer carcass. I looked down where Rodriguez had fallen beside me.

"Ain't that something?" I saluted my daddy.

"Private close your mouth. What, are you waiting for my dick to fall in it? No such fucking luck. Jesus Christ you are one ugly sonofabitch. Close that cocksucking mouth."

Then I woke up.

At the rodeo, The Indian sitting the gate grinned at me with two silver teeth and said, "He has the son in him you know."

The bull pressed my leg against the chute and flicked his purple pink tongue into his nostril.

I wondered if he meant sun or son. Either way it was true. When I slung my leg over his back, I knew that this ride might take me into that land of dust where the buzzer doesn't stop his horn in your side or hooves in your chest. To ascension. The bull raked his tipped horn against the gate and trembled. My heart crashed against my ribs, and I couldn't get a breath. I pulled the rope tight and looked at this pale beast that may have come straight from the parts in the bible where there's seven-headed dragons. Even his hooves were white. He raised his chin and rolled one pink eye back to look me square in the face. A fly crawled from the corner of his slick nostril to rub its legs clean. I raised my hand.

The buzzer sounded, and everyone was quiet. Even the broncs stopped moving and watched as this great bull pushed his body into the air. He and I and the moon were all that was. His muscles bunched beneath me, and he swung right and snapped his hind end up touching the back of my head. When he landed, I bit off the tip of my tongue and blood dripped on his pale hide. I didn't feel it. This surging thing whipped and pulled my body and came crashing down like waves against rocks. We didn't know it at the time, but the buzzer had gone off long ago.

The pick-up rider was loping beside the bull on a blanket Appaloosa and had his sunburned arm out for me to grab. My hand was stuck. I looked at the rider, and he looked at me, and we both realized that I was up shit creek. His little pony pushed her shoulder into the bull's flank with her ears pinned, and the rider wrapped his arm around mine. My hand started to turn loose when that bull turned on that pretty red pony and hooked her with his horn. She didn't make a sound as she fell into the dirt. The bull pushed her down with his wooly head. There was so much blood.

I couldn't loosen the rope and felt, in a way, that it was me digging in her flesh. I became excited. Just like when I executed a perfect kill in that empty desert. Head snapping back, eyes flung into the skull, a quiet slump into the dirt. Or when, back in our racks, me and Rodriguez sneaked into the head to just pet each other and kiss until I couldn't anymore and beat the shit out of him, listening to the crunch crunch of my fist against his slick face. We told the C.O. that it was over a girl.

Jesus God, the mare screamed like a woman. I could hear her fragile legs snapping and saw her take her last breath before my mount finished her. Before I finished her. I realized then that the rider was still wound up in my rope. A shard of bone was just pushing through his forearm and shining under the orange light. He screamed and my heart beat the same red blood as his, but I couldn't see him. He looked so small. A weakness here under these gladiator blows. My bull spun on him and lifted him like a sacrifice with his horns. I could smell the salt and the cheap beer on his mouth as his head lolled back. He had no bottom teeth. I knew that he had to die. This bull was sent to me, for me, to eradicate the unholy desire. I could see moths flipping in the arena lights.

I was his rider. I spurred him.

The sound of the crowd reached me through the roar in my ears. My bull pitched onto his knees. I could smell the wildness on him, and it reminded me of when Daddy would come and get me from school and take me into the woods, where we would lay on our bellies by a stream and wait until a deer wandered by us to drink, and Daddy would kill him and whoop because he could feed us kids, and maybe Momma would let him back into the house, if he brought home that red, red flesh for her. She loved all of the organ meat the best, so Daddy was so careful and would root through the gut sack until he found every piece of the sweetbreads. He handed them to me to put in a plastic grocery bag. We would hoist that buck and let it bleed. Daddy would cut

a sliver off of the loin and rinse it in the cold stream so we could eat it raw. It was chewy, and the blood was still warm in it. Daddy would pet my head with hands still damp from the stream and say, “This is what being a man is. Taking care of your family, son.”

All around me was heavy, white flesh. My face was warm, and I saw paramedics springing over the side of the arena.

“Jesus Christ. He’s breathing. Get this fucking bull off him.”

Soft hands slid against my chest and arms. I heard a popping diesel engine and saw the combine they used to drag the arena. The broncs were milling in the holding pen. Red and yellow, black and white they are precious in his sight. The Indian who sat on the gate stood over me as he tightened a lariat around the great white bull’s horns. I saw the fuzzy, red end of a tranq dart sticking out of its neck. His Wranglers cut into his belly and groin, and I could see his cock pushed to one side as he straddled the bull’s neck. He shouted at the fat woman on the tractor and suddenly the bull’s head jerked and his pink eye rolled half open. The red dirt gathered around his open mouth. His thick tongue dragged in the dirt. The combine bogged in the tilled earth, and the weight settled on my hips. I swayed my head and saw the medics rolling the pick-up rider onto a plastic yellow gurney.

The event veterinarian put down the tranq gun and went to the heaving pony. Her sides puffed and contracted, and her legs skewed around her. He knelt over her and took a syringe filled with pink liquid out. The mare groaned as he punched the needle into her neck and rubbed her head. She sank into the dirt with a quiet swish. The vet motioned the backhoe over to drag her out of the arena. Children in cowboy hats peeked through the bars on the fence. That bull had the sun in him.

By the time they got me to the hospital in Lawton, I was fairly certain that that sacred bull was waiting for me behind some gauzy curtain. I probably wasn't even going to get to speak to the Lord. He would just wave me onto the back of the beast that brought me here to begin with and shut his book.

"I never knew you. Your appetites were too great."

"And now what, Lord?"

"You must cut the bull into pieces, lay on the altar, and call upon my holy fire."

"But how, Lord?"

He wouldn't answer. He can't bear to be in the presence of sin.

When I woke up, I was filled with light. I could be forgiven. He had given another chance. A nurse came in with a clipboard. She smiled at me and took out my I.V..

"You are one lucky son of a gun, Mr. Merrill. You just have a minor concussion and a pulled groin. That bull was after you, huh?" She smoothed the sheets around my legs and grinned again. "You'll be out of here very shortly. Do you have insurance?"

I shook my head.

"Well, go ahead and get dressed, and I'll be back in a bit with some paperwork."

I grabbed my clothes from the chair, dressed and left.

It wasn't like in the movies. No one even looked up as I walked out, let alone try and stop me with pleas about my condition. The nurses all seemed fixed to one screen or another, as still as water flowers in their pink and blue scrubs. I nodded at a few of them as I left, draping my jacket over my bent shoulder. I could down all of them from the parking garage across the street with an M82, even when they started running. Pop pop pop and their heads would bust like watermelons. I was good at killing. Killing is what God demands. I used the payphone outside

of the hospital to call a cab to the rodeo grounds. Lay the flesh on the altar. Kill the demon inside me.

When I got to grounds, I went to my truck and pulled it up beside the bull holding pen. I cranked my windows down, pushed my seat back, and snoozed in the thick warmth of the Oklahoma spring. All night, I heard bulls pushing against panels of the holding pen and lowing to one another in the dark. I got out of my truck and propped my foot up on gate. The sodium bulbs hummed around us, casting a ruddy sheen on their slick, summer hides. Their eyes glistened like Rodriguez's after a hard run. I figured any moment they would start talking to me about jerking off in the head. The thought made me laugh, and I reached through the bars to rub their red curly heads. They just rolled back their eyes and pressed their swollen sides together like sausages in a can.

I sat astride the edge of the corral and draped a loop of yellow, nylon rope over the edge. The bulls shifted and swung their heads into each other making hollow echoes in the quiet night. I took out my knife. The knife I carried with me from the moment they issued it to me. A K-Bar. Sturdy. Reliable. I looped my rope just behind the ears of the closest bull and pulled his head close to my knee. I took my knife and pressed the tip into the soft folds just under his jaw and ripped the tough hide straight above my shoulder. I closed my eyes. Rodriguez's face, bruised by my fist. The black-haired boy in the bar. Calvin Klein models. Skeptical whores. Dead Hadjis. I hated them. I hated them the way God hates sin. The arc of blood splashed the rest of the beeves. The slit-throat bull buckled, and his weight pulled me off the fence into the surging mound of cattle. They panicked now. Their sweat turned sour, and they bellowed as a one-horned zebu pinned them into a corner and rooted into their bellies. I grabbed the fence and hauled myself up.

The white bull caught sight of me and rocked his head from side to side. His muzzle was slick, and he darted his tongue into his nostril as the others trembled and pressed into one another. Oh here was my penance.

I hung by the crook of my elbow while the others milled by. The bull pushed through the forest of black eyes until we stood face-to-face. He huffed bits of wet cud onto my cheeks and pressed closer. He raised his chin and snuffed the air in front of my face. His ears flicked.

I lifted my knife and dragged it in a crescent under the bull's chin. He just laid his jaw on my shoulder and the hot blood poured down the front of me. It soaked through my underwear and pooled in my boots. The dirt turned to mud under me, and my heels slipped under the pressure of the animal. Soon I was lying under this white beast, and I could feel the weight of the sacrifice pressing me under the thick glop.

I prayed under the hooves and bellies while my mouth filled with dirt and my cuts with grit. My pockets were full of teeth.

I reckon I was ready to face God. To hold up my cupped hands filled with the pale one's blood and let spill onto my head. To be washed in the blood. To show my fathers that this was not my lot. Perhaps my sins are too great. My hatred too strong. My weakness too deep.

It's hard to hide from God when you're naked in the fucking garden.

With Fire

When I found the body, it was before I quit drinking. Before my wife left, after I pushed the baby into the space heater and burned lacy, magenta patterns into her matchstick ribcage. The baby was bouncing in a pink, plastic Jumping Johnny, and I had had a few. My wife was stretching across the counter, swinging her fleshy arm, trying to take the beer from me. I could see her stretch-marked tits swaying under her robe. Her voice was wire thin and rose higher and higher each time I pushed her swollen hand away from the sticky, foamed-over bottle. I was pretty fresh from the jungle, where I saw my buddies' guts slung into the black mud and skinny dogs licking up fly-spotted chunks of dead people. I was on edge.

The baby started to scream and scream. I shushed her. Still she screamed. Everyone would hear. I heard a sound like the dull hum of a wasp in a camellia bush, and then I was

across the room, pushing the baby into the heater. Their screams were like mortars wailing past me into the thick night. The baby's mouth opened wide, and I hauled her from the Jumping Johnny, away from the rippling heat, my wife pummeling my ribs and ripping at my skin with her nails. I put the baby in the sink and ran cold, sulfurous water over her until I could peel away the scorched fabric. I could hear myself praying, *please God in heaven. Please. Please.* Our Pekingese ticked around my legs on the yellow linoleum and stared as my child balled the fabric of my sleeves in her tiny fists. I can't even remember if we took her to the hospital. Just the smell of burned polyester and her pink mouth squeezing into a curled cutworm.

When I got home at dusk after a sixteen-hour shift pumping sumps out at the Shell pipeline, the front porch was completely covered in amber beer bottles. Each one reflected the blue checkered square of the bug zapper that flickered and hummed from the corner of the porch ceiling. We'd had to move the damn thing twice because the first time I hung it too close to the hummingbird feeder, and my wife cried when a glossy, red-throated male got caught in it. His wings stuck to the wire mesh around the blue bulbs, and I had to take apart the casing to scrape him off. When I pried him off of the grate, his singed, wingless body rolled from side to side on my palm. He was so light, and his throat shimmered redder than fresh blood.

The second time, the rain shorted it out.

I picked up one of the bottles and shook it from side to side. The smell of urine curled from the mouth of the bottle, and I knew it was my ten-year-old son. That little fucker had dumped out every beer I had stashed in the shed and pissed in the bottles. He hated this new father. Now, this was before I got sober. And I was probably already lit, from pulling from a

skin-warmed flask all day in the field. All I wanted was a beer and the gray glow of Johnny Carson after sinking my arms in hot crude and cranking the winch until my back burned. I wanted to rub the brown velveteen of my recliner like a fresh buzz cut. I wanted to wash away the thick smell of oil from the back of my throat and think about driving my truck all the way until I couldn't drive it anymore, and then walking the rest of the way. Maybe to the water.

So I went to my truck, and got my deer rifle off the rack, and shot every single beer bottle. With every squeeze of the trigger, I watched a bottle burst and fling sprays of piss onto the window screens. I didn't stop until the siding was pocked with bullet holes and the porch swam with broken glass that shone bluish under the hum of the zapper. Some of the bullets hurtled into the woods, and the reports blossomed into a thousand echoes in the trees behind the shed. I could hear the baby wailing in the house, but no one opened the front door. She didn't even turn the lights on.

I got in my truck and drove back toward town to get a six-pack from toothless Mary's gas station. I hated them. I hated my wife's wet eyes and how she clutched the kids to her when I came home. I'd wake up in my recliner with her curled on the couch in her half-open Mickey Mouse robe, her hand dipping into a sea of metal jacks, red and blue blocks, baby dolls, sponge curlers, empty beer bottles, teddy bears, dirty plates, magazines, all nestled into the brown, cigarette-burned carpet. Her thumb pressed into the roof of her mouth as she snuffled against her fist in the gray light of the television static. She would raise her head and rake her fingers through her coarse curls.

"Bed?" She lifted a half empty beer bottle from the floor and sipped, her chipped fingernails tinkling the glass bottle.

“Yeah sugar.”

She told me she got used to sleeping on the couch while I was deployed.

I hated the baby wobbling up to me and putting her soft, damp hands on my knees. I hated my son with his peach fuzz and gap tooth. No one had known what to say to me when I got home after hours of just sitting in the mud slapping at my neck at those tiny jungle bugs, after hearing that whistle in the sky every night and diving for nothing. After I killed. My wife had handed me the daughter I had never seen and smiled that hurt smile, and my son dug at a scab on his elbow, and I just couldn't. Not with the smell of lime and shit still in my nostrils.

I pressed the accelerator and hung my arm out of the window with my palm up pressing against the heavy, cool wind. Just as I was about to reach the turnoff, a warm orange glow deep in the woods caught my attention.

I thought about just driving on, just getting to the store and cracking a beer in the white gravel parking lot. Flipping down the tailgate and wetting my throat, pulling on cigarette after cigarette. Mary had a monkey that sat chained on top of the gas tanks, and it could smoke. I could have called one of my buddies from the store phone, and we could give the monkey the dregs from our beers until it flopped around on top of the tank it was chained to. My momma was always afraid of that thing. I would laugh when it hopped down on her arm and chittered. She would flap both her arms at once and squeal some kind of gawdalmighty prayer. The monkey would grab the top of the window and bounce up and down, baring its yellow teeth. You could see its wet, pink tongue through the holes where Mary had its canine teeth pulled.

