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YARDBIRDS

By

Joshua Brewer

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillments of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

YARDBIRDS

This thesis by Joshua Brewer is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

YARDBIRDS

By

Joshua Brewer

Novel-length fictions, when at their best, deeply complicate themes, characters, events or situations using the form's lengthy the traditional notion of point-of-view to recognize the multifaceted power of the land. This work features a multi-racial, bilingual and multicultural community which confronts the longstanding black-white binary that has dominated literary depictions of the American South. This work aims to disrupt that notion—the South as monolith—by presenting bioregional communities as central to individuals' cultural and economic lives. *Yardbirds* engages death and deterioration—themes abundantly apparent in Arkansas communities—through a cyclical mindset: what is here today, I hope to show, is only a condition for tomorrow's many choices. By recognizing the inherit agency of all forms, the characters in this novel are able to progress to a more-just, inevitable end.

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I am thankful, first, for the Ouachita Mountains and the rivers and life that run there. I am so thankful for the people who raised me in those mountains and taught me to love. I am thankful for my short time on the Lake Superior shoreline and the life that I have met here. I will forever give thanks to those who have always cared for the land. May our treatment of soil and water show honor.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Northern Michigan University Department of English.

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Introduction

This novel, like most, is political. *Yardbirds* engages a discussion which followed a 2009 mill closure in the small, West Arkansas town of Mountain Pine. Mountain Pine, like many mill towns its size, depended on a lumber mill for its local economy. Rumor has it—and nothing is a better source in a small Southern town—that workers showed up for first shift a little before Christmas to find a padlock on the gate. No warning. Moments such as these are not isolated, but memorable instances in a chain of offenses representative of what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). *Yardbirds* offers a power-flip. Instead of a corporation (Weyerhaeuser, in this case) making profit-driven decisions that affect people and land, the spirit of the land and ghost of a native woman, Kawuatz, speaks through a member of Arkansas’ next generation, a young woman named Inés to burn that mill.

Inés burns the mill by embracing what Scott Knickerbocker in *EcoPoetics* calls sensuous poesis, or the manner by which nature as an abstraction is constructed through the acoustics and forms of human language (2012). Knickerbocker’s term is perhaps best understood outside of academic circles by listeners of Southern migration music, jazz and blues, hip-hop and rhythm and blues. Just as the reverberations of musical instruments and vocal modulations create physical sensations on a listener’s body, sound has the power to engage material nature and affect it in profound ways. For that reason, this work takes Knickerbocker’s challenge literally and attempts flesh out what possibilities lie in allowing the poetic, the sonic, to communicate with the material or natural.

In the aftermath of the fictional Ink mill fire, the town of Ink, like Mountain Pine, is forced to grapple with histories of racial discrimination, and class and gender inequality. Above all, the people of Ink must question why they exist. In part, this engages the paucity of creativity with which many Industrial and post-Industrial communities approach the waning days of a dominant employer. Surely such places exist for reasons other than the mill or mine or factory. *Yardbirds* shows its readers the power and deep intelligence of the local economy and local culture by allowing artisanal “hobby work” to fill the gap left by the retreating Industrial economy.

This novel most directly explores the possibilities provided by economic cooperatives in rural, post-Industrial spaces. Much analysis has detailed the economic poverty of rural Southern regions and its people, but too little critically analyzes how that very system of analysis—individually and capitally oriented—discriminates against certain actors. In response, I argue that while cooperatives are historically significant to the electrification, water and telephone networks of rural areas, too little work recognizes their potential for rural economic recovery. Ink’s cooperative also directly engages the racial, linguistic and gender inequalities inherent to American economies, especially those of the rural South. In this way, I hold economic structures at least partially responsible for our cultural systems of oppression, per a Marxist sense of economic structures. That said, it seems that the solutions to cultural forms of oppression must also directly engage the responsible economic, capitalistic base and larger ideologies.

Yardbirds continues a discussion of cyclicity and history, a longstanding concern in Southern writing. Like any Southern male writer, the specter of Faulkner haunts any reading of my work, despite my attempts at distance. I’ll admit, however, that

Yardbirds directly engages the concern of cyclicity found in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). If anything unites the group of writers called southern, it is rumination. I choose an approach that frames the cyclical in a positive light. My work argues that in order to maximize the efficacy of our environmental experiences, “environmental writers” must recognize the many actors and horrible actions of our history, however suffocating and exhausting that might be. The figure of the meandering, swampy river, the bayou, is emblematic in this way. *Yardbirds* is about a river, upriver from the bayou, like our history, a river which has been dammed for so long that it’s about to burst.

The image of the dammed river is not a mere symbol. River damming in the American South is beginning to receive the sort of political environmental attention that groups have brought to the many dams in the American West. The dam as a massive instrument of hard stabilization disrupts natural sediment systems and water regulatory systems. Furthermore, as is realized in the novel, the precarious placement of dams above poor and rural communities, like Mountain Pine, Arkansas and the fictional town of Ink, for the purpose of generating electricity for wealthier areas like the nearby town of Hot Springs continues the resource scheme of sacrifice zones and consumption zones, and the sacrificed people and consumption-minded people who live there. In this regard, my work hopes to continue the creative arguments brought to the popular American mind in Edward Abbey’s *The Monkeywrench Gang* (1975).

Inés’ final, fatal decision in the novel to bring down the dam comes from her realization of this scheme. While the mill economy has been replaced by an artisanal cooperative economy—a liberal dream in many ways—Inés recognizes the continuation of exploited people and land for wealthier, consuming people and communities at the

mountain foothills. The restoration of the natural river system—fatal to Inés and her community—restores a difficult up-river, down-river relationship and discussion that moves beyond the novel's scope.

The young, affecting character, Inés, owes much to the groundbreaking work of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Inés' identity in the text is formed primarily by the many Mexican women who raise her after her mother's death. Her father, Condrado, a Salvadorian immigrant, and his best friend, Robert, a white, Southerner are distant from her life, but play an integral role. At age 17, Inés is oddly asexual, or at least not sexually interested in the limited choices available to her in Ink.

If Ink can be conceptualized as a Borderland—a formulation supported by Luis Alberto Urrea's reading of West Arkansas in *The Devil's Highway*—Inés can certainly be formulated as experiencing matrixial identities, per Bracha Ettinger's notion explored first in *The Matrixial Gaze* (1995) and, more recently, in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006). This identification is first made apparent in Kawuatz's rape of Inés, a horrifying scene where Kawuatz forces Inés to begin menstruating at an early age. Rather than formulate this scene as a wounding—a yonic representation which would continue the phallogocentric imagery of Lacan's castration complex—this is represented as a possession, a material experience within a different, dual logic of presence-absence. This duality denies the notion of loss and accumulation intrinsic to capitalist (and perhaps rapist) ideology.

The concept of presence absence is also explored by the odd first-person narrator, Randall the rooster. Randall was chosen, in part, because of current *Gallus* psychology's

suggestion that presence-absence is the most substantial psychological process available to chicken fowl. Oftentimes, this research is cited in a way which is dismissive to chickens, but as Randall shows in his meditations on his removal from a cock-fighting ring and the severe psychological distress experienced there, the concept of presence-absence is particularly complex. The issue of presence-absence relates back to Kawuatz's attempts, through Inés, to consider the history of the West Arkansas region including atrocities associated with Hernando de Soto. By the conclusion of the novel, the brief experiences with Randall, hopefully disrupt anthropocentric logic in a way which allows for a larger ecological vision.

My goal that *Yardbirds* produce an ecological fantasy quickly moves into the realm of animal ethics. This central component of the novel takes form in four principle ways. First, as has already been discussed, the Fabulist treatment of Randall, a rooster, serves to complicate dismissive notions of *Gallus* psychology. While ethically fraught, readers experience in a rooster's point of view should allow the consideration of other animals' points of view.

Second, a central discussion between central characters, Robert and Condrado, on the souls of animals recasts the parable of St. Francis of Assai into West Arkansas language. The figure of Miranda Lambert the Goat, a corpse from the beginning of the novel, is filled with meaning and life until burial. This speaks to the way we humans often interact with animals. What is present in the scene is a corpse of a goat, not a living goat. However over the course of the novel that corpse is constructed as a symbol for the mill, the mill patriarch, "Daddy Thompson," the racialized body and the animal body.

The third way that animals play a central role in *Yardbirds* is the simple recognition of animals in space. Too often, fictional works are dominated by humans at the expense of nonhuman actors. However, any reader can recognize the traces of animals, wild and companion, littered throughout the text. The simple act of making animal actors as present on the page as in the work aims to begin addressing that gap.

Finally, other-than-human animals are the medium through which change occurs during the plot of *Yardbirds*. In part, this construction argues that any change that humans hope to have in relation to their Earth will necessarily involve an empowerment of animals in our society.

Three literary models have been critically important in guiding my construction of an ecological Southern novel. First, I was drawn to how Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* creates a resonance between protagonist, Esch, and her brother's fighting pitbulls. Like *Yardbirds*, Ward is particularly interested in the resilient rural communities of color and the complex role of animals in those communities. Ward's complex pastoral, per Lawrence Buell's notion, includes a wide range of animals, diseases and human social constructs which are as natural as Hurricane Katrina barreling down upon their community. Ward also demonstrates how the "slow violence" of racist economic models and communities have wreaked havoc on the depicted Mississippi rural black communities in a way that only the figure of Hurricane Katrina can make apparent. Likewise, exploitative resource-extraction models have destroyed Ink in a manner that destabilizing events like a mill-fire and a dam-rupture only begin to make apparent. Like the characters of Ward's Mississippi, those of *Yardbirds*' west Arkansas are resilient and resistant in their own, uncomfortable and uncouth manners.

Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the second novel to which *Yardbirds* is deeply indebted. I'm specifically drawn to the mule funeral scene from Hurston's novel, which I was reminded of after having written the Miranda Lambert the Goat's burial. Hurston's choice to personify the nearby vultures and create a phonetic resonance within the scene exercises many of the same techniques that I use to recognize the animal agency inherent to human events. Likewise the mule burial makes plain the myth of mule immortality in a similar way that my goat burial scene explores the myth of St. Francis' wolf. Unlike Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, anything that goes down in *Yardbirds* is most certainly coming back up again which is why the goat is unearthed by the pack of trailer park dogs, broken apart and eaten. Like the mule myth, there is some truth to the goat burial account as well: goats and pigs are often buried too shallow, simply out of the difficulty of the task. Earthy jokes like the goat's unearthing and Hurston's mule are buried in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Yardbirds* in a manner which is much more complex than symbol or allegory. In fact, if a reader were to approach Hurston's oeuvre or *Yardbirds* in such a manner, they are more often than not, on the wrong end of the joke.

In writing *Yardbirds* I was also deeply influenced by Jamie Kornegay's *Soil* (2015). Kornegay makes his novel's logical cyclicity clear through the central image of the compost heap. When the protagonist of this story, Jay, moves from a slightly fictionalized, Oxford, Mississippi to the hill country to start a radical food operation, he is confronted by ecological and psychological forces leading to his ruin. In the final scene of that novel, Jay becomes a part of the swampy ecology, composted in an inevitable end.

Like Hurston's work and my own, *Soil* revels in its own dark comedy, waking the nasty and embarrassing sides of readers' senses of humor.

I am most comfortable associating this work with the literary tradition known as Grit Lit which revels in and celebrates the trashier side of the South. I am taken by the surprising environmentalism of the many authors in that tradition, usually connected to hunting and fishing, but also of rural living and land ethics. *Yardbirds* aims to make that environmentalism explicit in the many discussions of food and connection to life like snakes, parasites and insects. It is my hope that an ecological literary movement might arrive from Rough South writers to fill the void left by the New Agrarians or Back the Land movement's literary icons like Barry Lopez and Wendell Berry.

Yardbirds takes full advantage of point-of-view to disorient and reorient readers toward a larger literary experience. This technique was perhaps best used by Ken Kesey's *Sometimes A Great Notion*, a class-conscious environmental novel in its own right (1964). Kesey employed a bouncing third-person narrator to connect readers to a logging community, a hold-out non-union logging clan, and, at one brief point, a hound. *Yardbirds* expands that technique to bounce less in the third-person point of view and to include first and second points of view. The only bouncing which occurs is during the first-person sections where Kawuatz and Inés vie for narrator position. When both characters speak from the "I" position, there are points of confusion and overlap, ultimately culminating in the use of the "we." At other points in the novel, Inés speaks, uncontested from the first-person; and, at others, Kawuatz does the same.

John Brandon's *Arkansas* is the model for the second-person technique at its finest (2009). Brandon's second person forces me to identify with a scummy drug dealer

who I would have trouble empathizing with otherwise. I used this technique to identify the reader with the principle character of Robert, a white racist who spends most his time philosophizing with best friend Condrado. Robert's body and marriage have been falling apart for some time at the novel's beginning and neither seems unchanged by the end. However, at the risk of authorial overreach, if there is a position where I want readers to experience *Yardbirds* from, it is from Robert's. While he is privileged in terms of his gender, his race and his position in the mill-hierarchy, he's far from a position of admiration.

The larger structure of the novel falls away from the central plot line, just as the town moves from its linear sense of progress. This choice takes free-form jazz as its inspiration. While the central plot elements—characters, points of view, etc.—are present throughout the novel, the pacing and movement within the text is at times erratic and jarring. In this formal decision I hope to produce the sorts of feelings experienced within the text, but also to give a more genuine experience of the logic of rural, Southern communities, like Blues, Jazz and hill music does.

Finally, for the images of this work, I favor the concrete and hyper specific. This effect of this is to create odd resonances between odd images, so that new meanings might come together. These meeting points are unpredictable and unintended, but, per Reader Response Theory, which might allow readers to engage the intended points of my work in novel or more memorable ways. Images of litter and trash juxtaposed with those of natural beauty like songbirds to create a pastoral rich with possibility. I hope to use these moments of instability to allow alternate ways of thinking about environmentalism and the economic models of our rural communities. If anything, the various crises of our

time are emblematic of the abject failures of our creativity. Instead of reduction, this novel favors expansion. Rather than top-down, the logic of *Yardbirds* works side-to-side, bottom-up, back-to-front and atavistically.

Aromas on the corner, these the soul, they say
Some greens just can't be cleaned and you can't wash out the taste
Of rotten roots
Salted looks and herbs
If it ain't made with love then it ain't fit to serve, I heard
Some get bruised and battered
Thrown away half-eaten as if their seeds never ever mattered.
What happened to the soul food?
I'm talkin' good eatin', good seasonin'

Big KRIT "Soul Food"

Chapter One

As the fire station's shrill alarm filled the hollers, silencing birdsong and cricket chirps, doe bleats and squirrel barks, the men of Hollow Springs Court stumbled from their trailers to leap over sleeping dogs, abandoned tires and sofa stuffing. Volunteer Fire's always had a following among the mill men. It was their people who always got burned out. Four mill men filled the cab of Big John's pickup truck and three more piled in the back. They carried shirts and shoes in their hands. Their bellies and shoulders and elbows knocked with the bumps while dressing in the truck. The trailer park's soil was all clumpy in the dew, so Big John's mud tires flung tread patterns of earth against the trailers. Worms wriggled in the new light.

When trucks converged on the station, the engine was already in the street. Boots and coats were bunched before its open doors. Haddix, the crew chief, bounced in his slicks. He'd covered his silicon ear with black, high temperature exhaust wrap. He had lost his original ear along with his neck and spine skin in an apartment fire three years before. The gear at Ink's Volunteer Engine had always been hand-me-down, but the situation had worsened in the recession. Haddix didn't even know that the coat had split until the roofing tar dripped down his collar. Doctors apologized when the replacement ear turned up white, saying that they could paint it black. Haddix told them to fuck off, that they'd fuck up his shade anyhow.

Haddix repeated: "It's Thompson's. It's Thompson's."

Another crew from town started throwing gear in the trucks. The men from the Hollow Springs Park stalled.

Haddix just said, “Thompson’s, boys, Thompson’s” over and again, like the siren.

The engine driver laid on the horn and aimed the engine at the mountain. The smoke had soaked up the sunrise. Redness leapt from the peaks into the clouds. Haddix stood in the door jamb by the captain seat as the engine rolled.

“Four alarm, motherfuckers. First on, last off. And we all coming back. Ain’t nobody going for a tan. Feel me?”

Haddix paused to say more, but “Get the fucker out” was all that he could manage.

Wind carried the sirens across the valley. When Jerry sounded the horn across the empty four way stop sign at the center of town, hundreds of dogs howled. Other engines screamed soprano as they race to join the fight. Drivers yanked their cars off the roads and hung out of their windows to smell. Nothing. Engine after engine passed. Three from Hot Springs. Volunteer units from hollows across the mountains. The wind turned to down the slopes through pines, oak, cedar and elm. When the engines met the smoke, their drivers called to shift-weary workers with horns. There was no need because shift had been cancelled ten years before. Haddix flipped his arm out the window at the sound of the horn, twisting it in the air like he was riding a bull.

Smoke covered Hollow Springs Court and the first shift workers drinking coffee with cigarettes on their tailgates. Smoke shrouded mountain shacks and outhouses, old men from another time. Wild pigs started with the scent of fire. A murder of crows elected to lift into the thermals. Smoke filled the valley and spilled out the passes. Everyone knew that Thompson’s had lit, but they stood outside, feigning ignorance, breathing it in, tasting for something like hope.

Wind jammed smoke into replanted pines and outcrops of rock, caves and bear dens, possum holes and squirrel nests. Wind piled smoke on the eastern face of the Ouachita peaks before jumping ahead of the day in a column of Confederate gray. At Joe Ben's place on Tornado Run, smoke excited the kitchen alarm. He stumbled into his kitchen to sniff at his oven for grease fire, and, finding it cold, muttered, "fuck me," and "not again," while running to put out another truck fire. Just as he reached his truck, Joe Ben saw the volunteer engine race through the gap toward the mill. When he smelled the smoke, he fell and cried in the rocky clay of the mountainside because the smoke reeked of pine sap.

In Ink, alarms sang at Mountain Pine High and in the Main Street Washateria. A few house units joined the cacophony. The kitchen smoke detector bawled at Shark's Bar, Hall and Fine Dining. Susan, the owner, ran to open the smoker's window.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Helen," she shouted to her daughter.

Helen killed the gas line, thinking it was leaking again, but the squall continued. A small detector beeped near the pool tables. Helen checked trashcans and the grease fryers.

"Shit's outside," Susan said, shutting a window.

"Where?" Helen ran to her with the fire extinguisher.

On Ink's single through street, Inkers stood in the smoke, coughing and rubbing at bed hair. Susan rolled up a dishtowel and kicked it under the entrance door.

"Can't have this place smoking up like the rest of fucking creation."

Helen nodded and pulled the batteries from the smoke detector by the window. Susan stood on a chair in the kitchen, yelled for the kitchen unit to "fucking die already"

and ripped it from the ceiling. Pieces of Formica fell onto the stove. Sheetrock dust ran from the wire holes.

More Inkers stumbled from their beds in bare feet and boxer shorts, packing foam curlers and belly fat. Bare-chested, Raymond's hula girl tattoo sagged with age, her inky breasts running onto her belly like his own. Inkers looked to one another, smoke, fear and sleepies covering for their modesty. They wondered what was big enough to burn like this. Then they heard the song of the sirens and the smoke alarms. At first it was the songs of jobs, children and pets, firefighters in slicks with water-hoses, cigarette scented carpet, recliners and propane. Then like the alarms had settled it, there was the song of Thompson's, a story of Ink and lumber and big pile of pine. Among the Inkers, that song turned to chatter and the chatter turned to gossip.

Chapter Two

It's been years since you've heard Condrado's Power Wagon belt out a note like this. It's early July, but it already feels like August. The sound distracts you from the microwave buzzer and since it's an old-school, dial-style with a broken relay, your mother's, which keeps radiating, boiling the two-day old coffee until a bubble bursts, soaking then steam cleaning the ravioli-splatter like the Ramen bowl. You wonder why he's coming like this, when he should be an hour and a half into first shift. The liquid runs into the corner. It's black, but speckled with red like a baby mudsnake. You hear Condrado's truck make the jump from the highway asphalt into Hollow Springs Court. His tires fishtail in the dust.

He's taken another fight, you're sure, his third. Three strikes now, so he's gone. The throaty roar of The Green Machine tells you that he's racing through the trailers coming straight for you. You throw open the microwave and try and hustle across the linoleum, feeling the burn marks and plastic bubble beneath your feet. You've let the place go since Sheri left. The park manager swears he's getting some FEMA leftovers from Katrina, but he's said that for years. After Sheri, you just say that you're waiting on the FEMA.