But I stopped the truck and got out instead of taking the exit to the store. I think I even put up my hood. I slid down into the ditch and humped toward the glow in the woods. The

kudzu hooked my denim coveralls and snagged at the fabric as I pushed against the soft dirt to get to the light.

A Roto-Rooter van was on fire. The flames churned in the light evening breeze and whipped around the vehicle, sending black smoke unfurling into the fading sky. The trees around the blaze were bent and charred. I circled the van, just to see. I squinted through the open cargo doors and saw the twisted spirals of mattress springs. Then I saw her.

She was swaddled in a blue tarp, curled into a comma near the front tire. The plastic had melted, and bound to her skin, and pulled it taut. She had her right thumb shoved into her glossy red-black mouth, and a piece of silver duct tape fluttered from her wrist. The air smelled like barbeque ribs. I guess she was about eighteen or nineteen, judging by the softening gold class ring pressed against the tip of her nose. I gagged.

The fire reached the fuel line and rushed upward, sending flames into the sky with a great surge. I looked at the girl with the blue plastic shrinking around her, exposing her pale round breasts. The fire licked at her face, and her lips curled away from her teeth. That smell.

I turned and ran from that metal pyre, and that dead girl wrapped in contracting blue film and from the dogs, and pigs, and possums I knew would come. I fought the kudzu and tore at tree trunks hoping they would push me out of these woods. The cooking meat and burning plastic smell crowded in my brain with images of V.C. rushing towards us, hurling grenades and spraying the air with bullets. My buddies crawling through the bush on cracked knees. Pain wrenched up my spine with every hole I jolted into, but I dug the balls of my feet into the black rotting ground and flung myself toward the highway. The headlights flicked in-between the trees orange and yellow.

I pictured the girl whispering to the man. Clinging to his shirt, her bird heart pumping away as he whipped duct tape around her wrists so tightly that her hands turned purple. I thought of the baby pointing at the TV with her thumb jammed in her mouth, her blank gray eyes staring.

Before I went to the jungle, I was whole.

It was supposed to be so easy. A throwaway mission. I was sitting the gun in the helicopter, where I ticked away at rice patties until the water buffalos' skin rippled and they lurched away into the sludge. We had gotten a call to come pick up some wounded from a clearing under heavy mortar fire. The weather was even good for us, sunny and still. We spotted the yellow smoke oozing toward the sky, and the pilots eased down into a squirming mass of bloodied soldiers. I could hear the mortars singing around the edges of the jungle.

The PJ reached down into the mass and started hauling up soldiers into the helicopter. The ground trembled, and the men surged forward toward the open seats. They pushed into me and grabbed my forearms. I could feel fingers worming under my monkey harness, yanking me against the pintle mount. A mortar wailed over us. The surge of bodies pressed into the opening, slinging dangling weapons into the back of my head.

"We're past capacity." The pilot's voice crackled into my headset.

The helicopter swayed under the weight of these boys, these wild-eyed sons of the land of soft toilet paper and air conditioning. I gripped the edge of the doorframe and shoved against the rise of frantic bodies with my boot. They flailed against my shins and cried. These big, corn-fed boys dragged their palms across the floor and let the tears rinse white lines on their mud-brown faces.

“I can’t get any fucking lift; get em off the bird.”

I put my boot against a green-eyed kid’s acne-pocked cheek and pushed until his fingers popped off the door. He flopped into the mud, his mouth gaping as he was folded into a wave of green and brown. I gripped packs and slung blood-streaked men onto the vibrating ground, one by one, until the helicopter lunged into the trees. Some soldiers still clung to the skids and dangled like marionettes, tipping the helicopter. I stomped on their fingers and swung my heel at their faces until they dropped to the ground. Some got up and ran. Some crumpled and folded into heaps in the mud.

No one talked on the ride back to base. We just pressed our shoulders together and let the wind eat up our cigarettes.

I drove to Mary’s with the smell of gasoline and earth still sticking to me. My mouth kept filling with salty water, and my fingers pinched the leather stitching of the steering wheel.

The *Closed* sign written in permanent marker fluttered from behind the shut screen door. Moths flipped in the air around the orange sodium lights, their shadows flickering across the side of the store. I got out of the truck anyway and banged on the door. Burnt hair. Charred meat. Diesel fuel. Open mouth. Lightning flashed from behind the clouds like a failing light bulb behind a shade. There was nothing to be done. Nothing but jungle and paperwork and homesickness. The monkey’s chain and empty collar swung from the top of the tank and clanked against the rust-red steel.

A guy in my platoon, called Culture, told me that we came from monkeys. And that if there was a God, he definitely didn't create us in his own image. Unless his image was a monkey.

"A big fucking hairless monkey!" He pursed his lips and hooted into the jungle.

We had been sitting in a clearing eating crackers and peanut butter, when we heard rustling in the trees. Everyone straightened and felt for their M16s. Sticks and leaves and half-eaten fruit rained down on us and a lone return hoot rose out of the trees. We all craned back and saw our enemy. A troop of black monkeys perched on the trees around us lobbing twigs and handfuls of leaves. The detritus fluttered around us, and we put down our weapons.

"Hey look, Culture, your girlfriend answered your mating call." I pushed his shoulder.

"Fuck you." Clear mucus seeped from his right nostril, and he lifted his M16 to his shoulder to fire into the trees. He sprayed the canopy with bullets, until our lieutenant marched stiff-backed across the clearing and asked him if he wanted to see his brothers die.

I kicked him off the bird on that throwaway mission. He was a liability.

I leaned against Mary's door and pulled a cigarette from behind my ear. My heart came down as I plucked at the tobacco hanging from the end of it before I stuck it between my lips. I drew the smoke deep into my lungs and let it glide from my nostrils.

If I was created in God's image, I would be toothless.

My wife was probably bathing the baby by that time and singing. *There is power, power, wonderworking power in the blood of the lamb.* The baby would be slapping at clumps of soap

bubbles and babbling, until my wife touched the heater burns on her side. Then her high shrieks would echo around the house and my son would peek over his Spiderman comic in my chair and I know, because he is mine, that he wouldn't be able to help but smile. Because it wasn't him.

I closed my eyes but couldn't scrub the girl in the woods from my vision. It was like a dream that sticks to you the rest of the day. A skipping record playing the same refrain again and again. The dead girl in the woods kept lolling her head and the skin around her throat cracked and peeled away. She was screaming for just the sweat of my fingertips. Just the spit of my mouth. She lurched up and groped in the black dirt with her fingerless hands until she crumpled into a pile of ash. A pair of half-burned cotton panties snagged on the kudzu and quivered in the breeze. I could still smell her.

I dug in my pocket for a dime for the payphone.

The Grinder

The squad leader regularly shit his pants on long runs. His name was Mickey Sanders and when he ran, he shat. He was also a fucker, so even though we had all crapped our pants at least once on some brutal run with a drill instructor screaming a hot meat smell and running backwards, we always laughed when he shook a turd out of his shorts.

“Motivated”

“Dedicated”

“To the Corps”

“Your Corps”

“My Corps”

“Marine Corps”

We were just a soft, green wave bobbing to the cadence. It was beautiful, efficient. Sneakers patting the concrete in perfect time. The tuning and breaking of warriors. Every insult. Every cadence. Then fucking Sanders would just shit right in the middle of it. Goddammit.

One time, we were getting ready for a class on making field expedient stretchers out of a poncho in the squad bay. Sanders barked, “Inspect before you expect!” and lined us up. We were supposed to have our ponchos dangling from our right hands. Like a perfect clothes line of green. Mine was still in my footlocker. He strode in front of us until he reached me.

“Where is your poncho, Happy?” he asked me with a gentle grin. His front teeth overlapped.

I didn’t answer.

The D.I. burst from his room and jolted over to me.

“Where is your poncho, recruit? Where the fuck is it? Did you forget it? Did your mama forget to hand it to you when you left for school today?” His boots squeaked on the waxed floor.

“Sir, no sir.”

“Sanders, get the fuck out of here and smoke Happy in the sandbox. If he ain’t puking, you’re fired, and Happy can have your worthless place as squad leader. Say aye aye sir.”

“Aye aye sir!”

“Goddammit, act like you got a pair. Say aye aye aye sir.”

“Aye aye sir!”

“Get out of my face.”

Sanders died though. I had had enough.

Part One: Receiving

“The only three things I want to hear from your fucking mouth is yes sir, no sir, and aye aye sir. Do you understand me? Fuck you. I can’t hear you.” The drill instructor looked around at all of us with a small, shining rectangle on his lower lip from the overhead light on the bus.

“Sir yes sir!”

The sound of starched fabric zipping past itself and the smell of sweat and Old Spice. I hadn’t slept for three days.

All these boys, little boys, all in unison chanting around me with sweaty palms and pictures of their girlfriends and field bibles and cavities.

“Sir yes sir!”

They drove us out of the bus, beating their chests and dashing from one end of the line to the other. They slapped backpacks from hands and jabbed their fingers at papers for us to sign. Smiles glinting with braces and fat titties shoved into too-tight bras were left with the Batman comics and NIV leatherbounds to be thrown out in the red contraband box.

They pushed us under those fluorescents and lined us up between strips of red tape and yellow stickers shaped like bootprints on the ground. The Mexican in front of me rubbed the back of his neck and shifted from foot to foot as his fingers pressed into the lines of muscle under his skull. The bulldog D.I. watched with a pulsing jaw and small eyes until the Mexican put his hand down. Dark moons of sweat soaked through his Metallica T-shirt as the drill instructor strode over peering from under his hat at Rodriguez or Cerda or Limon or whatever.

“Are you fucking afraid? Are you a pussy? You fucking smell like one, recruit. You. Smell. Like. Cunt. Get the fuck on my yellow footprints. Did you hear me?” His broad chest pushed close to the recruit. Neither said anything. I could smell menthol cigarette smoke and hair

gel and tooth decay. “You speak English asshole? You habla Ingles amigo?” The drill instructor edged closer and put his jaw right next to the recruit’s ear. “I will fucking kill you. Do you understand me? Comprendo?” His voice was so low I almost couldn’t hear it for the barking hoarse echoes of the instructors.

“Aye aye sir!” The Mexican or Honduran finally unlocked. His hair glimmered blue-black from the sweat and fluorescents.

The D.I. looked at him with a tight stillness. “Oh well, praise Jesus, he speaks.” With that, he loped away to scream at some eighteen-year-old trying to force his newly issued gear into a pack.

We were stripped, and jabbed, and buzzed down. We stood in a tight little line waiting for one of the barbers to bark “recruit,” so we could hustle up to the chair and have our hair clipped down to show the beads of sweat on our scalps. The hair fell in piles of red, yellow, black and brown wisps and curls. The warm metal scraped back against our skulls in long, unforgiving sweeps. The barbers gave our heads a brush and a slap and prodded us out of the chair.

A tiny, black bantam of a D.I., knelt by a skinny, red-headed kid. He had come in with his head shaved. The barber gripped the top of his head and ripped the clippers over his bare scalp.

“You think you’re already Marine, recruit?”

“Sir no sir!”

“You aren’t piss. Get the fuck out of my chair! You will run until your guts come out of your ass. Go go go.”

The kid tried to bolt from the chair. The barber slapped his head.

“Ain’t done yet,” the barber said.

Then it was paperwork. We got our M16s. Then more paperwork.

“Your number, recruit.”

“3014568.”

I had a good memory for numbers.

Part 2: Phases I, II, and III

P.T.

I had laughed again. I fucking laughed at the D.I. and he heard me. Goddammit.

“Who the fuck was that?”

In four seconds, SSG Wright was smiling in my face with his chin tipped forward just so I could see his eyes under the shadow of his hat.

“I should have known. Recruit Happy. You always laughing huh, son? You are just so thrilled to be here.” He jabbed his stiff finger about an inch away from my forehead. “Well. Let’s hear you laugh while you eat sand, recruit. Do not stop until I say so.”

“One sir.” The heels of my hands dug out a hollow in the sand. “Two sir.”

“I don’t see you chewing, recruit. Get you a mouthful.”

I bit a mouthful of grit as I went down.

“Chew it up. Swallow it! Now everyone better laugh. Laugh maggots. Jesus Christ, you green weenies, you're all so fucked up that your mommas didn't give birth to you normal; you're all asshole babies.”

I swallowed the sand to the strange cadence of forced laughter. The sand scratched down my throat, and I coughed. SSG Wright put his boot on my back and dug his heel between my shoulder blades.

“How does that sand taste, Happy?” I buried my face in the sand and scooped up a huge mouthful. “Delicious, sir.” Sand oozed out of my nose, and I choked. I could taste blood coming from my gums.

“Does it taste as good as Sanders’ pussy?”

I weighed my options. “Sir no sir, Sanders’ pussy tastes like strawberry ice cream.” The laughter of the squad burst into a guffaw.

SSG Wright’s boot lifted off my back. “Seems like Recruit Happy here really likes looking at Sander’s taint. Who else likes looking at taint?” He sprinted to the front of the line where Sanders stood, probably thinking about being the best Marine for his Marine dad. Asshole.

Next thing I knew we were all in push-up line. Staring at each other’s asses with mud-caked boots gripping the sides of our heads. Sanders was at the front. He never had to look at anyone else’s ass. Fucker.

The Gas Chamber

I finally decided on Gas Chamber Day. I had to kill Sanders. I had caught him crying in the head and trying to jerk off before PT. He was just sitting on the toilet. The whites of his eyes were threaded through with pink, and he was gasping through the thick, ropy snot. He clutched his limp dick in his hand and sort of tugged at it halfheartedly while his head lolled sideways. I walked in anyway and sat down to pee. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyeballs and started whistling weakly to cover up his boohoos.

“What’s up, college boy? Missing all that sweet tail back home?” I made a fist and worked it up and down on an invisible shaft while I sat on the black seat. He stood up and flushed while he rubbed his right eye. He might have grinned, I don’t really remember. I followed him out and crawled back into my rack where I listened to Graham gibber in his sleep above me in. He giggled and moaned and made soft sucking sounds. It was Gas Chamber Day.

They broke up our squad and ushered us into groups of a dozen or so men. We all stood around outside a small, modular building and flicked the straps on our gas masks. I spotted Sanders six men ahead of me. He stood at the front of the line gripping the lenses of his gas mask and shifting from foot to foot. We would be stuck in there together. I would have to look at him and remember his sobbing, and his limp prick, and his shit, and his sixteen minute runs. He would see me with snot and puke dribbling out of my mouth and remember how I fell out for the first three runs, and he had to come and pick me up while I whined about my side or foot or whatever the fuck.

Our turn finally came, and they ushered us into the chamber. The Drill Instructor motioned for us to shake our heads like dogs to check the seals on our masks. I dipped my head whipped my head back and forth to feel the mask suck to my temples. Another C.O. dropped a tablet into what looked like a little cast-iron skillet in the center of the room. We bobbed, and nodded, and did push-ups, and ran in place, and then we broke the seal of the mask. I could feel the warm tears streaming down under my jaws. Snot ran from my nose and down my throat, and the skin around my mouth burned. They ordered us to put the mask back on and breathe out. The rubber around the mask pulled at my skin. The Drill Instructor looked at us and readjusted his mask.

“All right ladies. Here it comes. Remove your masks.”

We all hauled off our masks in one unified yank. Oh my god. The gas filled my lungs and mouth. My eyes clenched shut, and mucus streamed from my nostrils. My chest hitched, and it was all I could do to keep from bolting for the door. The gas blinded me in a burning cloud. The guy beside me retched and heaved until the smell of his vomit reached me and a wave of my puke splashed the ground in front of me. I could see the Drill Instructor punching Sanders in the stomach through the haze. Sanders clung to him like a child and dribbled spit on his shoulder. I pushed against the sea of green and slid down into the froth of fluids while men around me writhed in disgust. We gagged and dragged on each other's uniforms.

"Backs flat against the wall. Open those goddamned eyes! Alright. Get out of my gas chamber, fucking pussies."

We ran out in to the bright Carolina sun with glistening ribbons slinging from our faces. "Wave your arms like a bunch of pretty little blue jays." We ran and flapped and hurled and breathed. Sanders looked like he was about to cry. Fucking squad leader boo-hooing. I wanted to fuck him up right there. I wanted to rip his head off, and stick my arm into his belly, and pump bullet after bullet in his heart. Weak. His weakness leaking all over our beloved Corps.

Drill

The beautiful organization of it all. Click click click. This is what I needed to be doing.

Dreaming in perfect unison with the others. My rifle was warm only on the places where I held it, where it rested against my arm, where I gripped the stock. Perfectly predictable. Ears? Open. One two three four. Eyeballs? Click. My cadence was divine. I was a gear. I was a cog. Port Arms!

There were only two colors in the Corps: light and dark green, but we were all green. Sanders was not green. He was no color.

Part III: The Crucible

It was four a.m., and SSG Wright flicked on the lights. “Rise and shine and give God the glory glory boys! Let’s have us a hump to wake up!”

It was Crucible Day, our last march as recruits, the final test. We shrugged on our packs. The end was near.

Sanders had a nosebleed and a hard-on that morning. I just had a hard-on which was promptly thumped by my bunkmate when Wright’s back was turned.

No more rack for fifty-four hours. No more mess hall. No more sleeping for more than four hours.

We dragged each other over plywood walls with our blistered hands. My belly burned with hunger. The woods closed around us in the darkness. I could hear the scufflings of night creatures plying flesh from bone as they tried to beat the sun. We slogged through the mud and the rain until I couldn’t feel my feet anymore. The smell of rot wafted around me when I pulled my boots off. I peeled layer after layer from the sides and soles of my feet. I retched but swallowed, because I only had one MRE left and I still had twenty-four hours to go.

We humped until we reached The Reaper. Sanders seemed to be waiting for me there. His nose was pouring blood onto the front of his uniform, and he kept licking at it, the way a dog laps at a wound. His tongue flicked up to the center and collected the blood that pooled in the divot. He sucked his upper lip and chewed his thumb and gazed at me.

“Sanders. You got a little something there.” I reached over to him, but he just growled. I mean like some kind of animal. He bared his teeth and shook his head the way they told us to in the gas chamber. Sweat dripped from the end of his nose.

I stepped back and looked around for someone else. Sanders coughed and misted blood on my beige boots. I knew it was here. It was my chance to rid our beloved Corps of him. He was a bent cog. A chipped bolt. So I did it. I lead him on. I grabbed his pack and pushed him ahead of me. I screamed and pressed. I mocked him and called him a faggot, a cocksucker. I baited him and skipped around him with raw pain shooting up my calves from the trenchfoot and the exhaustion. I grabbed at his gear and laughed at his cries.

Finally he sat down on an incline. He grabbed a handful of dirt and hurled it at me, tears mixing with the blood, and just lay down. I mean, Jesus, blood leaked from him like he had been shot. The thick crimson pool crept down the hill until it split into long streaks that bounced over pebbles and gathered somewhere at the bottom. He gurgled, and I pushed him onto his back. It was easy. So much easier than waiting. They say God loves Marines. God loved Sanders right back into his fold.

“Jesus, Sanders. I always knew you weren’t right.”

I marched on. I made it to the top where they gave me my eagle, globe and anchor. I wept at the honor, standing there in line with the other cogs. The functional Marines. The broken-in and ready to defend Marines. I ate steak and eggs and ice cream at the warriors’ breakfast, after we humped another six hours back to the commissary. I swirled my ice cream in my mouth and tore through mounds of eggs and beef. We found out later that Sanders had a brain aneurysm. Must have been the stress of the climb.

Semper Fi.

Mercy

The horses weren't in the front pasture when she drove up to the house on that dry sandstone. The grasshoppers clouded around the truck and plinked off the windshield as the truck dipped and heaved up the quarter-mile driveway. They needed some rain. The grass was cropped nearly to the cracked ground. The sway-backed mare had already gotten sand colic twice. Jayne parked the truck by the smoker that her husband J.W. had welded together from pieces of a hot water heater. She wrenched the handle and dug her heel into the bottom of the door to push it open. The plastic door side pocket splintered under her foot and snagged the skin of her ankle above her white Reeboks. She yanked her foot out and spat on the ground next to the smoker.

She still had dried blood under her fingernails from feeding the lions at the Caldwell Zoo. Tomorrow would be her tenth year as the big cats exhibit keeper. Jayne reached across the seat and grabbed an armful of groceries from the Brookshire Brothers and a case of Keystone Ice. The cicadas began their low drone, and the blood orange sun sent shards of light through the pink clouds. The heat was stifling.

Jayne got out of the truck with the plastic handles of the grocery bags cutting into her hand and whistled for Diesel. It was unusual that the big black dog hadn't scooted under the barbed wire to lope alongside the truck when the tires thumped on the cattle guard.

Jayne found Diesel the year before she married J.W. in a crushed shoe box by the side of the road, while she was looking for interesting trash. Jayne had stopped to pick up a ball bearing that was lodged in heat-softened hot mix asphalt when she heard a faint squeak coming from the ditch. She skidded down into the mud toward the sound. A damp, cardboard box squatted in the center of a tire. Inside was a tiny, black puppy covered in fire ants. Jayne reached into the box and brushed at the swarm. The ants crawled up her arms and dug their jaws and stingers into the soft skin around her wrists. The puppy shivered and whined under the palm of her hand. Jayne picked her up and wrapped the pup in the tail of her shirt.

Jayne wasn't in the habit of just letting things die. They called her Ms. Lazarus at the zoo for being able to revive ocelot kittens and tiger cubs. She even brought back a skunk kit once by covering its whole face with her mouth and breathing into its lungs.

Jayne knew something was wrong as soon as she got to the porch. Her son's backpack was in the front pasture where the house sat. Pages from his sketch pad flipped in the breeze. Red ponies, purple monster trucks, green scribbles all whipped past one another as the evening wind

plucked at the pages. Jayne put down the groceries and the beer on the porch swing and pressed her ear against the screen door. She could hear her husband speaking in a tight voice.

“Stop that crying, Jackson. Momma’s gonna be home soon, and we’ll all go together. Just hang on.”

She could smell the sweet cat piss and burning plastic smell coming from inside the house. J.W. had been hitting the glass again.

Jayne grabbed the beer and opened the door leaving the groceries squatting in the swing. Her throat constricted. There was no telling what J.W. would do when he was on crystal. He promised the last time she caught him crouched naked on the bedroom floor picking holes in his face that he wouldn’t smoke that shit again. She had reached over to wipe the pinkish water from his jaw, and he sprang from the brown carpet onto her neck. She could smell the sweet decay coming from his rotten tooth as he breathed in her face. He bit down on his tongue until it bled, and hissed at her like an animal until she blacked out from the pressure on her throat. Her friends from church asked why she stayed. She had come to Sunday school with her quilted bible cover and the green purple bruises blotting her throat like water stains.

“He’s a good daddy,” she’d said.

She walked into the room whistling tensely. J.W. hauled up the twelve gauge and pointed it at her. He ground his teeth. He had already picked the skin along his jaw until it bled and his pupils had sharpened to points in his yellow-green irises. She froze. Acid and salt filled her mouth.

“Well hey, boys.”

Jackson huddled in the corner trembling. His little, buzzed head shimmered with sweat. Jayne forced a big grin and set the beer down. She could feel her heart fluttering against her sternum.

“Hey, J.W. I got you a whole twenty-four pack of Coors. I got paid. Why don’t you stop playing with that gun and drink a cold one with me?” Jayne used the same voice that she used with lions when she had to coax them away from a dead possum that had wandered into the enclosure.

She punched through the perforation on the fridge pack with her forefinger and ripped the end off the box. Silver cans rolled onto the carpet. Jayne straightened up and looked at her son in the corner.

“It’s o.k. sugar. Daddy is just having fun with us.” She could feel the stiff material of her uniform soften under her arms with moisture.

J.W. held the shotgun steady. A tear slid down his nose.

“You’re a witch in my wife’s body. I saw you bring them things back to life. We all did. You should have just let em all die. Things is supposed to die sometimes.”

His ribcage swelled, and he cocked the long gun. Jackson wailed high and thin and dashed for the back door.

The blast vibrated the floor of the trailer.

Jayne came to face-up on the kitchen floor. The air in the trailer was viscous with silence and heat. She tried to touch her face but couldn’t lift her right arm. She tucked her chin to look at her chest. Her right breast was gone. All that was left was a gently bleeding, fist-sized hole. Her

bicep was pocked with red holes, and she could see the long stripes of her muscles. She heard Diesel howling from the back pasture. The horses were thumping against one another in the round pen out back huffing and whispering. She lolled her head to look out the kitchen window where the horses' shed stood. A hunter's moon hung like a drop of blood in the heat-ridden night.

"Where is my child?" Her voice bounced around the kitchen.

Jayne pushed herself up with her left arm and skidded on the wet linoleum. She gripped the counter and pushed open the back kitchen door and called to her husband and son. Her voice was hoarse. The night expanded and contracted around her. The only sound was the horses' hooves pounding the dirt outside. Jayne stumbled out the back door toward the round pen.

The horses, lathered with sweat, huddled together away from J.W.'s prone form. His belt buckle caught the light of the moon in bright threads from the edge of the round pen. The sweet smell of horses and gasoline and shit. She stepped on something soft and spongy.

Jayne gagged and buckled.

She crawled over to the J.W's body. Pieces of his skull lay behind him and grey chunks of brain specked the side of the house. Everything was bathed in an orange sheen. Jayne sat in the dirt with her feet sprawled in front of her.

"Where is my baby? You fuck. You cracker fuck." She kicked at his thin hip with her heel.

It was then that Jayne saw the small hand balled up under her husband's ribs. She got on her knees and tried to pull Jackson out. He was slick, and she was weak. She fell into the dirt and

felt the grit fill the cavity in her chest. She dragged herself back over to the cool fist. She lay on her back and wedged her left hand under J.W.'s back and wriggled her fingers until she could feel the side of Jackson's neck. The skin was caked with sand and blood. She inched sideways and put her hand where his mouth should have been. She touched the flayed meat of his face. Cool pearls of buckshot rolled under her forearm in the slush.

She curled her fingers around his little shoulder and pulled. J.W.'s body dragged on top of the boy's. She felt nothing. No pain, as she rolled away from their limp bodies. She wedged her shoulder under her husband's and pushed until he flipped on his belly. Jackson was very still. She smoothed her son's forehead and pressed her fingers against his throat. A very faint pulse. She covered his mouth with hers and breathed into the void.

Jayne woke up swaddled in gauze and morphine. Police came and went. Her neighbors brought her flowers and Pyrex casserole dishes filled with rice swimming in Velveeta and Rotel which she couldn't eat. They invited her to church and touched her fingers poking out from under the starched sheets. They updated her on the horses, and they didn't ask her what happened. They just drifted, and preened, and talked among the beeps and white light.

A psychiatrist came and gave her pamphlets on loss. She begged him to let her see her son.

"Jackson died, Jayne," he said.

"That's not possible. He had a pulse. Ask anyone at the zoo. If it has a pulse, I save it."

"I know you tried, but Jayne, he didn't have a pulse."

By the time they discharged her she had already started seeing the first hints of ghosts, though she didn't know what they were until the reporters started coming. And asking. The first reporter to come knock on her door had a pinched, hungry look about her. The horses came trotting up when they heard the screen door open and peeped over the porch railing as the reporter fidgeted with her green, polyester blazer. Jayne opened the door. The cameraman propped his gear against the house.

"Those things take your soul." Jayne tipped her chin toward the camera.

"We were just hoping you'd want to share your story with us." The reporter had lipstick on her tooth.

"What story?" Jayne pulled the door closed.

She could see them all around her now. She thought the shock would wear off and she would cry or scream, and the presences would lift away from her. They didn't leave her. She just noticed her front pasture writhing with movement one morning after she finished giving herself a shot of antibiotics.

The horses clipped away at the grass unperturbed as trillions of insects slid up their legs and over their backs. Red wasps and flies blackened the sky. Jayne rushed over to the phone to call her neighbors and saw the cockroaches skittering across the receiver. Her couch trembled with fleas. Flies clung to the ceiling. She tried to brush the roaches off the receiver and glanced at her hand. Thousands of pinhead lice marched up her forearm. She spun around and tried to scrub them off in the sink. The insects didn't move. Jayne stopped. The water in the sink spiraled down the drain past the water bugs squeezing through the rectangles. She didn't feel them crawling on her. She couldn't hear any buzzing or scrabbling. She slid down the side of the

cabinet to the floor. Water dripped from her fingertips and pooled on the rippling tile. The bugs moved silently up the walls.

She woke up in the night to Diesel chewing on her leg.

“Quit it,” Jayne snapped.

Diesel sighed and flopped back onto her blanket. Jayne rolled her hips off the bed and padded down the narrow hall to the kitchen for some water. She turned on the faucet and grabbed the glass with the fewest roaches on the side. A centipede walked in a circle at the bottom of the glass waving its antennae. Jayne walked out to the front porch barefoot and sipped the water. The pasture heaved with new movement. The clouds scurried across the sky yanking their gauzy covering from the moon. Hordes of silent birds perched on the barbed wire. Vultures hunched in the white pine and scraped their hooked beaks against the flaking bark. The sky was thick with flight. Jayne shook her head at a chicken that pecked by her foot at the soundless insects. A small form skipped up the long driveway from the quiet road. It got closer and closer. Jayne’s skin prickled.