Condrado's already in the yard as you make the door, stubbing your toes on the raised aluminum snake-guard. *Ahmotherfucker*, you say as you exit, greeting Condrado and his panting truck. The neighbors are probably announcing you—¡*Robert tropezó!*—and giggling then hushing, waiting for your ass to tumble, waiting to hear you bounce off

the bottom step, break a hip, moan and die. You won't give them that pleasure today. Black smoke fills your yard. Condrado's burned another piston ring.

"Rob, the big pile's lit. Get in."

You were sure it was a fight. A couple have been brewing with Condrado for. You could help him find work. You might even back him up, prevent a rematch, if he won. There's nothing for this though.

"Shut the fuck up, Condi!"

"For real, it's lit good. Fire trucks everywhere, but it's going. I couldn't even get close enough to see. Figured you'd want to know."

"What the fuck happened to the sprinklers?"

"¿*Estás sordo?* Get in the fucking truck and we'll see."

You reach around the door jamb, as the dew breaks on your skin. You search for the office boots, your Redwing six-inchers, but instead, your hand finds the tall steel toed lumber boots which haven't been worn since your promotion to shift manager. You pull them and run their exposed metal into the side of your trailer, checking for snakes and spiders.

"Let's go, leisurely motherfucker." Condrado drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

The boot laces are stiff with pine sap. Your hands are shaking. You haven't had time to warm them in the hot washcloths, so they won't quite clinch the aglets. You ball your hands into fists, hold them and try again. You have no grip for the small things anymore. Mill work took that from you.

You try to think of a time when leather covered the toe metal. You try to think where you could find work at 57. You remember sorting. Lumber here, Plywood there. Peelers and Boards. You give up on tying the boots, leaving their necks flopping on your legs like it's intentional.

“About time.”

Condrado knows your hands.

Now you see Miranda Lambert the Goat laying under the trailer, bloody vomit in the humus around her lips.

“Motherfucker,” you mumble.

Condrado looks behind the truck and sees her face in the weeds.

“Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.” Your voice goes higher like an incantation.

Miranda Lambert the Goat had hidden her body under the trailer sometime in the night. She didn't even bleat or cry for you. Now she's dead, stuck in that snake heaven under the trailer.

“Leave her and deal with that after the mill,” Condrado says.

“Fuck that. The dogs will get at her while we're gone. I'm surprised they didn't find her last night.”

You go to her, touch her neck. It's too hot to tell how long she's been dead. She's warm like everything. One side of her face is covered in mud, made from park clay and bile.

“Can't leave her here. Like this.”

“Then get her quick.”

You go to kicking your trailer skirt with the steel toes. You break seam after seam. The hole must be large enough to birth her corpse. You recognize your tired anger and breathe it in like all the broke teenagers who try to get high off burning plastic in the ditch.

“We’re fucking niggers without that mill. Kids ain’t got nothing. We ain’t got nothing.”

The hate doesn’t even make you feel better. Your right hand goes to flopping at the wrist like a fish.

“Treehuggers been wanting this down. So here we are. Fucking fucked.”

Condrado ignores you and pulls at Miranda Lambert the Goat.

“We got to take her with us,” you tell him.

“Fuck that. Throw her inside in a blanket.”

“She’ll pop and juice all over the goddamn floor. You trying to give me the fucking Parvo?”

He looks under the trailer.

“What-the-fuck-ever, let’s throw this *puta* in the truck and go.”

“Have some fucking respect.”

Her body sags between your hands, as you hold her front legs and Condrado takes her back two.

“We putting her in my fucking truck?”

It isn’t a question. Her spine stabilizes the body as you lift her into the truck.

For once, neither you nor Condrado can say a thing. This is Miranda Lambert the Goat.

As Condrado drives around the court circle, you see Hector with a wrinkled paper bag: mission groceries. You stick your head out the window, holding your weight on your forearm. It hurts, but you can't act like it does, especially in front of Hector.

"Somebody lit the big pile on fire," you shout to him.

"Como? The *big* pile?"

He says it in his radio show voice.

"Fuck already. We're headed over now. You want a ride?"

"Na, *gracias*. Condrado: *No me chingues. Fue a Thomson's para mierda turno.*"

Mierda turno, shit shift, your shift. Only Hector says *mierda turno* around you. Gringo shift and *mierda turno*, first and second. It's Hector's brazenness that burns you, his not-give-a-fuck what *you* think because you're just the fucking jefe gringo.

It isn't the time to deal with Hector, so you slide onto the yellowing white quilt that Condrado tacked to his truck seat.

Condrado pushes the shifter arm into first, pulling you back.

Condrado shouts at Hector: "*La verdad, ese, la verdad.*"

You're his fucking boss, you think, even if he would prefer Condrado, so you raise up out of the cab again, maybe just to let him know that you're still here, that you're not dead quite yet.

"Yeah, it's the fucking truth, *ese*. And this shit?"

You swing your arm wide, past the rutted drive and into the row of trailers.

"This'll only get worse, *Hector*."

Dogs beg at the tires for Miranda Lambert the Goat.

Chapter Three

My cousin got these worms when he was seven. We had always called him Bicho because he was one of them ankle biters, those little kids clinging to them older kids like chiggers. My cousin's real name was Carlos and he wasn't a cousin proper. He was mom's best friend's kid though, and when she died birthing me, his mother, Maria, practically raised me. That sure as hell made Maria a *tía* and Bicho a cousin.

Since he was always scrambling like a bug, we figured Bicho was a good name. Then, one day, once his crew was a little older, one of the other kids who was crying or pouting for being grounded or beat on, asked, "*qué bicho.*" Just like that we started blaming Bicho for anything we didn't want to talk about.

See, we could rag on Bicho, because he was one of us: a Hollow Springs kids. We didn't have much of a choice in who we were, where we were born. Churches talked about bringing donations around the park for the holidays. People put our Christmas lists up on charity trees at the front of Wall-Mart. It felt good getting gifts from so many people but, as we grew, we figured it out. No kid can forget a parent crying over a stranger's Christmas presents.

When Bicho actually got the worms, the kids got together to discuss the whole thing. I was about ten at the time and was one of the older kids. By ten, most us had been called trailer trash by another kid in town or at school. The first time I heard it, when I was 6, I thought it was because the court dogs were always tearing up trash bags. Shit, I have spent whole months of my life picking up shredded pizza boxes and milk cartons, unwound wire and that mustard colored couch stuffing. See, if us kids didn't pick up the

trash, the dogs would eat it and then vomit it all up. Then some other dog would eat the vomit and up-chuck it again. Nobody picked up trash vomit. Even the dogs wouldn't mess with double yack. Looking back, we had a bit of a dog problem in the park.

That's why we agreed to keep Bicho's worms on the low. We told our teachers that he was bad sick and when they asked how, we told them stupid Bicho ate a bunch of eggs after watching Rocky and got the bugs. No matter, the abuelas fixed him with wormseed. The teachers said that's why you can't eat raw cookie dough. They smiled and said stupid Bicho.

Bicho's worms are little like this voice I hear, but nobody has a tea for it. It's not something I could really talk about with anyone, anyhow. Everyone has always looked at me, and this voice is the last thing I need on my reputation. Nobody has ever said they blame me for killing mama, they can't help but think it. I've come to terms with the fact.

Hollow Springs women birth in our trailers. The abuelas say they know all about bringing life. While they admit you need a man to make that baby, but they a man just going to fuck up the bringing. It was my fault that mama died. My tía said I was turned in weird way and that I hurt my mama coming out. I heard the whole thing started from a squat, then mama went to her knees and finally to her back. Tía says they knew something was wrong when she went on her back like white ladies. They must have figured I was out of balance from the get-go, turning the way I did. If I told them I heard a voice? Shit, that's all they'd need to hear. They'd think I'd kill again.

I should be more specific about the voice. I don't really hear it like you would hear a neighbor. I know people like that too. This voice is just there like the wind. It's so slight that you almost don't notice it, but after just a second you forget that it ever wasn't

there. It's like Bicho. Who knows where he got them worms. Who knows how this voice got up in my thoughts.

I remember standing at the bus stop in the dark with all the other kids. All of us half-asleep, just watching that line of trucks taking our fathers to first shift at the mill. My dad had a taillight out, so I could pick him out and watch him until he made the mountain pass. I remember thinking how our fathers were just like the pine trees, uprooted and dragged to that mill in trucks. I understood that it was only boys that they wanted at that mill and that was the day that I realized that even if I could go, I didn't want to be a mill girl. That realization created a space for her like that half-second before a sneeze. Her name was as real as the basset hound's morning bay. Kawuatz. When I thought it was nonsense, my stomach turned and my body warmed. I saw angels tossing demons from behind the sunrise. Flying to drown them in swamp water. They sang war chants in the language of tongues.

Chapter Four

Susan brings water to a boil and throws two hands of grits in. She walks with a third handful to the backdoor and throws it into the yard.

“Day’s leaving you, girl.” Susan yells into the yard between the bar and the RV.

Susan had sold the RV’s engine for scrap nine years ago. Since it hadn’t moved in four years, she didn’t see the point. When the tires dry-rotted, she put the axles sat up on jacks and concrete blocks. Twenty three chickens run after the sparse grits.

“Oh, good morning, good morning, good morning. Little jarring of a start, but an otherwise beautiful day, ain’t it, ladies?”

Susan turns back to her grit pot and cuts a butter pat.

Remembering Helen, Susan sings: “Rise and shine, Helen, to pay your goddamn fine. Me and the ladies just riding, riding, riding this dummy dummy line.”

Helen notices two additional birds. Susan hears her pause, and slaps the spoon against the grit pot.

“Helen,” she drawls, “Come get you something to work on and quit gawking at them beauties.”

Diane Ream is on the radio, speaking through the static about politicians’ bickering, spending increases and tax cuts.

Helen pours a cup of coffee. “Lady sounds like could croak any second.”

It’s a deadpan joke. A mean one, but a joke.

Susan slaps the grit pan. “People die every fucking day, you ungrateful bitch.”

Helen figures most of Ink could do without federal charity if the mill jobs would just come back. She knows they won't and they'll stay as poor as the politicians keep them. Then that old thought: that she would have got out if it weren't for Susan. Helen knew she'd made some sin in her 19 years, but leaving her mama high and dry wasn't going to be one of them. Still, there was always the thought.

Susan fills the salt shakers, topping them with rice kernels. Helen dumps spoonful after spoonful of sugar into the grits. As Diane signs off, Helen thinks it again, *any second now*, and chuckles into grit bowl.

A call on Susan's cell breaks the lull. Her ringer sounds like a rotary phone.