Jackson stood at the gate waving at her. She knew she had found a pulse. His face was whole and bright again. She rushed down the steps in her bare feet and dashed toward him. A coyote slinked past him. He squatted on the ground, picked up a rock, and hurled it into the pasture.

“Jackson, don’t throw rocks! You’ll scare the horses into the fence,” Jayne hollered.

She reached the gate and flung it open. Jackson stared through her. She crouched and looped her arms around nothingness. She rocked back on her heels and gazed at him. His front tooth was missing. He waved again. Past her. She turned. J.W. was waving back from the old,

broken-down tow truck he was working on in the pasture. His red hair stuck to his forehead, and he had a smear of grease on his high cheekbone. A cigarette dangled from his mouth. Jackson dropped his backpack and ran to him. J.W. playfully swung at him and pulled him into a headlock. The horses cropped grass beside them.

Jayne walked to them. She saw the glass pipe on the hood of the truck, smudged a greasy black. Her heart beat. J.W. took the twelve gauge from the gun rack on the back of the truck and held it down for Jackson to touch. Jayne broke into a sprint.

“J.W. don’t let that boy around that shotgun.”

She jumped in front of Jackson, but he kept stroking the smooth barrel. J.W. nodded toward the trailer. Jackson skipped in front of his father as he lit another cigarette and picked at his face, with the shotgun slung over his arm. Jayne jogged alongside her child.

“Baby, don’t go in the house. Run back towards the road. I’ll be home real soon, I just had to get beer and groceries,” she said.

Her throat tightened when J.W. opened the front door to their house. She grabbed at Jackson.

“Jackson Dwayne Smart. Don’t you dare go in there.”

He disappeared into the trailer behind J.W. She flung the door open behind them. Diesel stood in the doorway, wagging her stump tail.

The trailer crawled with ghosts. Slipping past and through one another, so thick she couldn’t tell tails from fingertips. The pressed around her. School children darting in pinafores. Dragonflies shimmering under the lightbulbs. A black bear curled under the kitchen table. J.W.’s

shotgun bobbing in the swirls of fur and skin and wings and legs and teeth. She tripped over the corner of a braided rug and cracked her knee against the corner of the coffee table. She pulled her knee to her chest and wept.

“My baby.”

Diesel stood over her and pressed her cold wet nose to Jayne’s ear. J.W.’s bright flannel shirt showed through a palm-sized space in the hoard of the dead. A rain frog creaked in the silent night. Heat lightening crept through the clouds outside.

The neighbors came to invite Jayne to cowboy church with them a few Sundays later. Jayne was loading the horse trailer while Nick and Lena’s Ford cooled and fizzed in the driveway. They leaned on the gate.

“Hey, Jayne!” Lena waved her pudgy hand so fast, the fat under her arm slapped against her side.

Ants tracked up Nick’s ankles. Lena propped her heavy breasts on top of the gate.

“We was wondering if you wanted to come to church with us this morning.” Lena grinned. “You don’t even have to dress up. It’s cowboy church. Remember?”

Jayne looked at Diesel rolling in horse shit. Lena had taken her only kind excuse away.

“We’re having a barbeque afterwards.” Lena knocked her silent husband with her hip.

Nick ignored her and dug in his jacket for his cigarettes. Jayne put J.W.’s old roping saddle down. Diesel licked cockle burrs out of her paws, chewed them and rolled them off her tongue at their feet.

“God ain’t real, Lena.” Jayne watched three dirt daubers crawl into the deep crevice between her breasts. “And you’re standing in an ant pile, Nick.”

Jayne turned back to the half-loaded trailer and picked up the saddle.

Across the pasture, J.W. swatted at Jackson with a grease rag near that old tow truck. Her dead husband rubbed the rag along the barrel of the shotgun. Jackson squatted over a gopher hole nearby, grinning and squinting into the sun.

The Twinning

Everyone knew that Gary Wayne Morgan's boy Duke wasn't right. He stood no taller than five foot and never spoke a word to anyone even though he was probably twenty years old by now. His teeth jutted from his mouth as he breathed, and his small, black eyes were as muddled as swamp water. Everyone reckoned it was Duke's mama who caused him to be that way. Gary Wayne always went to the Baptist church on Sunday and showed up to work on time, but his wife, Indian Sarah, she wasn't right either. She went to the snake-handling Pentecostal Church that sat at the end of a cow trail and told everyone she had the gift of vision.

Sarah Flannagan Crow Morgan burned sage in the house and painted her breasts with the pale clay from the creek bed. She let blood from the cows to mix with whiskey to give to her baby son and read the creation story to him. But the way she told it was that woman was created first, even before the firmament and before the Seraphim and the creatures of the air, earth and water. It was a woman who kept the father company while the crimson serpent coiled around her wrist and whispered strange primitive chants until she could no longer bear it and fell to earth to become a tree. She, who sat by our father was endowed with the ability all women have, bore fruit. This fruit grew into all the animals and peoples of the earth, so when Eve did consume it, she was consuming her brethren and was cursed for eternity with blood.

Duke didn't know what blasphemy was, but he knew how to fetch his daddy a glass of ice water when he came home from the fields. He would watch the beads of water on the outside of the glass turn gray after Gary Wayne took his first sip. He would see his momma come and shroud his daddy in cigarette smoke and black hair. He could hear dogs barking and cicadas humming. And he knew that Jesus loved him but that he wasn't allowed in Sunday school because you're supposed to keep your britches on in church. He knew 245 words including water, jelly, Bessie moo cow, Daddy, crawfish, chinquapin, outside, dog, run, happy, and baby, but he never spoke them. It was hard enough keeping track of them. They might float away from him like spit in a creek if he let them out.

His existence was small, but it was soon to become larger for Sarah's belly housed his brother who would be able to catch ibises with his hands and coax foxes to him. No one knew that yet of course, for in the meantime, he existed only as a tadpole floating in his mother's womb.

One night as Sarah handed Duke a hen to pluck, she felt a quickening. She was afraid. She was afraid of kinky hair and caramel skin from the black boy who worked at the gas station. He loved her thick fingers and would bite at her thighs. She was afraid of the child coming out with the same blue face that Duke had.

She snatched the chicken from her baffled child. Her cheeks gleamed with the sheen of grease and strands of hair clung to her lips. She flung the bird on the counter and gouged a fist-sized hole into its abdomen. She thrust her hand through the opening and withdrew a fistful of guts. She slopped them onto the counter and spread them around with her forefinger. Down drifted around the kitchen and was lifted toward the single bare light bulb. It looked like golden petals as it spun in the air toward the door. She ground her teeth and hummed. Duke started to cry. She swirled the entrails and wiped her face leaving a smear of bile above her left eye. She saw her new baby in the purple liver and sighed. He would be white as the stars. He would be pink as a kitten's mouth when he was born. Sarah gathered Duke in her arms and kissed him on the lips gripping the sides of his pale skull. He looked so much like Gary Wayne when he cried. The chicken blood on her hands mixed with his sweat and rolled into the corner of his mouth.

Duke loved his momma, but was afraid of her for she seemed so large. Her body swayed like an ancient oak as she waddled from one task to another. Shucking corn, trimming tusks, stirring beans, she seemed like the moon at its fullest. She told him soon he was to have a brother. The baby was growing like a chick in an egg and would soon be here to eat and shit and cry just like he did. Duke grinned crookedly at her and returned her kisses with an empty gaze and a gurgle.

Gary Wayne was unaware of his impending son until Sarah had been incubating him for seven months or so. Sarah had put on pound after pound of thick fat after Duke was born and had

never regained her snug belly and high breasts. Her bronze skin swelled and popped into a rippling, stretch-marked mass, which she wore like a sable coat. She became uninterested in Gary Wayne unless she had been swilling Muscatine wine, and then sometimes she would call him the wrong name as she enveloped him in her flesh. He didn't mind. He never could believe she had stayed as long as she had.

One day, he came in from the fields, and Duke trundled over with his ice water. He burbled and hummed as his father took the glass. Duke sat down in front of him and began shuffling a pack of cards softened and dingy from years of bending and dealing. Gary Wayne lowered himself in the yellow, plastic chair in front of his son. Duke could shuffle like a black jack dealer. His smooth loose hands sorted the deck, flicking spades and diamonds apart and then pushing them together again. He arched the cards, and the worn deck whispered back into a tight rectangle. Duke never even looked down. He just stared at Gary Wayne's glass. A thread of spit hung from his lower lip and shimmered like a silver wire until it snapped and splashed to the front of his overalls. Gary Wayne reached across the Formica table and wiped his son's chin with his thumb.

"Want to play a hand, Mr. Duke?"

Duke began dealing. One for me. One for you. He fanned his hand and looked over at the door. Sarah was standing there, naked as the day she was born, except for a pair of red high heels. Her heavy breasts hung over her round belly. Her skin was scarred with the strain of a baby. Her feet splayed with the weight and spilled from the shoes. Her dark eyes were as wild as a doe's. Gary Wayne could see a pulse in her throat, and he felt a stirring. It had been months since he had seen her immense body.

“We’re having another one, huh sugar?” he asked.

Sarah drew a spiral around her naval with her finger. She was very still. “You got eyes.”

“Duke, go on and do the evening feedings early.”

Duke picked up the cards and stacked them. He grabbed his daddy’s glass and handed it to his skin-clad momma. He flapped his arms and bolted out the front door.

“You been to see the doc yet? We don’t want to lose another one.” He went into the bedroom and brought out her robe. The robe was embroidered with puppies and the words “ruff night?” in blue thread.

“It’s going to be another boy.” Sarah twirled as her husband pulled the robe around her.

Gary Wayne looked down to tie the belt around her. “Where did you get them red shoes, Sarah Crow?”

“Oh he’s going to be loud as a calf. He’s going to holler until he calls the birds to him. We’ll have to give up some things, but this boy child is mine.”

Gary Wayne shook his head and lit a cigarette. Sarah snatched it from him and took a long drag. She was like the deer he could never bring himself to kill when he was hunting with his daddy. He would raise his Winchester and look down the sight, and then the doe would look directly at him with those strange black eyes. His hands would slacken, and the deer would glide into the dim morning woods. His father would always say the same thing: “I’m more of a bird hunter too son; you reckon we should set out some trots so we don’t starve?” Gary Wayne used that deer rifle only once and that was to kill a fox in the coop. He missed.

Duke was outside trying to coax the brood sow to him with an egg when Sarah's time came to deliver. She walked out in the yard, hiked up her skirt and bolted into the woods. Her red shoes became pinpoints of color, even as the rest of her faded into a gray green smudge. Duke and the sow looked at one another. She tilted her great head up and sighed. He tossed the egg to her and watched as she sucked the yolk out of the dirt and flapped her ears in pleasure. Duke checked the buttons on his overalls and followed his momma's path of broken twigs.

When Duke found her after a couple of hours, she was tangled in Kudzu and quietly rocking her hips. Duke sat on the ground and watched as she floundered and moaned. She arched her back and heaved until all at once in a gush of blood and water, Elijah Crow Morgan slapped the ground like a catfish. He bellowed like a calf, and even the crows that perched in the trees waiting to devour the afterbirth took note and hopped to a higher branch. But there was something else. Sarah gripped the ground and screamed as another slick crown pushed from her, and a girl-child slipped out into the sun. She was very smooth and quiet and clutched something in her fist. Her dun skin glistened, and her black curls clung to her long head. Sarah picked her up by her leg and pried open her fist to see what she brought from the caul. She held an eye of the bluest hue. Sarah reached for the boy worming in the vines and saw that where his right eye should be there was only smooth skin.

Sarah pressed the girl child to her breast. "Where did you come from?"

She had had faith, and the Lord did bless her with child. The baby's muffled cries echoed around the swamp.

Duke sat in the kudzu and looked into the woods at his sister and momma. Sarah beckoned him to her.

“Duke, come on over here and meet your brother and sister.” Her wide eyes glistened black and wild.

He pulled the wood burrs from his overalls and stumbled through the vines toward her. He peeked over her shoulder at the babies. He didn’t touch. Too small. Too ugly.

“Well, come on then,” Sarah said, hauling herself from the ground.

Duke shook his head.

“Don’t you want to help Mama? I can’t stay with Daddy no more.”

“Why?” Duke asked.

“Because the way things are is the way things are.” Sarah tucked the babies under her arms. “Now come on.”

Sarah swirled around and started off deeper into the woods. Duke followed. Their shoes were wet and rubbed blisters on their heels. They trod on even as the leather scraped layer after layer of damp skin, and the sun sank behind the cypresses. Elijah wailed. The girl-child slept. Gray foxes crept through the underbrush and peered at them as they trooped toward the swamp. Their irises caught the light and burned bright green. Their eyes held the same sheen that betrays cats and wolves and their love for squealing death and entrails rich with fat. The ground began to soften as they slogged further. The strange parade marched on. Luna moths quivered through the thick air to land on Duke’s face and sip the sweat from his brow. Their pale, velvet wings covered his eyes like a green pall. The delta mud sucked at their ankles, and cottonmouths dropped from the trees and whipped into the water. The air vibrated with sound. Soon they came

to an old, half-sunk houseboat. It rested across the water in a nest of buttonbush like a pile of broken bones.

“Mama Shaker. Mama Clemency. Come out and seeee.” Sarah crooned. “I have brought you gifts from my belly.”

But the boat was silent.

“I have birthed two little wolf cubs.” Sarah was very still.

The cicadas stopped their drone. The cottonmouths retreated under the water. A mosquito gorged silently on the girl child’s earlobe and clung there like ruby drop earring.

Sarah handed Elijah to Duke. “Don’t drop him.”

Her daughter woke for only a moment and dropped back to sleep as Sarah waded out toward the boat. Duke tucked his bawling brother under his arm like a piglet and stared at the fireflies flicking orange over the dark water. The water closed over Sarah’s ribs and she lifted the baby above her head. A pale hand curled around the glassless front window of the houseboat. The moon rose, and everything living bore the weight of the moisture and the heat.

Duke slapped at the mosquitoes and dug in his ear until there was a bit of greasy blood on his pinky finger. He watched his momma as she plodded deeper into the water. Soon, the pale circlet of moonlight on the top of her head disappeared, and then there was nothing but still, still swamp all around. The cicadas began their song again, and the swamp shivered back to life. Duke’s stomach growled, and his wriggling brother was wailing from under his arm. He yawned. He put Elijah on the black earth and asked his baby brother to take him home. It was easy enough follow the foxes all the way to the wide open chicken coop. Duke stood at the edge of the

woods and shifted his brother to his other arm. The foxes trotted in and in a flurry they each snatched hens until Gary Wayne came out and fired his single barrel. He missed.

When the feathers cleared, Duke ran flat footed over to his daddy and deposited Elijah in his arms. Gary Wayne fumbled with the shotgun and the slick newborn. The umbilical cord hung between the stumps of his first two fingers which he lost when a chain broke on a rig. “Where’s your momma?”

Duke grinned and let one word escape, “gone.”

He looked at the one-eyed infant and counted his toes. All there. For a moment he felt the same thickening at the base of his throat as when he found out Duke wasn’t right. He and Sarah and Baby Duke all rode back from the doctor in his old Ford. Sarah wouldn’t speak. She just held Duke in her lap while he stared into the sunlight streaming through windshield and tried to snatch the swirling dust motes that always leapt from his clumsy grasp. He would grab at the air and then huff with frustration when he opened his tiny fist to find nothing. Sarah cried then. She cried so hard Gary Wayne had to pull over the pick-up and wrench Duke screaming from her. She yanked the truck door open and got out while the eighteen-wheelers ripped past her and flung gravel into her hair. She turned then and stomped down the highway prying off her shoes and howling at the sky. She fell and skidded down the ditch gathering sticker burrs and leeches at the bottom. By the time Gary Wayne got to her she was sitting in the stagnant water with two skinned knees picking the leeches off one by one. He had never seen Sarah cry before. He had stood there holding Duke’s wrist and smoking a cigarette until she crawled out of the ditch.

Gary Wayne nudged Elijah into the crook of his elbow and propped the shotgun against the coop. Duke skipped ahead of him toward the house.

“Get me a cold one, son.”

Duke wiped his nose with his arm and flung open the screen door. He got the biggest Mason jar and grabbed the ice tray. His filthy hands left translucent imprints on the outside of the jar, and soon the beads ran gray down the sides.

His daddy took it and sat down at the kitchen table. “You boys want to play a hand?” Duke shuffled, and Gary Wayne wiped the swamp and blood off the baby with his shirt tail. “He looks like me, huh?” He put his finger over the empty eye socket and blew in Elijah’s face as Duke dealt him another card.

Duke gazed out the window at the cobalt shimmer of the bug zapper and fanned his cards. The moon loomed over the cypresses, and they could hear the high wail of a coyote. Gary Wayne considered for a moment walking that baby down to swamp’s edge and letting the sludge close over the hungry, pink, squalling mouth.

Duke got up from the game and rubbed his grimy hands through Gary Wayne’s hair. He peered at his little brother over his daddy’s shoulder.

“Baby,” he said.

Gary Wayne picked up a dishtowel and pressed it against his face. His shoulders jerked. Duke pulled Elijah from his daddy’s arms and held him, rocking and smiling. A whippoorwill called its own name over and over from the night heavy woods, and June bugs tinked against screen door.

Only Son

When Francie walked into her dead son's apartment, the first thing she noticed was the smell. The piss-perfumed dust of the overflowing litter box clung to the back of her throat. Black bananas slumped over the edge of a red plastic bowl in the tiny kitchen. A bare mattress was propped against the bedroom door. Sheets hung from every window. It was too warm. Francie shook open the black trash bag and called the cat.

“Kitty kitty kitty kitty. Here kitty kitty.”

Empty handles of Taaka vodka clunked against the walls as Francie wrenched open the cabinets in the kitchen.

“Come on kitty. Herrree kitty.”

The white sheets puffed away from the window units like a pregnant bellies. Children screamed and giggled from the courtyard over the hum of the air conditioners.

Francie picked her way across the living room and pulled on the stained mattress until it flopped onto a pile of pizza boxes in the middle of the floor. The bedroom door swung open. The room was dark except for the flickering computer monitor across the room. Francie flicked the light switch on and off, on and off, on and off. All the light bulbs were missing.

“Kitty kitty kitty.” She opened the closet door. A pile of lottery tickets squatted on top of three VCRs. A single windbreaker hung in the center of rack. Francie pulled the jacket from the wire hanger and hugged it to her chest. His smell still cling to the collar.

Francie hung the jacket back up. She called for the cat again and strained to hear paws padding or the jingle of a silver bell. Nothing. Just thuds from the apartment upstairs and the rattling drone of the cicadas outside. She picked up one of the lottery tickets and stuck it in her pocket. A pressure settled on her chest, and she rushed to the shrouded window. Sweat gathered under her breasts and trickled down her belly. She ripped down the sheet and pried at the painted-over latch, picking at the edge with her fingernail. It wouldn't budge. She twisted around and scanned the room for a tool to break the seal. A kitchen knife dangled from the pull chain of the ceiling fan. Francie watched as it spun and dotted the room with round, orange reflections from the evening sun.

She heard a key turn in the front door. The room contracted.

“Francie?”

Her name bounced around the empty apartment. She whipped her fingers through her hair and wiped at the greasy mascara under her eyes. It was her ex.

“Yeah? I’m here. What are you doing here?”

Louise walked through the bedroom door readjusting her bra straps through her thin tank top.

“What am I doing here?” Louise’s jaw pulsed. “He was my son too, Francie.”

“I know. I didn’t mean that.”

“I have to find something for him to wear.” Louise twisted her gray hair off her neck. “It’s fucking hot in here.”

Francie nodded. The orange light bounced off Louise’s damp shoulders as she yanked open a dresser drawer. Her thin lips pursed, and she looked like the time in college when they put laundry detergent in the school fountain. Determined. Joyless. Kind. The bubbles had swallowed the concrete mermaids and dolphins in a shimmering mound of suds. Francie had had too much wine and forgot the engagement ring on her hand. Forgot her stately mother stirring grits and reciting verses about hating the sin but loving the sinner. Forgot her nights in the backs of cars wondering if she was alone in all this. She leaned in and kissed Louise. They twined their arms together and touched foreheads.

“I’ve been looking for the cat,” Francie said.

“He didn’t have a cat.” Louise tugged a wrinkled button-up from the drawer and shook it. It popped in the quiet.

Rage crawled in. “Can’t you smell the fucking litterbox?”

“Jesus, Fran. Why are you always like this? You don’t own his memory.”

“You gave up on us.”

“You know what? I’m done. I’ll see you at the service.” Louise stuffed the shirt into her bag and slammed the door.

“At the Methodist church. He wasn’t even religious. You’re so selfish.” Francie screamed at the closed door. She ripped the kitchen knife from pull chain and hurled it at the closed door. It chipped some paint from the frame and clattered to the linoleum. She looked at it until it became just a gray shape dotted with rust. She knew then.

Francie knew. She always knew with Darren. She caught him hurting things and he would cry and cry and try to hold her hand and hug her thigh. He caught a hummingbird when he was seven and tore its wing from the socket to see if it would fly in a circle. The little bird just flopped on its side, chest pumping in and out, until Francie crushed it with a brick. A little surge of nausea tickled the back of her throat as the bones snapped like dry grass. He hurled cats from roofs and cut the legs from daddy longlegs with a pair of nail scissors. They took him to therapy and read books, and wept together in their bedroom, their hair sticking to one another’s hot faces. Then they fought. Francie and Louise screamed and dragged on their nightgowns, while Darren peeked under the door. They could see his shadow cutting through the light in the hallway. When Louise had enough and stood on the porch with a cigarette and a carpet bag, they begged for forgiveness. Clutching at her shirt tail and wailing. Louise’s eyes were empty. She stubbed out her cigarette on the white railing and jerked her shirt out of Darren’s hand.

She wanted to call Louise and tell her that her son. Her son with his pink cheeks and big feet was alone again. And that he had been hunting again. And this time, she couldn't run from them. She patted her pocket for her phone and felt a creep of heat from the center of her chest. Another hot flash to remind her of the gray streaking her hair, her dry spotted hands, her quiet house.

She pushed herself away from the window sill towards the knife in the center of the room. The corner of the scratch-off ticket pricked through the fabric of her pocket and scratched her thigh. It struck her. The closet. He always hid his treasures in the closet when he was a child. Louise had found a pocket knife and a piece of an extension cord where he had peeled away the orange plastic and knotted it around hundreds of house keys. She found a bloody pair of Spiderman briefs. She found his yearbook with his own picture cut out.

A few months after Louise left, Francie caught Darren creeping in through the back kitchen door on a Tuesday night. His cheeks were painted with crude unicorns and flowers that streaked pastel sweat down his chin. His Spiderman cake from his twelfth birthday party slumped under the expensive glass cake cover, and the dog ticked around him in the kitchen. He didn't notice Francie sitting in the dining room with a glass of milk and an unlit cigarette.

"Darren, come in here." She cleared her throat.

She folded her arms under her breasts and shrugged at him. His mouth set, and he wiped at the sticky paint.

"Where were you?" Louise's voice bounced around the silent dining room.

"Mama, I think I'm in trouble. I think my brain's not good."

“What are you talking about?”

“I never saw that before, and I wanted to.” A single tear tracked through the colorful smudge.

“Darren, this is very important. What do you mean?”

“Girls are different. You know. I wanted to see.”

In that moment, he looked very strange. His small teeth glinted in the light, and some black face paint caked in the corner of his mouth.

“Where is she?”

“She’s here.”

“Where?” Francie asked.

“In the dog’s house. I told her I was bringing her some cake.”

“Did you hurt her?” Francie’s heart skipped.

“I don’t think so.”

Darren led Francie out into the huge backyard. The girl crouched in the dog house, sucking her thumb and holding a squeaky toy. She was wearing orange overall shorts.

“I wanted to keep her for a little while.” Darren smiled. “She’s cute.”

They found out the girl had been missing for two weeks. Darren received mandatory counseling and a stint in juvie. The girl’s mother wept at the sentencing. Francie felt nothing.

The closet was the only room in the apartment with a light bulb. She pulled the dingy string and stepped in. She pushed the windbreaker to the far right. The back wall was covered in cardboard and blue painter's tape. A corner of white paper stuck out from the edge. Francie ripped away the tape and pulled the cardboard from the wall. Hundreds of black and white missing posters curled with water damage spackled the back wall of the closet. All women. Every number on each poster had a symbol over every number. Hearts, and sevens, and dollar signs dipped and scrawled across the pages. She sat down on the closet floor and tucked her legs underneath her. Lottery tickets stuck to her bare knees. She peeled one off of her skin. *Are You Feeling Lucky?* Four hearts all scratched off to reveal twelve, twenty-two, five, fifteen. *Void if more than two hearts are revealed.* She turned the ticket over. *Tanya Forgives me* was scrawled on the back in Darren's delicate bubbled handwriting.

Francie reached into her pocket and took out the scratch off. *Pot O Gold! Scratch three of the pots to win up to \$2,000!* He had scratched all six. Four, seven, fifteen, twenty-five, twelve, one. She turned the ticket over. *Justine can't. Hell is real.*

She couldn't breathe.

Francie walked into the church only five minutes before the funeral service. Her bag was packed with the water-stained flyers. Louise caught her in the foyer and grabbed her arm.

"Where have you been? We've all been waiting for you."

"Why?"

"We're his family. We have to walk in together."

Francie looked at the program she was handed at the door. Darren's round face peered back at her.

"Ok."

Louise nudged her through the door. People she had never seen rose on either side of her. The cheap, black casket hunched at the front of the aisle. A spray of lilies topped the huge container. Her heart pounded. Sad eyes that wouldn't meet hers. Roses pinned to breasts. Blue carpet. She stumbled behind Louise, just touching her elbow. Louise pulled away.

The reverend cleared his throat as they filed into the front row of folding chairs. He leaned on the pulpit. "The passing of one far too young has brought us here today." His voice crested and lowed. "Was a sweet, happy son. Well beloved."

Francie glanced at Louise and realized she was praying. Darren's graduation picture reflected the light fixtures from the easel next to an arrangement of carnations.

The first time she and Louise saw Darren, he was sitting at the foot of a dirt-streaked slide. His thick glasses were strapped to his head with a green polyester cord. He dangled one bare foot into a mud puddle and frowned. His tiny shoes were perched at the top of the slide, side-by-side. Crows hopped around scattered Cheetos, calling dry and guttural to one another in the long evening shadows. The wet cold settled in her bones.

"He's four," the social worker said. She flipped through a clipboard and circled something.

Darren peered at them from the slide.

"Does he talk?" Louise asked.

“Honestly not much.” The social worker glanced up. “He hasn’t had it real easy.”

Francie went and sat down on the edge of the slide beside the child. She dug in her purse for a piece of candy and found a cherry cough drop. The wrapper stuck to the candy and she picked away at the softened paper until the gummy, red syrup stained her fingernail. When she handed the cough drop to Darren, he hurled it into the mud and giggled. Francie fished the cough drop out of the mud and pretended to put it in her mouth.

“Delicious!” She smacked her lips and rubbed her stomach.

He stared at her. His long eyelashes curled against the lenses of his thick glasses as he blinked and pressed them higher on his nose. She sat down on the edge of the slide and pointed to the crows.

“Birds die too. I’ve seen ‘em smashed.” Darren flicked at the tassel on the zipper of her purse and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Francie sighed and reached to touch his curls. He flinched.

They filed the paperwork the next day.

Francie reached over to Louise and rested her fingers on her knee. The hymn “Rock of Ages” churned out of the organ.

“How many of these people even knew Darren?” Francie whispered.

“Funerals are for the family,” Louise hissed back.

“He was hunting again.”

Louise brushed Francie’s fingers off her leg. “Stop it.”

“I have proof this time.”

“Don’t you want this to be over?”

“I want everyone to know him. Know him like we did.”

“Francie, enough.”

She saw him smiling at each woman. He just wanted to see. He bought scratch-offs after he drew them away to ask the curtained sky if they would forgive him. After he collected them and tore them. If they could forgive him. Thinking they still wandered his apartment tracing their fingertips along the walls and whispering his name, though he never told them. He couldn’t contain them, and they sunk into walls and drifted in the corners. He coded a system because he missed them and wanted them to stay. He drank a handle of vodka and sat in his closet and cried on top of the glossy pile of tickets promising him money if he would only follow the rules. He left the windows open and breathed in the wet air until he was lonely again. He forgot to feed the cat. The cat slithered out of the gapped window and hunted pigeons.

He did it on purpose. It wasn’t an accident. The cops said he had been so drunk that he probably didn’t even notice the warm, brown bayou pouring through, and that his radio was tuned to an AM station, and that he had a plastic angel in his pocket. Oh My Lord. My child has gone so far that I’ll never raise a fatted calf for him to come back to me. My child never was a part of the flock. My child. My monster. My child.