"Sharks, Susan speaking."

When her mother begins pacing and looking to the backyard, Helen already knows.

"Nothing you can do with her?"

Another rescue.

"Shit, you know they ain't just for eggs. They're God's creatures, goddammit. Treat them as such."

She knows her mother can't say no, can't let the birds go to the chicken hawks.

"Ah, fuck, Shirley. How many we talking?"

Susan reloads the coffee machine in the off chance of morning diners.

"They was fighting them?"

Susan nervously wipes the bar.

"That poor baby's never had a chance. We can give him that. He'll be fucked, but I'll speak some sense into his rambunctious ass."

Helen gives her mother the look and Susan waves her off.

“Alright then, Shirley. One of us’ll be around.”

When Susan sets down the phone, Helen speaks into her grits.

“Mama, you think we can take another bird? You know the corn ain’t cheap.”

Helen started going over the bar’s books at 16 after subbing a correspondent Intro Accounting for her high school math requirement. The bar had barely covered costs back then and the margin had only narrowed further in the last two years. Sharks had never put out a paycheck.

“I don’t know what else could happen.”

“It’s been a hot summer. Prices are just going to go higher.”

“These people don’t think. At least the Mexicans eat theirs. Set with chickens. But the roosters. They just make them roosters kill each other.”

“Okay, so why don’t you let the bird go to the Mexicans?”

“Shit, Helen, because it wasn’t raised to be no Mexican’s soup bird. This here’s a Silkie. And there’s the rooster. He’s a full rehabilitation.”

Chapter Five

I found my girl asleep on a couch beneath a box fan, dreaming of frogs. The blades blew water vapor from a bucket, swamping the trailer. She didn't know to call me. She didn't know her might.

"Inés," I said, "you going to learn to sing."

She stirred, turning between the cushion where dead skin and sweat mixed.

"Wake Inés. You 'bout to learn to sing."

She woke, sulking for her frog dreams.

"Learn to remember what's been forgotten."

Her wide eyes looked for angels in the night.

"Learn to sing your wishes. Know what has been sung from my wells."

I felt her heart race. I felt her larynx rumble—a question—but I silenced her.

"Snitch not, my baby. Learn to gossip with true brethren. Know me and deny thy heaven."

I explored her blood, filling the canals, flushing her neck and her face.

"They laid me deep. Up under waters of myself."

I gave her a memory of the valley with cottonwoods on my banks. Blacksnakes hanging from the trees. A bear lumbering from blackberry bush to blackberry bush. A thrush sounding at the offense. I showed her catfish suspended in the air, gills throbbing, then pike and gar with no water and then fallen trees covered in algae. She knew it in the night.

I pressed her chest. She fought for shallow breaths. I pressed. She tried the larynx and I pressed. She cried and I pressed. Blackness closed around her vision and I pressed.

“Know the dam that drowns and constrains.”

I filled her mind with water. The catfish left and the pike left and the walleye lingered with their dead eyes and moonlight teeth.

“I am Kawuatz. I am in the legends and the fears of tremendous women’s bodies.”

I released her breath and she wheezed. Her fingers stirred and her leg twitched.

“Travel with me.”

Her body went rigid when I took her mind to Mena Creek. I showed her the woman they called Old Woman Witch. Her body now sprawled over a rocker. Grey hair blowing in a breeze. Her left eye sprung open. Flies exploring the tear duct. Witch had called for my power. When Witch refused me, I swelled in her arteries until blood spilled over her brain. The Witch had called for my power, but refused my price. Nothing in these mountains is free.

Inés began to shiver.

I told her, “Tremendous women know my name. Know me now. I am Kawuatz.”

Blood ran on her thigh. She reached to her sex and it spotted her palm. When she started to cry, I dried her eyes until they threatened to scab. She knew me from her body and knew me as her body. She stopped trying to cry. And she bled.

“I’ve seen blood soak these mountains. Blood running in torrents turning the clay like berry bursts. My blood has filled the basin. No dam can hold forever. Blood turns wells and spigots. Now, blood rises for recognition. Sing woman, sing Inés.”

Chapter Six

Living with Kawuatz means living in the extremes of power. She waited a couple years after introducing herself at the bus stop to show herself. Kawuatz has no body, so she uses mine. Before me, she used Old Woman Witch. My father said that Old Woman Witch was a real witch who handled all the love and heartache in the mountains. His friends said if you really wanted your lover back, go running to Old Woman Witch. Old Woman Witch was no longer useful to Kawuatz. She had disobeyed, so Kawuatz killed her. I was old enough to tell the difference between a threat and a lesson.

Kawuatz took control of my body. She turned it against me. Then, she took my mind to Old Woman Witch's place just to brag. I was sure I'd be dead that night. Sure that I would never see thirteen. When I tried crying, she pulled all the tears from my eyes. The eye thing didn't hurt nearly as bad as her pressing on my chest and swelling me paralyzed. No doubt, she fucking whooped me.

When she told me she didn't play with girls, I figured I was fucked. That smell of blood mixed with the normal trailer smells of cigarettes, pine sap and sawdust. I figured I was dying like mama did, bleeding out, but faster. It took mama a day and a half.

Kawuatz said, "A woman runs to danger. A woman deals in fear. There is no death, only forgetting."

I deal in memory.

Most the time, living with Kawuatz was easy, especially compared to growing up in Ink. Sometimes she would come weekly and other times she'd wait months. I never minded the company. The older I got, the harder it became to meet *expectations*. That

was the word everyone used. That was probably around the time I started checking doorknobs. I could strip a door and break down a knob in less than ten minutes by age 15. When I got caught, my father would just get sad. It was my tía that had no problem knocking the piss out of me. She slapped me and bounced me on the walls when I fucked up. Always on me about how ashamed my mother would be, how I should just *look* at what I was doing to my father. After I scored a Yankee Screwdriver, I could knock over a knob in 4 minutes. Tía and I had no problems when I was fast.

Kawuatz first taught me to sing love. I spun flings and heartache across Ink. When other kids started getting cars, I sang flat tires and water into fuel tanks. It was a way to even the score. I sang life into my father's truck every week. He'd just puff up thinking like he and his trusty socket set had magically cleared the clogged injectors. Then when I was seventeen, Kawuatz developed this thing for religion. I broke the pulpit at the Baptist Church one Sunday and blew the tent from a tent revival that Saturday night. One day, I figured out how to make the school intercom system play the 97 Beats station for three hours during semester tests. Still, with all the songs and odd requests, I had no clue she would want the fire.

Chapter Seven

I am a spring, a headwater. I am a woman. I am Kawuatz.

I drown in the name of electricity. Before the dam, I meandered. I cut mountains. I pushed logjams. I knew every stream, creek, bayous and brake that joined me on my journey to the brine. I knew wolf, bear, elk, bison and panther. Cottonwoods whispered on my banks. Blacksnakes hung from branches, waiting for a bird to pass their gaping cottoned mouths.

I am both downstream and upstream. You are always downstream.

Before I was I was a spring, I was a woman. Before I was a woman, I was a girl. Before I was a girl, I was a people. My people were downstream people. They travelled south of the land of great onions, following the herds and the earth they made. When these people came upon a great river, they spent two weeks fashioning boats to cross. A great fog descended upon them on the morning of their crossing, but they needed to move. Winter was coming. The herds were moving south.

The banks of that river were covered with summer grape blooms. The people asked in haste. They took too much. With their grape rope stretched between their boats, the group moved across the river. The fog was so thick at the center of the river that people couldn't see one another in the same boat.

The rope broke. The people took too much. They should have waited for the fog to clear. That's why my people came downstream. Many died in the journey. Those who survived were the best paddlers, fishers and navigators. Our ancestors are the strongest,

the smartest, the most lucky and blessed. We carry their lineage. I shape the earth with their blessing.

We passed high bluffs and mountains with great herds of deer. The people of those lands told us to go downstream. We passed great mounds and cleared forests. They told us downstream. We passed a great city on a high bluff. Downstream. As we went downstream, the bluffs disappeared. The old mountains shrunk like our elders. The trees came closer and the waters spilled out into wetlands. The biting insects multiplied thousand-fold. We covered ourselves with mud, like the people there, but we died from fevers. We did not belong to this land, but we knew we were out of season.

To survive my ancestors turned upstream. They climbed from the wetland to the dry forests where so many bears lived. People lived in this land too. These people spoke of a gathering place upstream. A healing place. So we climbed into the hills and, eventually, the mountains. It was the time of the harvest, but nothing had been planted or saved. By this point, we were so few that others supported us through the winter. It was a fat year for them and the bears.

Chapter Eight

A line of cars drive from the mill toward Ink. The drivers wave to you and Condrado as they pass. You and Condrado wave back and remember in silence. Exhaust wheezes from the rusted fluting under the seat. The Green Machine's pipes make a low, tone deaf noise without the muffler or catalytic converter. Condrado fumed when he lost his muffler on the railroad tracks behind Thompson's last year. The railroad caution arm had been stuck down for nearly a year, but everyone took it as an omen when the arm's motor went. County Judge said the money wasn't right to fix it, so it was up or down.

Everyone said, *down, down for sure, with all them boards bound to go out.*

You encouraged it, figured it would be good for shift morale.

"Oh yes," you said, "leave it down and we'll go around."

The pine has been shit for ten years and the prices have been worse. The situation at Thompson's has been good for the churches and Sharks, but little else.

You break the silence. "Twenty seven years in that Decking Yard."

"I was planning on making another ten in them."

You figure Thompson's would have had five years, tops, without this fire.

"Shit, you'll be too old for Decking in five years."

You think of your shaking hand. The throbbing above your left ass cheek. The toenail that grows inward, time and again. If you have to boil any more washcloths for soreness, you'll need a bigger pot. It takes an hour just to move each morning. Gringo shift is out of the question.

Condrado first came to Ink to work lumber in the seventies. He was the first Latino on any shift at the mill so they called him Spanish for a while. When more Latino families came from across the South and Mexico, Thompson's threw them the second shift. Since Condrado had been on first shift for almost twelve years, like you, he figured just he'd keep being the good ole' Salvadorian con los gringos. Most of second shift was Mexican anyhow. Condrado knew one Honduran couple who swore they were from Senora to make things easier.

They called third shift night shift because it went from nine at night until five in the morning, but also because it was an entirely black shift. Nobody dared say black shift like they did gringo shift or how some of the gringos called the second, Mexi-turn. In public everyone just said night shift, which was perhaps worse than calling it black.

As the orders slowed and the prices fell, the Thompson's cancelled third shift and moved Jake and Elbert onto gringo to fill for some retirees. Later, when the second shift manager, Tex, retired, the Thompson's put you up to supervising second. The move almost caused a walkout by the shift. As the senior Latino at the mill, the shift was rightfully Condrado's, but the Thompson's had never had a brown supervisor. Daddy Thompson can't understand anything outside a Black-White South. Thompson Junior was dispatched to the second shift meeting.

"No fue mi decisión y no es," is what he told them with a boot against the locker.

That stayed the walkout, given Daddy Thompson's promised retirement.

Less than a mile from the mill, the smoke presses your nostrils against your nose. The smell is spicy and snot runs into your stubbly mustache. A line of cars slows and stops ahead, stranding the Green Machine in the smoke.

Last night, the big pile was a quarter of a mile long. Now, the smoke chokes you and burns your eyes, throat, and face. You breathe next week's work. That sting is loan payments, child support, food bills and rent. A single cloud twists from the mill's front outlet. The pressboard loading dock drowns beneath a haze. Treatment and all those flammables have burned for sure. The fire is probably melting the belts and brushings on the line, the fucking computers that took over. There's nothing the firefighters can do as smoke punches through one window after another, as glass shatters and metal doors clatter down. Each new orifice feeds oxygen to the flames.

Condrado laughs at his windshield. "Mill's all I had, Rob. Ain't got no line on a manger gig. This is all I fucking had."

You're more fucked than Condrado, but better off in the short-term.

"You know the kids look up to you. With Junior in charge, you were going to go management. Should have been done already."

"Maybe, maybe not. Father to son, white boys look out for their own."

How else would you be where you are? Why not somebody who worked inside? You were just the Thompsons' favorite white boy.

"Figure I can tell you my sorting trick, since shit's burned."

"Gringo-mojo and bullshit."

"Fuck you then. I'll keep it to myself."

When people had pestered you for this, you told them you had to sell your soul like a blues man. You want this reveal to mean something to Condrado. Something that says sorry for the shitty shake he was dealt, for the way you feel. It won't mean anything now that it's all burned up.

“Tell me them pines were shit and you just said some of the shit could pass as peelers. That’s the trick, ain’t it? Bullshit is all we’ve always had ‘round here.”

“I had three fucking seconds to make a call on a whole truckload of pine. Think that’s bullshit? You know how the trucks would always take the turn into the yard real slow? So they wouldn’t hit that sprinkler pole or drag their ass end over that security booth?”

You remember their green secondhand forestry trucks, the short trailers and the big tractor-rigs. The hillbillies and the Salvadorians. Bismarck crews, Gurdon crews, paper mill scraps from Pine Bluff. You had to look past the truck and the crews. Starving people who *needed* plywood prices, only a transmission, an injector or a heart attack away from ruin.

“While they were slugging into the yard, I got a good broadside of their load. That’s how I could see what should go over to plywood.”

You look into the smoke ahead and imagine the gnarled mountain pines, the fat loblollies from bottomlands, the look of them, the half-degree of difference in the bark.

“And how’d you judge the logs, if it wasn’t bullshit?”

The feeling of eyes on you as you walked a few steps toward the peelers or the lumber pile. Sending the truck to David or to Condrado. Making or ruining two days of work on mountains slopes and in bayous. Five of your footsteps doing all of that.

“Shit. I ain’t going to tell you that.”

The fall of faces. The curses from the cabin. Hungry mouths at home. All on you.

“I’m going to say bullshit ‘till I hear otherwise.”

“I couldn’t give two fucks. My paycheck came from that stop between the sprinkler-pole and the rent-a-cops. Thank god for them treehuggers.”

“Fuck it. You make ten on voodoo man seeing through bark, but you get the rest of that forty and overtime on the mojo.”

You can’t help but smile. Condrado loved that word. Fucking mojo.

Chapter Nine

I found her in the night, slipping behind trailers, singing locks and windows open. She's a trickster at heart, but there's so much anger under it all. She'll need to find it before we're done. The moon would rise strong but late that night, so the Milky Way still fought with the trailer park's lights.

“Run.”

She obeyed, singing, taking a well-worn deer trail up the mountainside.

She heard a thicket with berries that popped in purple. She heard kudzu all around. She heard plum and dogwood and hundreds of bats. She heard raccoons and a bobcat and coyote's run. She heard the patter of countless moths who were done eating and fucking like animals, who only lived for beauty in a world sleeping through their show. She ran and sang all night.

I told her to strip at the summit and she bared her sweaty nakedness to the dawn. Shards of shale cut at her heels. Sweat ran down her arms and back and belly. Evaporation left salt on her pitiful breasts and shoulders. I filled the valley with song, showing her Hollow Springs Court, humming until she felt the dew clinging to the trailers. It bubbled like peroxide in a dog bite. The horizon had just reddened but I could already tell that the trailers would cook. I cherish the morning light that beats at shade, sending it over the trailer tops, spreading, unconvinced, until that dimness cowers beneath the rotten and half painted boards of steps and never finished porches.

I sang of a 17 year old man who stood on this ledge, years before she was born. He looked up to a hawk balancing on a thermal draft. He must have thought how fine the

view was for dying. When he heard his mechanized haunting, Thompson's, and he raised his right boot to the rail. Under his left was a rock marked *Joe and Liz 4 Eva*. He must have thought it would be a mess to go like this, that he should add a line to the note using a word like inescapable. Something that said it wasn't the past or even the present of Ink, but the future that convinced him. When he tried to step down, his under-slung heel held to the rail like the tar man's palm on his shovel handle. He was panic rigid, a lever arm in forward rotation. His head clipped the stone above the *4, Joe and Liz* before each retina. He saw the greens of pine and oak and a late bloom of dogwood. The squirrels chattered and an armadillo trumped, never regarding his fall. The hawk aimed for a squirrel spine. His final register was the Ouachita. *Oh yes*, he thought, *our river, our dams, their lights, their lakes, their boats*. He laughed until the pine tops shredded him.

Kawuatz had revealed the suicide in case I needed reminding, but I did not. My father had hurt for years. His friends had ached and went hungry. The kids knew better than to ask. My high school had split the kids who would make it out from those who would stay for the mill. I watched our men surrender to swollen and thankless lives. I watched our women begin surrendering to men. I watched the white kids make a shift and us brown kids make a shift and the black kids realize that their shift had been cancelled. My people were my resolve. I felt the mill rattling as I squared my shoulders on the mountain pass.

We began by remembering the earliest breaths to become trees. Bird songs. Doe bleats. A turkey gobble. Porcupine screams. A beaver's breathy widdling. Squealing rats. A bobcat's hiss and a soprano rabbit. The chatter of bats from a shallow cave. A wolf

bark. A bear's huff and growl. A skunk clapping and whining and smacking her lips from a headstand.

We saw the men who came to cut the hardwoods, men who replanted everything with pine. We remembered the twang that grew the pine. Words that must be sung over again. Smoke makes a cough. We mixed French, Spanish and Caddo words with English, setting those old languages equal to the words of logging and milling and trade. These utterances bounced through the valley, passing the trailers on my breath. We sang words like *awashatasha* to the trailers, not even knowing the words, just thinking of two lines of men made to work. When I thought of my father waking and driving to Thompson's, I sang words like callous and contortion.

This song was the largest that she had ever tried. When her voice began to crack, I moved into her larynx. We filled the holler. The heat was coming. She imagined a blister bursting between two toes in a boot, so she sang. Our words began to collide with one another in the valley. Callous heard band-saw and kerf heard breast. Our words resonated until the valley hummed with our voices. The pairs made lyrics and the lyrics made country songs of horses and gamblers and lovers gone wild, of drinkers and fighters and murders unsolved, of prisoners running and ghosts coming home.

Our voice spilled through the mountain pass and ran down the highway. The songs took form as an Adelita, then as sonnets, and somewhere as a crude joke. They made the mill in minutes and surrounded it. The lightest constituents from each song went first. Short vowels washed over the big pile, the sprinklers soaking it from the heat.

Pen and bed and led and set. Wet made its way into the water, lapping at the sprinkler mouths until the spray couldn't keep up with the vowels.

The bare consonants excited the earthworms. They heard pit and hit and fit, bit and grit and shit. I moved into her face and sang such a string of consonants that her incisors began to push into her lip. Worms shred themselves against the bark. Worm pulp mixed with pine sap. New worms came to the pile, wiggling through their kin. As they slinked, they gorged themselves, shitting a pine mess into their cousins' mouths. Earthworms overran the pine pile. Their flesh coated the logs.

We had held the lits from the chorus. Anxious behind slid and grid. Then the pass filled with them. Lit pushed off hit and fit and the last of the shit. Lit throbbed on the pile, pulsed in the earthworm pulp. I channeled her hatred into lit, through the shortness that the tongue travels from the mouth to the teeth, the off-handedness of the air stream. That hatred raised the worms to a fury.

The lets joined the lits. The two ran through the pile like a saw. The pulp of earthworms and sap coated the pile. Her tongue was a brush, painting the pile with life again. A flash point must happen everywhere and all at once. Their sciences might think of a single place and moment, a single reaction that pushes the pile to burning, but the view is so narrow. We saw the worms raising a blanket of gas. We saw methane rising like peaches from the pile. The molecules left every rotting hole. Logs burped of morning gas. She couldn't tell where it happened, if a lit or a let was responsible for the blaze.

The flashes are not so uncommon at Thompson's. My father called them flaming tree farts. Only those without callouses jump. Five seconds is the line. Five seconds is the

fire point where alcohols evaporate and carbon sublimates. Already hoarse, the thought of my father pushes me. I sang for the thousands who lived in the flash. Who took slung logs and wild saws, broken bones and bloodied skin. The people of the flash who shrugged at a one-second, noticed a two-second, worried after a three and wailed to god with the fourth. The people of the flash.

She pushed the long vowels past the fifth second. Bake and take. Wage, rage and cage. Bite and hide. Fuse, mule and hole. Flames danced as the gasses evolved. Little smolders danced in the worm holes and pine notches. Earthworms dug deep to the rocks where they baked. Snakes writhed away from the mess, slithering to hawk spears. Rats and opossums scurried. A raccoon cat ran with a litter in her mouth. Our consonants had taken their tails.

Chapter Ten

Kawuatz was quiet for a couple weeks after revealing Old Woman Witch. I thought about asking my father to take me to the cabin, to see if there really was a dead lady inside, but there was just no way to ask. The breaks were the scariest part about Kawuatz. That's when I had time to think things out, time to worry about her next visit. I couldn't even fully believe her realness until I started high school. I knew things that I shouldn't and when I sang for something, it happened.