The reverend had stopped speaking, and two men walked to the casket and lifted the lilies from the top. They slid their fingers under the lid and lifted it until it gaped open. The faint smell of formaldehyde wafted into the congregation. Francie could see soft white fabric and lace.

The reverend's breath echoed in the microphone. "If you want to say a last goodbye to this young man, please make your way to the front."

A line of people passed the coffin and leaned in to see. They patted him and whispered about how happy heaven must be. One young woman in a tight black dress touched his hair and bent to say something in his cold ear.

Louise patted Francie's shoulder. "You don't have to go see him if you don't want to."

"No, I need to." Francie saw the little girl in the doghouse, blood spotting the front of her overalls. Darren grinning with a wildness. She fingered the stiff flyers in her bag.

A man she had never seen before held out his hand to her as she threaded past the white folding chairs. She looked at the floor and pushed past him. The coffin waited, nestled between cheap flowers. For her. She peered into Darren's stretched and glued face. His fingernails were glossy and his hair starched. His mouth seemed drawn on. She turned her back to him and coughed. Hot tears run down the back of her throat. She choked and yelled into the belly of the church.

"He isn't in heaven." The words bounced around the silent auditorium. "He isn't a good boy." Louise pushed past the strangers and reached out to her. "This is what he is." Francie pulled the flyers from her bag and dropped them to the floor. A few floated around her knees before slipping under the coffin. "They're the ones in heaven. They're the good ones."

Louise grabbed her upper arm and spun her to her chest. Her breath was hot on Francie's face.

“Shut up. Just shut the fuck up,” Louise said. Her brown eyes softened. “Just shut up for once in your life, Fran.”

“It’s over.”

“Yeah, it’s over.”

“Are you sorry?”

“No.”

Francie pulled away from Louise and leaned over the casket.

“I hate you.” She clenched her teeth and tucked the lottery tickets into his shirt pocket.

“But you are mine.”

She turned from the casket. Louise reached for her again, but she shook her head and pulled her arm away. Everyone watched her. She picked up a flyer from the ground.

“Amanda, age seventeen, five feet three inches, one hundred and twenty pounds, blonde hair, hazel eyes,” she said.

No one moved. Francie let the paper drift from her fist.

She remembered him clinging to Louise in the swimming pool when he was five. He held the strap of her black bathing suit in his fist. She pried him off, but he clung to that strap, flailing until he freed her right breast in front of their neighbor. Louise splashed red and covered herself with her hand. Darren started paddling, and Louise got so excited that she forgot the neighbor and her loose breast and squealed and clapped as he paddled in an odd little circle,

spitting and huffing with each stroke. Francie laughed until her throat hurt. Louise and Darren flicked cool drops of water on her, their faces round and pink in the summer heat.

They found him later that day snatching butterflies hovering over Francie's begonias and crushing them into a fine yellow powder

The Garbage Man

The note reads:

*‘Dear Garbage man, Please make sure you get ALL the trash out of the can.
Thanks! The Brewsters’*

I stand there just holding the damp piece of paper. The A-L-L scrawled in all capital letters and underlined. The exclamation mark after the ‘Thanks.’ I look over at the white house nestled among the pruned Spanish oaks and ball the note up. The bathwater rain makes rivulets of space between the white maggots humping up my arms as I hoist the cans in the back of the truck. They feel muscular and clean inching their way under the cuffs of my gloves. My back burns, and the smell of cat urine puffs out of a half-tied bag as it smacks the bottom of the

compactor. I grind my teeth and think about how Mrs. Brewster's wrists must be so silky and warm. About how her perfume would just touch the air around my nostrils as I bit into her heavy breast. A drop of my sweat would fall in the deep divot between her collar bones and how she would moan about how strong I am. How powerful my arms are. I pound the side of the truck and give my driver the thumbs up. Next house.

Sometimes, I go home and think about Mrs. Brewster and the lesbian couple with the hyphenated name on their mailbox. In my head I arrange them in order from smallest to largest. Then from happiest to saddest. I keep all the notes. The apology notes. The critical notes. The notes about Christmas. I wad them all carefully into the smallest ball I can and then tuck them in beside one another in a plastic Wal-Mart bag hanging from a nail above my recliner. Sometimes I just lift them in the sack above my head and pretend I am a doctor doing a breast exam on the lesbian couple at the same time. Sandy has peachy, small nipples that contract under my very professional touch. Alma's are aggressive, and she leans into my palm.

I jog beside the truck toward their Colonial style home. There's a tin full of butter cookies with a glossy-eyed Santa beaming at me sitting on top of their immaculate cans. A damp note flutters in the breeze.

*'We thought you might enjoy these!
- The Rodriguez-Browns'*

I turn toward their house with the cedar playground equipment nestled back in the white pines and look for Alma or Sandy, but the porch is deserted. They have a little boy. He looks like he has mirrors for eyes, and I hate him. Before he came, Sandy threw out beautiful trash. I know it was Sandy because she wears blue, Oxford button-ups and doesn't wear any makeup on her freckled face. My momma never went out without her face on. But Sandy. Sandy doesn't care if

the neighbors see her. Alma is too sweet for nipple clamp catalogues and ATM receipts from some strip joint in Harahan. I know that joint, and Alma wouldn't be interested in the collagen-pocked flesh there. Too kind. I know it was her who left me those butter cookies. I still have those catalogues wedged under my mattress and sometimes I think about Sandy licking the skin behind Alma's ears.

The driver is honking, and I'm still holding the goddamned cookies. I put them on the curb and grab the cans. Their trash is ordinary now, full of empty baby carrot bags and electric company envelopes. Later, I will eat the cookies in front of taped episodes of *Full House* until I fall asleep in my recliner where the devil will perch on my chest and keep me from moving. I guess he's the devil. He wears a suit, and I always imagined the devil in a suit. My eyes will pop open, and he'll just have his feet pressing against my ribs and his knees folded under his skinny elbows. His head is too small for his body, and his teeth seem forced into his grayish gums, like shells stomped into the sand. He'll look me in the eye, and roll his tongue behind his lower lip and grin. The television will flick promises of hair in a can or lab grown diamonds. Then he'll be gone and I'll be able to breathe again. But my house will be different. Somehow. I sling the boring trash into the compactor. A stray maggot is crawling over the cookie tin and inches over Santa's right eyebrow making him look skeptical. I take the tin from the curb and jog up to the cab of the truck to chuck them through the window.

"Jennings, If you eat these, I'll kill your duck dogs." I smile at him. "I'll know. I counted them. There are twenty-four cookies," I say.

"Jesus Christ, Hutch. I don't want your cookies. Just hurry the fuck up so we can get done before traffic gets bad."

Next house. I find a dead cat in a white trash bag. It has a piece of string tied around its tail and its matted fur has patches missing. I knot the bag and throw it in the compactor. I imagine the cat's bones crunching and snapping and its guts spurting out like ropy red toothpaste as the metal slab presses and presses. I take my tin of Vicks out and dab my ring finger in the sticky stuff and rub it inside my nostrils. Four more streets then the fill.

When we finish, I get in the truck and open the cookie tin.

"See? I didn't take your cookies." Jennings tosses me a tub of wet wipes. It bounces off my shoulder and rolls to the floorboard.

"Twenty-four. They're all there."

"You sure they aren't for both of us?"

"It just says 'Garbage man.' Plus, I know them."

"Whatever man, they never leave the driver any cookies," he says.

"Maybe you're not as handsome as me."

"Maybe. You are one sexy son of a bitch. Look at that face." He grips my ear and pulls. Hard.

I don't squeal. He wants me to squeal.

Sometimes I wake up and there's nothing. No one. Just the pressure on my chest and I am nowhere. If I could speak, what would I say? No. I would say "no." When I finally can move, sometimes I'm up in the oak tree outside my trailer, and all the dead things I see wrapped in trash

bags, stirring with maggots, are stacked on the lumped roots with their paws stretching the filmy plastic until something gives, and the air is filled with flies, and I am not a man, but something bigger. Something more. I leave my tree on wings made of dog food bags and follow the scent on the women's scribbled notes, if only to see Mrs. Brewster dip her fingertips in a pot of cold cream and scour her face with sad, vicious strokes. Then, when I wish like a beggar does, not for luck or a pot of stew, but for too much, for a million dollars, for a slender goddess blowjob, I am transported to right outside Alma and Sandy's four-bedroom, three and a half bath house seated among those heady trees. And I wait. They begin consuming each other from the top of Alma's black curls to the soles of Sandy's feet, and I, in turn, am left with my empty chest, for when they are done there is nothing left. Nothing left for me.

It's Sunday, and I don't have to work today. My dreams sweep in through the morning light, and I remember how warm it was in lesbians' bed and how I watched them lap each other up. I get out of bed and wander into the kitchen where my zebra finches bounce from perch to perch and beep for seeds. I have named them all "Bird." I reach into their cage for the feed tray and feel their tiny hearts pumping away as they flutter from my calloused hands.

I have never fucked a woman, and I am thirty-five-years old. My body is fine and does what bodies do, respire, perspire, consume, defecate, but not fornicate. After I feed the birds and eat a bowl of Golden Grahams, I look up porno on the internet. The Saints don't play until three today, so I have time. I put my fingers on the home keys and tack out "Mexican Bride Pegs New Husband and Groomsmen with Big DILDO!!!!!" It's one of my favorites, and I reach up to touch my plastic bag filled with the crumpled notes scrawled by manicured hands. I imagine Mrs. Brewster pursing her thick, red lips, gripping a stick pen and writing to me, for me,

'Hello trash man!'

Do us a favor and please don't leave the trash cans in the driveway. We appreciate it!
-The Brewster Family'

The porno folds into a kaleidoscope of flesh and masculine frowns. I am imagining Mrs. Brewster unhooking her bra and those heavy breasts tumbling out. I reach for them. To weigh them in my hands, to bite the nougat-colored flesh until it softens into warm, saltwater taffy in my mouth. But my hands are covered in wingless flies that shimmy up my fingers and pour onto her skin. They track up to her mouth and pour into her orifices. She is filled with them, and I am close to coming. Mrs. Brewster is choking now and a thread of saliva spins from her bottom lip. I am coming. I am coming.

Regret. I wanted to tell her I loved her this time. That I have always loved her and can make a nest for her in my bed of bath towels and pink polka dotted sheets and feed her butter and ground meat. Everything I touch turns to flies. My tears dot the pillow, and I understand that the nothingness must be filled and that only I can fill it. All I have is their notes to stuff into the void. I clean up with an old tie and kiss my bag of notes. Sometimes, I wonder if she can feel it on her soft cheek. Like a breeze cutting through the heat.

The Saints are losing. My dad would have been piss drunk by now, knocking over two liter bottles of St. Genevieve and pissing in the closet with his hand curled around the doorknob. He would have ripped something off the wall and thrown it against the T.V. I can hear him in my head and remember he is safely in the ground now. His liver quit working, and he wasted into a pile of yellow skin draped over bones. The capillaries in his nose burst into pink fireworks across his face, and all he wanted from me was one more glass of wine. I call my mother. She is probably drunk too. The phone rings five times, and I hear her voice on the machine.

“It’s Judy and Rob. Leave us a message, and we’ll get back to you. Have nice day!”

I guess I should go and see her. She forgets me more than my brother who died when he was seventeen. He took her Station Wagon and drove it to California when she sent him out to get milk one day. He drove it right into a freight train. Everybody said he was on drugs, but I knew better. He used to crawl under the bed with me when Dad started hurling wine glasses across the room, and pick at the white gauzy fabric of the box spring until it tore. We drew pictures of pigs and dragons and later women with giant balloon breasts with nipples of purple crayon. When he died, I was thirteen. I crawled under the bed and wrote,

'I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.'

I get myself another Dixie and the butter cookies. I open the tin and shake it from the bottom. The cookies have maggots bunched around the jewel of jam in the middle. Jennings probably opened it and let them in. Motherfucker. I push them around with my forefinger, feeling their taut, cool bodies writhe away from my touch. I pick them off and turn the cookies over. I clap the lid back onto the tin and toss it next to the trash can by the television. The Saints are still losing by two touchdowns. It's the fourth quarter.

We thought you might enjoy these.

I will go see Ma. The finches flutter around their cage and cling to the gold bars. I grab my keys and dust cookie crumbs from my shirt. I'll get her some flowers. No. I'll get her a burger from Dairy Queen and a blizzard.

I finally get through the long drive-through line to the window. A pretty girl thrusts the upside-down blizzard out of the window and whips it upright again right out of my reach. I open my door and press my chest against the door, reaching for the cup. She is looking at me. She has a strawberry birthmark just over her eye and full lips. She smells like cotton candy and berry

deodorant and sweat. Her name tag reads ‘Allison.’ I imagine her holding onto to some blond boy in the backseat of his Camaro, her knees gripping his skinny sides, panties around one ankle.

“Will it hurt?” she asks.

He’s petting her, but his fingers tangle in her long brown hair, and he pulls and pulls until she’s screaming, and hair floats around her like shining fall spiderwebs, and she digs into his throat, but he’s grown to the size of a bear, and his spine juts, and his knuckles crack. Her creamy thighs puddle under his weight, and she bucks against him. I reach through the car window for her wrist, to drag her from under his chest.

“Sir?” The girl holds a grease-spotted bag. “Sir?”

“Yeah?” I can feel damp fabric creased in my armpits.

“I said, do you want ketchup with that?”

“No. Thank you for asking.” I take the bag and start to ask her if her boyfriend has a Camaro. She’s already taking another man’s order on her headset. “Uh huh.” She slides the window shut.

Ma hates it when I bang on the screen door. So, I set the blizzard on the porch swing and open the screen. I rap one, two, three. Nothing.

“Ma?”

The wind stirs the puffs of cat hair on the porch. The blizzard tumps over, spilling a little cookie dough in a white puddle.

“Ma? It’s Hutch. I brought you some food.”

Shuffling and banging. The door opens a crack.

“I don’t know no Jimmy.”

It isn’t her voice. It isn’t anyone’s voice. I realize that I am not at the right house. This house is too big. Our house is smaller. It has camellia bushes, and little green lizards that dart over the walls and my cowboy bedroom, and a concrete birdbath with an angel on top. My mother is there. She’s always been there, and her hard, gray eyes get soft when she spoons out butterbeans. When Dad died, she stood outside the church smoking and you know what she said? She said, “One more to go.” When my brother died, she grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “At least I know where he is this time.” And hugged me to her until it hurt my neck.

I cried. I cried when I remembered. I went home and set my finches free. They fluttered and beeped, and disappeared into the purple sky. I sat in the grass and thought about the women. About their notes. About Alma’s lacy cursive, about Mrs. Brewster’s jagged scrawl.