I couldn't tell anyone or ask anyone about hearing a voice, so I went to the library and started looking for others who heard like me. We didn't have anything medical in our school library, so I started reading from the science section. I asked my sixth grade teacher where Science came from, she said Darwin, so I read Darwin. I wasn't a bad reader for my class, but I needed a lot of help. The library had a massive dictionary on a podium by the check counter and that is where I read. I'd look up a word and not even know the words in the definition, so I'd have to look them up too. While I got better with the dictionary and the words, I had trouble with the book. It just seemed so sure and so broad and so proud of how things are.

Since the religious people hated Science, I wandered over to the World Religion section hoping for something better. They had a children's book on Joan of Arc and it said angels told her to greatness. I asked the librarian if I could get more books on *the Joan of Arc lady* and she told me she'd order some from the county library. They found three books, one supposedly from her trial. When I read Mark Twain's book on Joan of

Arc, I was convinced that Kawuatz could be right for me. I asked the librarian for some other books by *this Mark Twain guy*.

When the books came, I wouldn't sleep for days. The librarians loved how much I used the dictionary. I thought they were being mean because they knew more words than me so I made a goal to finish a real book someday without the dictionary at all. I've yet to do so; knowing a word in a book isn't the same as knowing a word. In between book arrivals, I kept reading in the Science section. I had a bug thing for a while, then a tree thing. My favorite part of Darwin's book was the rocks, so I read a lot about rocks too. There were a lot of voices in World Religion, so I stayed there too. I was really into Shiva for a while until I read that Parvati was the power. That made sense to me, so I got a computer pass and printed as much as I could on Parvati. I told the librarian that *Parvati's my girl*. She could wipe our universe in seconds.

I hadn't told anyone about the blood. I went over to a friend's house and swiped a tampon from his mom's cabinet, but I couldn't bring myself to use it. The idea of it just *sitting* there unnerved me. I stuffed my underwear with toilet paper for the first few days and it worked because there wasn't much blood. I knew this was coming. Girls around the park said the first girl to get a period in her grade would be the first one with a baby. That meant 13 or 14. The boys thought a period meant you were ready to fuck around which I never have. I ripped off a pocket rocket for getting off.

I started using shirts for my periods, cutting them into strips. Women's shirts were often too thin and a lot of the men's shirts smelled of cigarettes or were dirty. I learned that a good thick shirt was ideal. Winter was my primary hunting season. Old broken in flannels were choice, but sweater material would do. I realized that the best scouting time

was between three and five, when the kids ran the park. I'd sneak around the backside of the trailers and work the lock to get inside. Whereas curiosity encouraged my doorknob skills, necessity made me mean on a lock. My winter quota was twenty-five solid shirts by April.

It was hard to keep my secrets but most of my friends were boys from the park. I could never tell them anything about Kawuatz or the period. May and Helen were my best girlfriends, but I couldn't tell them either. We were at that age where we mostly talked about whatever the teeny magazines were writing. We'd spend hours at the Piggly Wiggly after school, reading to each other and debating each article and graphic like we were posh and spoilt and weren't too poor to put together five bucks between the three of us. They'd let us come in either way, knowing we couldn't put it together because because Helen's mom ran Sharks.

The third time Kawuatz visited, I was in Science class. Mr. Landrum was talking about states of matter. I had read all of that before. Suddenly, I saw three mountains. I knew the feeling of bones as the body goes pulpy. This was the moment that Kawuatz had turned into a spring. I hadn't known that Kawuatz was a spring or thought of the possibility, but at that moment, I simply knew.

I knew that one mountain was to the west and I recalled it like a sunset, and I recalled the mountain to the east like a sunrise. The third, to the north, I remembered as Ida. I knew that these mountains had new names. I knew they were a part of the Ouachita range and that most were called by English words, but I also knew that these were names put on the mountain by people hoping to guide strangers and colonizers. I had never

considered the naming of things, but then I remembered how bears name a mountain and how beavers name the creeks.

Just like I knew that Kawuatz was a spring, I also knew that these mountains were linked and that erosion was their voice. I remembered hearing the songs of these mountains that told of their rise from coastline to sky. I remembered listening in the valley during slow rains, hearing the sediment song roll down their faces over me. I remembered hearing their elegy of the coastline and the sea breeze. The mountain sediment sang of their time as a cove and how the manatees grazed between them.

I remembered Kawuatz running. Her two sisters were nearby, looking for the late season ramps. I knew that the mountains kept this valley in Spring and skipped the summer into Fall. I knew that there was a small grove of trees in the center of the valley and that the rainwater ran to them. I remembered the dryness of the valley, the sand that the mountains and their sediment had sheltered. Then, I remembered watching Kawuatz's oldest sister leap from a Chestnut log in joy after spotting the first bunch of ramps. I remembered the jealousy of losing the first ramp sighting to a sister. I recalled the shock of watching silt rise around an oldest sister's feet like dust should for a runner but carrying on like a smokestack until it reached her full height. I remembered looking to Kawuatz's middle sister and feeling the rage at her running in fear. I recalled watching the spring making silt engulf her and make her into a dribbling pool by the face of Sunrise. I remembered Kawuatz tracing the foot prints of her oldest sister, feeling the face of the Chestnut against her soles. I remembered how she leapt into the air, spreading her arms like hawk's wings to fly to the far edge of the valley.

I remembered Kawuatz as a spring against the Mountain Ida feeling for the water at her roots. For that moment, I was her and we remembered the first shout of our waters, how it ripped a trough in the silt, moved past the dribble and pooling of our older sisters. We remembered leaving the valley that they'd call Three Sisters, encouraged by the runoff from the mountains and foothills. We ran up creeks and rivers, met with hundreds of lesser springs who pledged allegiance to us. We rolled as a river to the sea. I know they call our song the Ouachita now, but that river is only the lazy echoes of our beginning.

After a couple miles, I crossed the National Forest trail. The opening was such a surprise that I kept running for a few strides before a stuttered stop. From there, I took the trail to the summit. The pines smelled but with such intensity that it almost burned my nose.

I was covered in sweat by the summit. The sun was just starting to rise.

Our trailers have always been more than homes. I saw them as monuments to something, twenty eight toppled obelisks clinging to something close to coolness. Every summer morning they wake wanting for anything but the heat, wanting like hounds looking for blood or a fuck on the breeze. No matter. The shade and the coolness will always return.

Chapter Eleven

The Sheriff Deputy working the fire stops first shift in the highway a half-mile from Thompson's. The engine crews back into containment positions. One crew lights a small backfire along the train tracks that sent lumber to yards outside of Dallas and Kansas City. A whooshing sound overwhelms the fire's heat and the smoke irritation in the body.

A helicopter dumps sand where the big pile was stacked. The dirt pops and hisses as the engines try to flood the area. The Deputy walks to the first truck and tells the driver, Jake, that he can drive a quarter of a mile and get a look, but then must evacuate past the roadblock three miles back toward Ink. The deputy figures the workers have earned the right to pay their respects alone. He tells Jake to wait until everyone knows the drill and goes from driver to driver.

When he returns the Deputy reminds Jake, "Quarter mile, or both our asses."

When Jake returned, he drove past the Deputy and his crew sweat-drenched and sobbing between coughs. It was the same for every truck and car that returned and after the third the Deputy began to cry too. Everyone would just say the smoke got to them.

First shift always took lunch at Sharks. Helen and Susan didn't mind if people bought food or beer, or if they just came by. The electric was on either way. Years ago, when Jake worked third shift, Sharks had a breakfast and beer menu for the crew. Susan hadn't got pregnant with Helen yet. While the bar did good business on three shifts, Susan couldn't get the money quite right to hire help, so she worked all three, opening at 5 and closing at midnight or later. People tipped heavy knowing that.

This on his mind, Jake drives back to the Terraced Heights Complex, the nearly all black, subsidized units between Ink and Story. After showering and changing out of work clothes, he starts knocking on doors. He starts with the old timers, men and women who asked him to come in and take a seat before he could begin. He'd tell them that the Complex wasn't the place for a discussion. Everyone head to Sharks, he'd say. There was a wake to be had.

The old women tell their men to go raise sons and daughters from their beds. They tell Jake, that they'll throw something together. When Jake knocks on his fourth door, an old man answers in church clothes and tells Jake everyone knows but the hosts. He tells Jake he's going to call his cousins down at Whole Hog about bringing out some trays. He said not to worry, that the money would get straight.

A few of the first shift trucks were already at Sharks when Jake arrives. Jeff, Sean and Darryl hadn't gone inside. There was no right way to tell Helen and Susan, so they leaned against their truck beds in overalls and work shirts, the smell of smoke overwhelming yesterday's pine scent. While they had driven here out of habit, like Jake, they had never worked third shift, didn't know how to come off third shift, like Jake did, because they were white. They were proud of that fact too, especially Darryl. They stare as Jake parks. They stare at his skin and they stare at his clothes.

"You brining a revival with you," Sean asks.

"Boys, we going to bring some food around and be together on this."

"Who's we?" Darryl asks, his drawl accentuated as if to say hate.

"Fuck that off, today, all right?"

Jeff, the oldest of the group, his beard gnarly and gray, nods to Jake.

“If you ain’t got something nice, Darryl, then shut the fuck up,” Jeff said.

While Jeff’s age was respectful, so was his frame and fight record in this parking lot.

Clearly pleased, Jeff looks back to Jake. “What we doing here?”

“I went on home, to the Complex, and told folks there what had happened.”

“Good thinking. Sean, Darryl: get cleaned up and tell your people to do the same.”

“Just so y’all know, they trying to get Whole Hog to bring some lunch plates down, but people are trying to throw a little together too.”

Jeff pulled at his beard. “I’ll go by Whole Hog and tell them we’ll get them some money together. My cousin works over there. We’ll do right by them. Black, white, green, they’ve got good eats.”

“That sounds good. And thank you Darryl and Sean. Before you go, Jeff, I’m going to need some help telling Susan.”

“Fuck, man, that’s what we was doing out in this parking lot.”

“You don’t think she can see y’all? Think she can’t smell all this smoke?”

“Yeah, but nobody *told her* yet. Guess that’s us.

Chapter Twelve

The sirens raced inside my heartbeat, tripping up its rhythm. Otherwise, I could have slept right there in the rocks. I began to worry, sure that the fire would hurt someone, if it hadn't already. Kawuatz saw the world as restrictive. Killing Old Woman Witch was a simple action that let her move to me. The same with burning the mill. My veins swelled as the fire took off.

Ink and its people were never passageways for me. I felt held down, but not because I wanted to go somewhere else. Everybody else had their people at school. They bonded over calling me freaky and trashy. It's hard to forgive people for words like those. When I was younger my best girlfriends, Helen and May, were white. That didn't mean anything beyond the fact that they were white girls until Middle School. My father had Robert, an old fat white guy and I saw how a few other kids had white friends, so I didn't think anything of it.

By the 8th grade Valentine's Dance, I had started to get the picture. When May moved to Little Rock that year, I thought Helen and I would be thick. I hadn't told her about the singing, but I had sung around her before. She ditched me at the dance when I started singing couples into love. She said I was *ate up*. I took it as a compliment. I thought she was saying I was full of life or smarts or something like that. She moved to the snot kid table the next week and I looked up ate and then eat in the library, just to be sure. I was sure she knew something about Kawuatz and that she would tell my father or her mother about the voice. I thought about cars rusting out.

My father noticed right away. I had hidden the crying from him and tried distracting myself with padlocks. He asked why I never went into town to Helen's anymore. I told him I liked the woods around the park. He thought woods were healing. I told him I had been reading a lot about the plants and the animals around which was true. He loved that, told me to study up and be a scientist someday.

I wanted free of Ink but I didn't want to leave. Singing that fire freed me. For years, I had watched kids leave town. A few ran to the community colleges. Some ran further, to four year schools around the state. More signed up to fight a war nobody understood. Men and women learned to fight young in Ink. Pay and benefits made it worthwhile.

When these people came home for rare weekends and holidays, they read Ink in a way that reminded them to study harder or to stay by base or to get a job that wasn't lumber. They looked at Ink's temp workers. They looked at our unemployed and those who hung around and played with drugs. They heard our hustles and silly rivalries. They heard the rhymes and the new bands. They shook their heads at how we clung to what we could: the shit pay and no health care, the race hate and woman beating, the broken down trailers and crooked cops. Everyone made excuses and nothing changed.

I won't apologize for doing something.

Kawuatz teaches that songs destroy and create, that the two are inseparable. Ink sings like that too. My mother died and I was born. The mill made jobs and trees were cut. The computers made jobs somewhere and we lost jobs in Ink. As my father and his friends made lumber to build houses, their bodies were broken down.

Singing love was like a doorknob. The grades at Ink Middle School were small, so I knew everyone decently well. Still, for love to pass between two people, I had to really watch them. I could make any two people fall in love if I watched them long enough. When I would find a passage, I could explore it. I'd just hum it out right there in the hallway or the basketball courts or wherever.

Mrs. Snodgrass told me that Ink was a judging town and that nothing was determined. She said we inherit hate in Ink. We see color and homes when we should see people. I tried to remember the things Mrs. Snodgrass taught me because she had been to 37 different states and to Mexico and Honduras and because she read so many books. I could make any two fall in love when I could sing judgment out from between them. One could tell the other that he or she felt that heaviness that wears you out but still keeps you awake for days. Most just needed to see what's so wonderful about another person.

When I got decently good with doorknobs and locks as a kid, I thought about electric switches for a while. It's funny how crude most electric things are. A switch is almost the opposite of a doorknob. Nothing passes the box until the contacts close. Same thing with the sockets: until the plug is in, other than a few sparks, nothing happens.

Kawuatz's first electric lessons were just simple things. Questions mainly. She'd ask how the power lit the room. How a stove cooked. How a fan turned. Why the water could be hot or cold. I tried cheating: I asked my father and my friends, but their answers were never good enough for Kawuatz.

I had to promise my teachers that I wouldn't read library books in class, until my worksheets were in. I had my own library pass near the worksheet tray. When I started asking about appliances, Mrs. Snodgrass ordered me Home How To books from the

VoTech library. She read a lot about sewing, *Threads*, *Sew News*, *American Patchwork* and made her own dresses and kids' clothes. I'd always try to mention how pretty the fabric or the pattern was and she'd say I was *the sweetest little thing*. I never wore dresses and she never asked why, but I'm sure she noticed that my tee shirts were wrinkled and that I tried to wear my favorite pair of blue jeans every day.

The *Home How To* books had disassembly and reassembly instructions. I was always getting shocked, even with the books. Everything always said to flip the breaker switch but our place had glass plugs. They looked a lot like light bulbs with a wire in the center, but they were clear and didn't glow.

Love and breakups and flat tires could be messy, but the fire song left me hoarse and hollow and shaking against the bark of a scraggly mountain pine.

Kawuatz called me deserving. She told me to explore the song and relish it.

I ran through the long vowels in my lowest octave and little peaks rose on different edges of the lake. They looked so much like ripples that I almost missed them, but my song doesn't move with things like the wind. Little peaks popped up when I cycled through the consonants in this octave. I ran through the group in reverse and the pool began to swirl.

After switches Kawuatz asked how radios work and I spent eight months trying to answer. The police reported a rash of thefts in the park and searched pawn shops for the units. No amount of humming could feel them out. I broke unit after unit trying. I buried them all in the dirt behind the trailer skirt next to the locks and menstrual shirts. I fucked up by thinking of radios like light switches, the opposite of doorknobs. I had to start over and think about signals.

Mrs. Snodgrass found another Votek book in Hot Springs. She wore her red plaid dress. I told her I liked the ribbon around the top and she said it was called a ruffle. I told her she looked like a queen in ruffle and we smiled. I didn't smile with people much. I ran over and looked up ruffle in the dictionary. When the books came in they showed me how to think about inputs and outputs and frequency.

I followed the first pattern of notes in the pond, taking my voice higher as I went. The current swirled and rose as the frequencies went higher. A little sound spilled out of a mountain pass and rocks fell near a beaver dam. I stopped, startled, but Kawuatz crawled into my voice and I continued to sing. She had always asked before joining me in the past.

We sang a low consonant vowel and the current knocked down its peak near a recent clear cut. We fluttered a vowel between high and low octaves. The current wiggled down a dry creek bed and I laughed at the silliness of the shape. We sang in my highest octave, cycling and cycling until the current was a set of rapids. We sang peaks and troughs. We pulled a runner that rose like a fountain and splashed into the valley, knocking a deer feeder off a stand. Corn scattered and a rat chased kernels into a snake hole. We sang a hole by a cedar and the fabric filled it. We sang the hole deeper, uprooting the cedar. The hole rose like a bubble. Cedar boughs and roots and dirt hovered inside.

I sang from David's story:

“Cuando él abra, nadie cerrará, cuando él cierre, nadie abrirá.”

I chanted the line and the sounds foamed. Something formed above the pool but fell apart as mists. Songs of David were not meant for my pool, so I sang of Kawuatz instead.

“Cuando ella abra, nadie cerrará, cuando ella cierre, nadie abrirá.”

The chant made key holes and I sang at them in my highest octaves. The voice guided the sirens into the tunnels. The closer they came to the mill, and to me, the higher their octaves. Despite my lightheadedness, I squealed, clenching my hands into fists. I needed the sirens. When their sounds filled the key tunnels, the bubble fell into place. I smelled the cedar as it unlocked.

The pool parted in the valley. At first just an ass crack, then a split log. The hard sounds stayed on the western side and the soft sounds moved to the east. A thread rose from the soft sounds. I thought Kawuatz was singing, but she said I had raised the stored sounds, that I was ready.

I thought of switches and lines of flux and sang hard g's and c's. My voice dried the center line of my tongue. The pulsing stops braided the strings. It looked like a tangled rat-nest in my worst morning hair. The valley rose until the remaining hard and soft sounds flopped like shoelaces. Turkey's scattered from their roost.

The ends splayed from one another, repelled by some nature of their own, pulling the knot in two directions. One moved to me and the other toward the mountain pass. I heard the mill boss, Daddy Thompson speaking with three other men. I only recognized Daddy Thompson and his son Junior. I'd always heard how he did right by people. Another was Charles Rodriguez, a Little Rock lawyer. The third was a man from Dallas

that Daddy Thompson had called Sanders. I felt Daddy Thompson's fear and regret when this man spoke.

Sanders bought the mill when it was underwater a few years before. He had the connections with lumber buyers to keep it running, but he needed people fired. When Kawuatz revealed things to me, I would just know. It was like a hunch with details. Nobody other than management knew of Sanders in Ink, and Ink was a town of names.

I wished that my song could reach Dallas and bring Sanders to the mill like this speakerphone had. He should answer for trying to fuck us. I wished that Daddy Thompson hadn't sold us or managed us at all. I wanted for my father's anger, for the way he fought like a dog, moving from the air to the dirt. When I screamed both ends of the ribbons came to me. The hard and soft consonants met my fists. The two other ends left the spool through the pines and the dogwoods. The valley stopped to take note as the twist passed. Kawuatz had not been seen like this for hundreds of years.

My threads splayed to explore Daddy Thompson's ears and nose and eyes and mouth. I felt his nausea. I thought his scattered confusion. He told Junior to take over. He sat in a cold metal chair, saying the whole mess had given him the indigestion. He said the air conditioning was too goddamn cold. He thought he belonged in a lumber mill. I tasted his long cut chew. I understood his nighttime hemorrhoids. He resisted the urge to scream. When he knew I wasn't indigestion, he stood and fell through a line of the metal chairs.

Twine entered his ventricles, meeting at the tricuspid valve. His heart sac filled with song and blood. His son blubbered and shouted. Junior kept asking, *Dad* and *where exactly it hurt*. The lawyer shouted at a phone in Spanish and English. When I realized

what was happening, I shouted words like kudzu, petunia, cigarette and fern. The song came back and twisted me. I warmed as it dragged me to the edge of Balancing Faces. I understood Old Woman Witch.

Daddy Thompson screamed that he'd thrown a disk again. Junior wanted to believe that, so he did. The lawyer even said it to Emergency Services on the phone. As his blood went stagnant, Daddy Thompson knew me and Kawuatz. His spit was on my face. His inspiration cooled my ear. He told Junior that he was sorry, that the mill was what he wanted to leave, that *Ink was meant to be a mill town. God's will*, he said, as Junior lifted his feet into a chair.

I cried and went snotty like Daddy Thompson. I gurgled as he died. When the voltage hit Daddy Thompson's corpse, my yarn of song unfurled and twisted like a double-dutch line. Two men ask for a DNR and a Power of Attorney. Junior laid on the floor near his father, held from his body by one of these new men. Daddy Thompson's sternum cracked, three ribs dislocated in the struggle. The second time the voltage hit his corpse, it knocked me to my knees. His heart cells shuttered to life. A tiny contraction and blood began to move. The white blood cells had never stopped their work in the lymph.