I could wear my father’s suit and ring their doorbells. I know when Mr. Brewster is at work and when Mrs. Brewster comes back from taking the kids to school. She would see me sitting on her porch and spread her white wings and fold me to her breast. My own wings would break off and blow away to the gulf, where crabs and seagulls would huddle in them until the loud boats pass. She could forgive me for my trespasses and kiss my brow. She could show me how to fold a fitted sheet. I could tell her about the sparkling landfill filled with dolls, and microwaves, and her children’s diapers.

I could return Alma’s tin with warm smile, and she would invite me in, and we would drink some kind of fancy tea. She would put her small hand on my wrist, and I would follow her

into every single room of the house, watching the fabric of her dress cling and swish around her hips. I could fix her sink and take out her trash. She could tell me about Sandy and together we could flip through photos. I could show her my hands, creased with black. I could drink her up.

I could tell them my name. No more trashman. No more garbageman.

I will.

Dolls

Rusty Bouvier stood motionless before the great collection with his pesticide sprayer swaying from his limp arm. He had never seen so many beautiful dolls. Their finely painted lips pouted and shone as if begging for a light peck. Their round eyes seemed to watch him carefully from the high shelf as he moved closer. Glass irises gleamed like jewels lodged in pale stone. Blue and green. Gray and brown. He put his sprayer down and edged closer. Tall, like his mother's side, he easily reached the peachy red-head in the back, who was frozen in a coy giggle. He just wanted to look. Just to see her linen frock and tiny leather shoes. Maybe to touch her curls. She seemed to beckon to him saying, "Hold me close, Rusty. Kiss my cheeks wash my hair name me

love me scold me tuck me into bed.” He nestled her into the crook of his arm and bounced her against his ribcage.

Just as Rusty cradled her to his chest, Mrs. Linden walked in with a glass of ice water. She looked startled for a moment and put the glass down on the table beside the bed. Rusty fumbled with the doll and tried to set her back on her stand. His heart thumped, and he couldn’t hear her even though the words weren’t angry. They were sweet. Too sweet. He could smell her cunt as she came closer. He thrust the doll at her, and grabbed his sprayer, and continued sweeping the mist of chemicals along the baseboards, but Mrs. Linden stood in his way. She cuddled the doll against her sharp collarbones. The pesticide misted her pink and green running shoes. He felt his stomach churning acid into his throat as Mrs. Linden reached for his hand. He let the tank drop to the red carpet with a slosh. She eyed him with a strangeness. With desire.

“She is beautiful isn’t she?” Mrs. Linden kissed the doll’s white forehead and pressed closer to Rusty. “Looks like May, doesn’t she? May didn’t have red hair though.”

The smell of decay and age lifted off of her skin from behind her ears and between her small, flat breasts. She ran her forefinger over the blue veins that swelled from his stained hands. Rusty jerked back and slammed the back of his head into the doll shelf. The screws that held the shelf gave way, and Rusty could feel his face brushed with silk and lace as the dolls fell around him. He could hear porcelain cracking on porcelain and tiny, cloth bodies thumping against the carpet. The dolls heaped at his feet in a dusty, perfumed pile. Mrs. Linden fell to her knees and began scooping them into her thin arms. Rusty could see her ribs heaving through the cloth of her dress. He thought she might be crying. He stepped over her, and grabbed his sprayer, and left her on the floor.

Rusty drove around the rest of the day chain smoking. He told a young couple that roaches were just trying to get warm, just like you or me. You gotta share. It's Louisiana. That was his last house before he stopped at McDonald's to get two quarter pounders with cheese. He ate the same thing every night in front of the television with a doll catalogue in his lap. He watched little girls talk about what they wanted for Christmas and taped it so he could rewatch it in June with the window unit humming in his dead father's house.

Sometimes a little girl would get a cheap, plastic doll with painted-on, cornflower blue eyes and look so stunned that Rusty would pause it and just whisper at the television about how he could give her beautiful dolls. Dolls with little glass tears and crumpled hands. He would doze off in his chair wrapped in a felt blanket with a wolf printed on it only to wake up at three in the morning to go stare at his dolls who sat, and reclined, and stood, and leaned on every surface in his sisters' old room. He just sat in the middle of all the peering cold eyes on the flattened brown shag carpet and imagined his two older twin sisters brushing his hair when he was three. May and Gaye. Shining repetitions of one another with the same gray eyes and hair so blonde it was almost white. They were starlit Gemini rotating around one another grinning and interlocking hands with identical, pearl pink fingernails all in a row.

They were only two years older than baby Rusty, but he became the older child as soon as he was six and they left him to go back to heaven.

Jesus came for them not long after he found them clinging to each other behind the cotton shed, asking Jesus how come? The twins wouldn't stay in their own beds after that and instead curled around each other like mirror images on a pallet on the floor. Sweat beaded and slicked, their white blond hair and their cheeks burned with fever. He sneaked into their room, and they lifted up their nightgowns in unison to show him the red streaks on their bellies. Rusty piled dolls

around his weeping sisters. He crawled into the ellipse of space between them at night and reached out for them until one morning when May was as cold as porcelain. The doctor said infection. Sepsis and infection. Gaye followed her sister not a week later.

They knew who did it. He always came around asking Daddy to borrow his spreader or auger, just until he sold the two-year-old steers, then he could buy his own. He would show the kids his shrapnel scar from World War I that crawled from his armpit to the base of his throat. He dug in the pockets of his loose khakis and pulled out fistfuls of cherry cough drops wrapped in waxy paper to drop into each child's cupped palm. No one suspected except Rusty, who saw him wipe his face with a pair of girls' panties one time at a church picnic.

The house was never the same after that. Momma drank coffee all day and scrubbed her hands raw with lye soap. Daddy seldom spoke.

Tonight Rusty sat on his hands in the middle of the floor and looked around him. He never turned on the lights when he went to visit the dolls. Before the twins died, when Rusty was very small, he would crawl into bed with May when monsters scrabbled in his closet and ghosts peeped in his window. She would hug his head and tell him not to worry because monsters and haints didn't like being watched and that's why you never could see them. The dolls always watch and they can see in the dark, everyone knows that now go back to your own bed before Daddy catches us. And he knew he was safe.

Rusty, now too big to sprawl on his belly, sat on the twin bed and polished third editions Clarissa and Mandy's green eyes with a jeweler's cloth, until the moon hung high. He put the dolls back on their stands and left for the shower where he masturbated to nothing in particular.

He pulled his coveralls on and turned off the television, which flicked images of an old woman with fake tits laughing at a little boy in coveralls.

Katlyn cracked a piece of nicotine gun through the foil against her front tooth, bit down, and waited for it to burn against the roof of her mouth. Her daughter was calling her from the living room.

“Mom, Momma, Maaaaa.”

“Hang on baby,” Katlyn yelled at the wall.

She grabbed her teal bra off the laundry pile on the bed and flicked it at the cat, who patted at the air lazily and closed his eyes. She clasped it in front, spun it around, and leaned over from the waist so her breasts dangled heavily into the cups. Katlyn drew the straps over her shoulders and popped them. She stood up straight in front of the three paneled mirror. The mirror that made her infinite. Thousands of images of her receding into the silvery distance, where she was the only standing figure left.

“Mom?” Samantha, her only child, seven years old with tears wetting her stuffed seal’s head, stood in the doorway in her Beauty and the Beast panties. She scrunched her little face. “I can’t put my fucking jammies on.”

Her dark brown eyes widened in delight at the sound of “fucking.”

“Samantha Andrea Couteau. Quit cussing. It’s unladylike.”

Katlyn was distracted. It was Memorial Day, and the boys at Polk would already be drunk and ready to spend away their checks in honor of this great nation. On her. All she had to

do was take off her top and sit on their dicks for five minutes or so, and tell them how *strong* and *brave*, until one of them started crying on her bare tits about some dead gunny in the desert. Bingo. That was twenty five dollars in her g-string.

“Mom, you’re wearing your red shoes.”

“Yeah baby, I got to go to work.” Katlyn smoothed on pink diamond lipstick, dabbing color where her lip split and arched from six cleft palate repairs. “Come here.”

Samantha eased into the room. Her hair was snarled into a dry clump in the back and a sticky smear of grape jelly on her cheek had already attracted dust. Katlyn tugged up Sam’s sagging Beauty and the Beast panties and used a make-up wipe to scrub away the purple stain. She didn’t have time to brush the rat’s nest out of Sam’s hair.

“O.k. Go to bed. I’m going to work. Kisses for me and kisses for you,” Katlyn said.

“Is Meemaw coming tonight?”

Katlyn sighed. Her mother hadn’t come in two years. Sam still asked every night.

“No, but I’ll be home around four. You remember how to count the hours?”

“Yeah.”

Katlyn checked her lipstick in the glass window before she locked up. It always ran from her pocked lip into the divot under her nose. She wriggled the cheap aluminum key into the door and forced the lock until she heard the bolt slide against wood.

When she got into the purple Saturn, she smiled at the stillness. When Sam was in the back seat, she pressed her bony knees into the driver’s seat and talked to her naked Barbie about

Princess Who-the-Fuck and her handsome prince. Katlyn wanted to grab the frizz-haired doll out of her hand and hurl it onto the highway. She wanted to scream when Sam asked her question after question. She wanted to slap her daughter's fat little face. Where's Daddy? When's he coming to see me? I'll bet he'll bring me presents. He lives in Lafayette? How far is Lafayette from here? The teacher said our parents should come tell the class what their job is. Can you come? It'll be this Tuesday.

But instead she turned up the radio and reached for the pack of stale cigarettes she kept in the glove box.

Rusty was his way to Pineville for a rat killing at the mill. The dawn was just breaking through the purplish clouds, and the smooth highway lulled him. He was thinking about whether or not to add a black doll to his collection. He had seen one online at the library with tiny red ribbons tied around her sweet pompoms. Her puffed curls looked like bear ears. She was posed perfectly. Her tiny fists pushed defiantly against her hips. A gap tooth showed through her grin. She had a slingshot just poking out of the front pocket of her overalls. Rusty was entranced, but he worried that she would be lonely in the sea of plump, peachy blondes and redheads.

He was picturing his new dolls holding hands when three thumps knocked under his truck. He heard a thin cry. His front tire lost traction, and the truck skidded into the narrow shoulder.

Rusty forced the emergency lights on with the ball of his thumb and jumped out of the truck. The front tire of the bike and a clear plastic Little Mermaid purse filled with Nilla Wafers, and Barbies, and a few hundred pennies scattered over the asphalt.

“Oh Christ.”

He edged closer and saw a little girl crumpled behind his front tire. Her fingers were tipped with electric blue nail polish and her mouth was open. A piece of folded notebook paper jutted from her front pants pocket. Rusty pinched the corner of the blue-lined note and tugged it free from her shorts. He shook it open.

*Toilet paper
Bannanas
Candy
folder*

Her dark eyes reflected the white side of his truck. She was missing teeth and he could smell child sweat mixed with blood. He knew that smell. The smell of his sisters behind the shed. Rusty licked the sweat from his upper lip and reached to touch the child’s wrist. No pulse. Her still-warm skin was as smooth as a mouse pup’s. He sat down cross-legged beside her and touched her knotted hair. She was wearing pink shorts with an elastic waistband and an adult-sized baby doll T-shirt from the Pegasus Lounge. He sprayed Pegasus every six months for silverfish and roaches. They always tried to pay in him in beer tokens and lap dances and all the lunch buffets he wanted, no matter how many times he told them that he really did prefer a check. He laced his thick fingers through her tiny ones and turned her hand over to look at her blue fingernails pressed loosely against his knuckles.

Katlyn came home to an empty house. She wasn’t even drunk anymore, just tired. She walked from the front door with her red shoes dangling from her hand to Sam’s room and checked her watch.

“Shit.” Sam’s door was open. “Samantha. Hurry and get up. I got to take you to school.”
No answer. “Samantha Andrea.”

Katlyn picked up a pack of cigarettes from the kitchen counter and shook it, hoping for the soft rattle of a lone smoke. Empty. She pushed her nails over her scalp and walked toward Samantha’s room at the end of the hall. A pile of Sam’s dirty laundry slumped on top of the floor vent in the hall. Sam’s father used to lie on the vent when he got back from the asphalt mill and perch Sam on his soft belly. She screamed and wriggled, and he puffed air in her ear and made her wave bye bye when Katlyn left for the club at night. She never could make it work with men who were good to her.

When she got to the bedroom, she felt a thickness in her throat. The broken daybed Sam slept on was empty, and the comforter covered in red and blue dinosaurs was crumpled on the floor. Sunlight streamed through the gap between the hotel towels that hung over the windows. Katlyn stopped in the center of the room. Piles of construction paper, and the poster of Dora the Explorer, and a tube of leaking Neosporin sitting in a glossy pond of petroleum jelly, and paper plates with grease spots, and stuffed animals all gazing with black button eyes. No Sam. A strange emptiness overwhelmed her. It wasn’t sadness or fear. Just nothing.

She pulled out her cell phone and called 911.

Rusty drove the back way home. He called the mill in Pineville and told them he had a fender bender and that he’d be out next week. The girl child he found on the road had her head on his lap, her bony knees pressed against the back of the seat. She was cold and stiff, but Rusty knew a warm bath and cup of milk with lots of sugar and a little coffee would liven her again. He petted

her blood-stiffened hair. He would give her his most beautiful doll and tuck her into the May's bed, and then he could sleep on Gaye's bed under the watchful forest of glass eyes and just love her. Just wish for her.

Katlyn always had a healthy mistrust of police. When they finally showed up, she recognized the stocky red-head from the Pegasus. He chewed on the end of a stick pen. She could hear the plastic crack every time he rolled it between his teeth. "Where's her daddy?"

"He's driving in from Lafayette." He wasn't. She hadn't even called him.

The cop pulled the pen from his mouth and wrote something on his pad. A thread of saliva trailed from the end of it, snapped, and hung from his lower lip. He pressed his thumb against his chin and rubbed, trying to hide the shining line of spit on his chin.

"Who was staying with her while you were at work?"

Katlyn pinched the soft skin on her wrist. "She was alone. I couldn't get my mother to come. She had something to do at church." Another lie.

His face remained impassive.

"You know anyone who would want to hurt you? You sure her daddy didn't get her?"

"I told you he was in Lafayette."

He asked her a few more questions, told her to call her family and boss and looked around the house. Katlyn led him to the back of the house and watched him. He wandered around Sam's bedroom and rubbed the orangey bristles on the back of his neck. The muscles in

his back bunched and went lax as he rummaged through the piles of laundry. His wedding ring seemed too small and pinched the freckled skin behind his knuckle.

“Ok. We’ll get back to you as soon as we hear something.” His eyes swept over her breasts, just once.

Rusty loved her best. He took her home and ran a bath. He apologized to her for her broken bones and torn skin as he peeled away the sodden T-shirt with the tribal Pegasus on the front. She had a tan line where her berry brown skin was cut with the white swimsuit lines of a two piece. He sat on the toilet, held her stiff little body facing away from him, and brushed the cockleburs and gravel out of her curls. He lowered her into the bathtub and thought about his own baptism, where he shook and fought the pastor who held him under too long. Her hair floated around her in dark tendrils, and he carefully scrubbed away the shit and blood. When he finished rinsing Head and Shoulders out of her hair, he toweled her off and set to removing the electric blue polish with acetone. “Pink is the only color for pretty girls.”

Posters of Samantha curled in the rain as the months passed and the cops came and went, but nothing. Nothing but a cesarean scar and some faint memory of a dark-haired child.

She danced and drank whiskey sours with nineteen-year-old soldiers waiting to be dropped into the mountains of Afghanistan.

One night, she brought some married Corporal home. He stood, straight as a bean pole, in her kitchen. She poured some cheap bourbon into a glass and splashed neon yellow margarita mix into it, and pushed it into his hand. He looked around.

“You have kids?” He nodded to a crude drawing of a cow on the fridge.

“No.” She poured herself a drink and smiled. “Not anymore.”

Her chest swelled with the feeling of freedom. She fucked with her bedroom door open. She packed Sam’s toys into boxes and stacked them in the back of her car. She watched soaps wrapped in the warm haze of pot smoke. She threw away the list of numbers for the babysitter.

Rusty ordered a deep freeze for her. He lined it with wallpaper dotted with carousel ponies and tigers and clowns and stood it upright, so his beautiful girl could sit on her pink velvet stool and wait until Rusty came home with a Moonpie or a ceramic figure of a golden unicorn for her. He had carefully glued her eyes shut and brushed her lashes with mascara, leaning back to admire his work. He rouged her cheeks and painted her nails and every single night took her out of her cold room to tuck her into May’s bed with his third edition Claire, the southern belle with real human hair.

“I’ll find you a sister soon,” he said as he tucked the pink down comforter around her.

“Pretty girls ought never, ever be lonely.”

He switched off the light and slid into the other twin bed, his feet jutting through the bars.

Oh Lazarus

I had exactly four Pall Malls left when Leroy asked to bum one. I told him that I had them timed perfectly so I could smoke one every two hours while we hooked animal carcasses on the side of the road in service to the great state of Mississippi. Didn't he love Mississippi, with its sweetgums and good catfishing? We had after all, broken her laws with our insatiable appetite for amphetamines and marijuana and crack cocaine. Big black Leroy told me to shut my stupid mouth and give him a goddamned cigarette. Stop talking for once in my life. I obliged both requests. Leroy had a pretty short temper and possessed all the strength of a very pissed-off Philistine. At least the Old Testament Philistines. I figured having my face intact was worth one

cigarette and my very temporary silence. When I handed him the cigarette he tapped it against his palm and wrinkled his nose.

“You say you used to be a preacher, huh?”

“Yeeeah but I can’t save you, Leroy,” I told him as I jabbed my sticker into a dead raccoon.

It’s ring tail flapped as I lifted it up like a puppet and bobbed it in front of Leroy singing *Jesus Loves Me This I know For the Bible Tells Me So*. I pranced around until a warden came over and told Leroy to stop provoking Reverend Balls Deep. This time it was Leroy who obliged because my temper wasn’t all that placid either, and sometimes I’d go into some holy rages. One such rage landed me here. Picking up carcasses and eating overcooked, canned spinach in a prison chow hall. At least they let me out to walk along the highway and see the red tails and look at everyone’s trash.

I wrote some of my best sermons after I had pumped a little cold into my veins. Sometimes, I would strut up to the pulpit feeling like my chest had opened up and the golden light of the most holy lamb had filled it to bursting with his word. My flock would walk up to me to shake my wet hand and look at me the way a cow looks at a new gate after those most inspired sermons. I just hugged necks, and gripped hands, and tell them I’d pray for them. Then I would get into my Volvo and follow one of the members to his little home and eat chicken salad with pools of opaque liquid shimmering on top, while some dog stared at us through the screen door. I would make a few jokes, say a few prayers. By the end of lunch usually I was coming down. I kept seeing that big buffalo-headed deceiver in the every corner. Just flashes of his grin. My gums itched. I was a Baptist minister so I couldn’t ask for a beer to soften my heartbeat. I always

thought of that joke about how you keep a Baptist from drinking all your beer on a fishing trip is to invite another Baptist along, when all I wanted was a Benzo and cold Coors.

When my giggling got too nervous and the conversation turned to the devil I knew it was time to haul ass out of there. I ran over everything in my path on the way home. Squirrels never thought I was serious and just dillied in the road chasing each other in these tight little circles until I heard at least one of them thump around in my undercarriage. I liked it. I liked it because I knew I could come back later under the pretense of being that soft-hearted preacher who picked up dead animals and buried them. I had a secret though. I just loved their pearly bones. I could make them live better, purer, clean as wool that's been washed by the blood. I would take them home and clean them, stripping away their skin and flesh and set their carcasses out in a neat row on my back porch for the maggots to clean and the sun to bleach.

I had a Great Dane skeleton too. I kept the smallest tail vertebrae on a chain around my neck. Such a beautiful animal. Tall and lean, it would gallop across my yard, glossy muscles bunching and sliding across those heavy bones. The dog belonged to my neighbor, Jacob, who asked me if I had seen Moses when he didn't come home for his dog bed and kibble.

"Nooo. Not today," I said. "Where you think he ran off to?"

Jacob leaned against the horsey wire fence and stared at the woods across the road.

"No telling."

I had to bury Moses. Let the beetles do the work, otherwise I'd have flies coming from the ends of the earth. I was pretty used to the smell by that time, but that's a damn big dog to just leave rotting on your back porch. When the meat had finally been eaten, I set the bones in cold

water and scrubbed them with a toothbrush. I was putting things in their right place. In their purest, pearl-white form. God himself never had a prettier collection of souls.

I guess I been partaking a little heavily the Sunday the sheriff came and hauled me off the jail. I had stayed up for three nights plunging the same needle into the veins on the tops of my feet over and over and trimming passages out of Isaiah with a pair of nail scissors. I was alone. There was always speculation as to why I was alone. Especially from the Methodists. The truth is I guess I never had but one sexual thought in my entire life, and that was when Lazarus rose from the grave in the bible. I had a picture bible growing up that my daddy had gotten me from some salesman with crooked fencepost teeth at the Zondervan's book store. I guess I was about six. He kept hitching at his crotch and saying how *rich* the drawings were. So Daddy got it for me and explained about how I couldn't draw in the pages on the ride home because it was still the bible and did I understand? But I wasn't really listening because I had found my love. Lazarus. Oh Lazarus. He was holding Jesus' hand and the gauzy wrapping hung off his handsome face. Martha and Mary were gripping Jesus' robes and weeping, and I was so happy that I started flipping around the pages so Daddy wouldn't know that I loved a dead man.

I took that bible back to my room and looked at Lazarus again under the dusty antique lamp I begged my momma to get me at a flea market. He had tears streaming down his face into his dark beard. Jesus looked so pleased. I got my first erection.

I had that brightness in me that Sunday morning. I was nearly weeping from the fullness of The Word when I saw Carol Jennings and Laura Miller in the back pew tittering and flipping through a magazine. They were the dark spot in the corner. I rubbed the smooth rabbit skull I

kept in my pocket and cleared my throat into the mic. They went on snatching the pages back and forth and sighing wetly. The congregation was dead silent. Electricity ticked behind my eyes and threaded through my brain. I tore my sermon in half and pushed my shoulder into the pulpit stand until it collapsed, and the sanctuary filled with the howl of feedback. I yanked at my tie and strode down the aisle toward them. Harlots harlots harlots harlots harlots. When I finally got to the back pew I snatched the magazine away from Carol's trembling hands.

"This is a house of worship. This is a house of God."

She was crying, and I had my thumb pressed against the hard little knot on her throat and kept pressing when I felt strong deacon hands pulling me away. They pushed their weight into me until I felt the rough carpet against my face. My rabbit skull splintered in my pocket and I was sure that it was actually my spine cracking.

Well, the sheriff came and found three eightballs in my car. They also searched my house and found my collections, and three more grams of crystal, a little less than an eighth of dope and twenty-five Benzos. So I went to trial, and then I went to jail because as much as I taught them about forgiveness, no one wanted to post my bond. I guess I did try and strangle a thirteen-year old-girl.

They finally started loading us into the van after we had dumped our bags in the flatbed behind the sheriff's truck. The warden chained Big Leroy to me and ducked our heads before we hopped into the vans like shackled circus elephants. On the ride back, I leaned over to Leroy and whispered to the side of his head that I took something from the road. Leroy told me to shut up, that I was going to get everyone on lockdown. I shook my pants leg, and vile odor puffed into the air around us.

“Oh Jesus, Leroy. Leroy’s cutting them over here. I call this cruel and unusual punishment. Jesus Lord. I’ve got to say a prayer for you son. You got a demon in your asshole.”

The van burst into raucous laughter, and Angel kicked the seat behind us. Chains rattled and the warden hollered at us to settle down. I reached into the cuff of my pants leg and resituated the dead ground rattler I had found all flattened under an empty Dr Thunder box. I could feel some kind of sticky ooze matting my leg hair together. Another one for my collection. Another one to show my love real sacrifice. Real pretty. Real nice.

It happened like this on the first day I came to the pen. The day I first saw my love. After they brought me into the general population from the holding cell, they shoved some clean sheets at me and prodded me towards my cell. I had been clean for a few weeks, and everything seemed muddy. I had my bible, and I was ready to pay my penance with some Ahab, who had killed a kid when he blew up his meth lab just to make a little biker blue. My mind slogged as I ticked through verses and parables. The florescent lights hummed above me, and I looked down at the V of the flip flops cutting between my socked toes.

When I finally reached my cell and walked inside, he was not King Ahab who sat there but my beloved Lazarus. He was thin and had the same sharpness about his dark features as my wild-eyed children’s bible version. But he was so. So alive. Too much guts and moving bits and wet-mouthed speech. I came in and began making my bunk. I learned his named was Graham and he was excited to have a preacher here with him. Maybe I could help him learn to be better. Because he had accidentally killed his girlfriend’s boy child? girl child? when he was high on junk, and left the gas on, and then left to get some more more more. He started crying then and

lifted his hair away from his face to show me where his girlfriend had come home and tried to tear out his eye when she found her dead baby and him asleep in the front yard. I put my hand on top of his head and called him my son like some pedo priest. He was disgustingly warm.

I read to him every night from the bible because he said he never was real smart with books or church. Sometimes Herman from across the way would scream in his sleep and wake up everyone on the block. If you listened hard enough you could hear Angel whisper to him in Spanish until the night went silent again. Graham would ask me if there was such a thing as haints, and I would tell him that the bible tells us we go right to Him or to that lake of fire.

“Aren’t such things as haints. Go back to sleep, son.”

I concocted my plan to make Graham mine one morning when I got up before him to arrange my little collection of polished bones under the edge of my blanket. Graham never called me Reverend Balls Deep like everyone else despite my collection and the need to belt *Give Me Oil in My Lamp Keep it Burning Burning Burning* in the communal showers.

He was sleeping so soundly that his chest barely rose, and his hand curled next to his nose. I watched him until he began to writhe under his blankets and wondered how hard it would be to give someone a lobotomy. Too hard. Pillow to the face? Graham was too young, too full of come. Too risky. I ruminated for weeks. All the while Graham kept talking, and moving, and leaking fluids like the rest of humanity. It finally came to me when we were out picking up dead animals, and Leroy hollered like a lost calf, and dashed to the warden screaming snake.

“It’s a goddamned snake.”

The warden laughed at him and told him to get back to work, snake was probably scarer of his hollering and stomping than he was of it. It came to me then. I would poison Graham, just enough to make him cool and still. I could have really used some tweak.

Now I had my snake and just had to get it past the guards. I pinched the head off the rest of the body and let the length of the snake slap the floor. I tensed and looked around. Leroy stared out of the window and ignored me yanking his hands as I shifted around. I clutched the head in my hands and figured it would be easiest to just hold it in my fist. The guards rarely paid Reverend Balls Deep any mind. I was crazy but harmless. I got the snake head in without any trouble. I usually held the animals I wanted in my mouth until I got to my cell where I retched them into my hand and admired them. I figured a snake head might be a little too risky. The guards didn't even look as they were unlocking my cuffs. It was a little too easy.

When I got to my cell, Graham was sitting on his bunk with the porno mag he traded a guard a horse contact for. I was so excited I just stood on foot rolling the snake head around between my fingers until he looked up from the sweat moistened Hustler.

"Heey, Graham." I grinned and made all my nice teeth show.

"Hey, Reverend." He looked back at the pages of the mounds of fecund flesh flopping all over one another in a slick pile. I crawled in my bunk and hid the head under my pillow until night came.

That night I made Graham my Lazarus. I sat cross-legged in the bunk above him and counted his breaths. I was at 18,127 when I decided that number seemed holy enough and slid down beside him clutching the snake head by its jaws. His tender, little wrist lay there full of lacy veins carrying blood back to his steady heart. I traced his forehead and felt the warm pulse of blood in my loins. I pried the snake's jaws open and tapped his wrist with such care. Graham's eyes fluttered under his lids. I couldn't move. He breathed sulfurous sweet on my face and I did it. I plunged the fang into his wrist and pressed the head as hard as I could. Graham came to swinging and caught my front teeth. He flung blood from his knuckles and jumped clean out of bed.

"Son son son you were having a nightmare," I pleaded.

The snake head had bounced away into a dark corner somewhere. Graham caught his breath and looked at his wrist.

"Godalmighty it hurts."

I sat down on the floor. "Well yeah. You whacked my teeth pretty good."

"I feel kind of sick preacher."

I got him back to his bunk and bandaged his wrist with some scotch tape and toilet paper. I waited until his breathing became uneven and he began moaning a girl's name over and over again. I hopped off my bunk and slid in bed beside him. He was sweating and begging was it Amanda? Or Jennifer? for a cool drink of water. I petted him and told him he was going to be just fine. Soon he was going to walk from that old grave because he was a friend of Jesus. Just a little glass, Lord. That's all I need.

“I want to go home, preacher.”

“You’re on your way, son. I’m right here with you.” I held his hand, and pulled the white sheets over him, and tucked them around him. His dark eyes flicked around the room. They were wild and confused. He grabbed at my uniform and pressed his face against my chest. My Lazarus draped in white. In his most perfect form.

VITA

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