I knew that this song must take a life. I can't remember the words, just that I screamed a desperate babble. The strings wound toward Daddy Thompson again. They balled up and twisted. I thought of good murder and how my father broke a man's nose with his brow at work. He had called my father a spick. When my father came home, almost fired and still bloody, he told me that we can fight or get beat on. The slack met

Daddy Thompson in the floor. His heart sac ruptured. The strings came apart above the valley, mixing condensation with the ash. Campfire Lye fell on the pines.

Chapter Thirteen

Susan's phone hasn't stopped ringing since the fire engines passed through Ink. Regardless of her loud religious skepticism, she gets calls from the preachers at Stone Creek Baptist Church, Briar's Cut Missionary Baptist Church, Word A'Flame Primitive Baptist Church and the Holy Ghost Tent Revival. She even gets a ring from Father Rory at St. John's Catholic.

She's got one act for all the ministers:

"You know Sharks got beer, coffee, whiskey and pool. And, of course, mine and Helen's *fine dining*. Only thing I know for certain 'bout today is that I've got two Silkies and a Rooster coming over for the rescue. We all ain't so different from chickens you know. Come on over and we'll figure it out it. Who am I telling? Y'all preach about the flock."

Jeff, Darryl and Sean's showing up at Sharks didn't surprise Helen or Susan. Neither woman expected the two to come inside. Parking lots and tailgates had always suited their country crew. They'd spit a puddle of tobacco juice and smoke god knows how many cigarettes between their drinks inside. There was always lot of chest puffing and talk out there, but fights were less common than their posturing suggested. They'd make the occasional brawl spectacular so the retellings could nourish any urges in between.

Jake showing up in khakis and a button up was noteworthy, but it was the time he spent with Darryl and Sean that really threw Susan.

"Hey, Helen, what you know about Darryl and Jake?"

“Don’t get along.”

“Yeah, everybody knows that. They out there talking something over.”

“Well, mother, you need me to go ask if we should to sell tickets?”

“Cut the shit. I’m just trying to figure out what the hell’s going on. This fucking day.”

Susan watches the men’s hands. Darryl has always started with a strong left hook. He’d hold it in his back pocket to ready his swing. Jake never swung first. He’d usually shift between his heels, feigning nervousness, to duck anything thrown his way. He’d follow with a headbutt and an uppercut. But with Darryl flapping his hands and Jake waves him away, Susan gets back to erecting folding tables with Helen. When the trucks tear out of the parking lot, Helen looks out.

“Jeff and Jake headed in.”

Regardless of the mill, Susan had committed to maintaining her usual manners, for *comfort and regularity*, as she had put it to Helen.

“Jeff, you look like shit as usual, so no matter. Jake, my man, you sure look good when somebody’s dead.”

“We got some hard news on the mill, mam. Burned this morning.”

“Shit. Is that what you boys were on about out there?”

Jeff sighs. “Yes. I told the boys to run back and tell their folks to come on down for some barbeque and drinks and maybe a little news of things.”

“I’ve been telling folks to come round too. Jake, I appreciate you hooking up Whole Hog. They called me already and said they’re bringing out a pig.”

“We didn’t know if you knew anything or not.”

“Course I fucking did. People got gossip they want known? They call me.”

Whole Hog Pig Out backs their smoker trailer as close to Sharks as they dare then pull out a shade awning. Four men open the pig warmer and start chopping. They had left a sign at their smoke house saying that they and the pigs would be working Sharks for the day. Whole Hog at full speed—with two men on table-sized chopping block, and a third on a griddle and burner set for cracklings and sides—was a show unto itself. You couldn’t call their operation industrial, though they had a tee shirt that read “Henry Ford ain’t got nothing on them Hog Boys.” Their art was performance and mania. Sure, a job needed doing, but the hog crew, as they called themselves, took to the task with a religious fervor. The choppers bragged that they hit so hard, so often that they had to keep a plane in the trailer to even the wood.

A St. John’s van delivers a group of older women from Hollow Springs Court. They tote paper bags filled with tortilla chips. Grease balloons in the fiber to run like kerosene in shower water. They lift watermelons over their shoulders and perch them on their hips and nuzzle them into their stomachs and cleavages. Candy, who ran a tamale pickup or delivery service out of her kitchen, grips a tall, five gallon bucket packed with tamales. She jokes with the Hog Boys as she unloads her husked wonders into their warmer box. Maria carries a box of still-needed nopales, cut from the park that morning. Sarah waddles with her massive clay pot of frijoles. Her son, Eddie, hugs a basket of rice.

When the women come into Sharks there are hellos and how’s so and so’s, but nothing more. Maria sets the large box onto the table and asks Susan for as many sharp knives as she has.

“Filets do you any good?”

“Yes, it’s okay.”

The women run their blades down the faces of the nopal ears. An ear flies to the side. *Too dark*, someone says. The blades sever aureole and spine from the pads. Knife tips exact glutinous strands of cactus pulp that break and hang to the steel until their weight pulls them to Earth.

Susan and Helen break the silence by dragging chairs across the linoleum. For the wives of Ink’s mill men, Sharks is the place that exacts too large of a cut from husbands’ and sons’ paychecks to get them drunk and bloodied and fucked. The men slink back in morning reeking of the trinity. Helen’s paternity was a constant gossip point among Inkers. While Susan said Helen’s dad was a piece of shit ex in Little Rock, Robert was probably the only Inker who believed that.

Susan was fresh to town and single when she opened the bar on her mother’s life insurance. On Shark’s opening day, Robert brought his shift down to “support the local infrastructure.” That was almost twenty years ago. Susan could still wear a size five in Levi’s. Robert was always big, but his chest, shoulders and stomach were more solid. He had the neck of a man who carried logs on his shoulder. His shift crew joked that he could undress a tree load with his eyes, could tell if the wood was meant for plywood or lumber. They begged for his secret and he waved them off, buying a round of beers. Susan served Robert last. She asked if he had judged her yet. The room stalled. His eyes were the color of denim, so dark they looked hard. It didn’t really matter what he said.

“You know you’re beautiful. You don’t need a mill man’s eye for that.”

Robert and his wife Sheri were separated by the time he and Susan started fucking. Nobody around Ink had the decency to tell Susan that Sheri and Robert had always had a month by month type of relationship. When Susan started to show, Robert built a bar height baby chair, cutting circles, triangles and squares from the sides. He joked that the chair “would give Baby something to learn other than drunks.”

Ink’s women still watch their husbands when they mention Helen, Susan or Sharks. They figured Robert would own up, if Helen really was his. He spent his weekends at the bar, sober, teaching Susan how to work on the old gas lines and plumbing. One Sunday he motivated most the men around the park to erect a pole barn over Susan’s leaky RV behind the bar. They pulled timbers from a fallen barn and metal from a trailer fire. She had been patching the roof with tar for months.

Susan walks behind the bar to phone her friends and businesses around town. Helen keeps putting the chairs under tables while the older women keep quiet. They replace their worries with the nopal needles. Susan runs out of minutes by the eighth call and Jake tosses her his phone.

“Have to buy a hundred minutes a year just to keep the phone. Don’t even use the damn thing.”

Susan calls the fire dispatch to tell the engines, the churches to shame them into transport, the ice cream shop and the farm stand to tell them that Candy and Whole Hog had shut down to run out of Sharks. Susan calls the school and talks to the Superintendent about sending the school buses to the bar. When she says the school legally requires

parental request, Susan tells her the school will be covered up with calls. The Superintendent caves out of laziness.

Nobody set a time, but a line of trucks, cat-backed and muffler free, leaves the hollers at five until noon. Thompson retirees ride with their sons, first shift workers until today. Old women who pulled a real town out of a lumber camp mind their eyes, their chins and their shoulders. Young men and women who worked their final shift just yesterday drive taller trucks and louder trucks. Forever judged as rednecks, racists and backward hicks, few knew unemployment or this new word, unemployable.

Packed minivans, cars and trucks come from Hollow Springs Court. A few church vans come too. They are loaded with children and mothers, aunts and grandmothers. Their men needed a minute.

The ministers drive large handicap vans from the Complex filled with the old and the diabetic. When they unload, the ministers ask for addresses of other people who couldn't make it down and could use a little help. At least ten people say my mama or my auntie or my daddy or grandpa would sure love to be here. And the ministers start taking addresses and ask that people call ahead and let their relatives know.

The cars from the Complex are full. Men wear slacks and button down shirts. Shoes show fresh shines. A few older women wear summer hats. Many wear dresses or skirts. Third shift might have been cancelled years ago, but this fire hurts across color.

The people bring guacamoles packed with red onions and garlic, cilantro wafting from their wrists and their collars and their braids. They come with vinegar slaws made

from heads of cabbage lopped from the earth that morning. Carrots, mustard greens, collard greens and poke salad have been shred into the mix. Radishes are sliced thick.

They come with pounds of chicken. Legs, wings, breasts, livers, gizzards and hearts fried in tall cast irons with bacon grease and lard. All from yardbirds slaughtered and brined by those who shuttered at industrial chicken houses. They carry cornbreads made from coarse ground meal that advertise inherited cast iron shapes and greases.

They've plucked produce from their gardens. Some chilies are deep bowls and others are skinny bulbs; there's green serranoes, orange habaneros and dark jalapenos, all hot like the summer. They've brought corn in husks to be thrown on a grill grate naked; there's a paste of cotija cheese, mayonnaise, cream, cilantro, garlic and lime for the slathering. Some tomatoes are meaty and most are sweet, many small, some round, some oval and some large like small melons. They bring whole onions and wide bunches of greens for braising. There are slivers of fiber for cooking in lime or vinegar.

Women spread tablecloths from home over the burns and scratches in the table plastic. The room looks like a fair. Sharks hasn't been full like this since the eighties, when the computers first came to the mill, when workers came from shifts, smelling of pine sap and diesel fumes, covered in sawdust and sweat salt. Ten years later, when they started coming in pairs, they spoke of OSHA and surprise inspections. They said nothing was a surprise. OSHA wanted to deal with big players. Small mills were one more stop, one more mill town.

Dishes line the length of the bar, three rows deep. In the kitchen, twenty hands chop melons into quarters and tomatoes into slices. Okra chunks and potato strips fly,

mostly landing in a deep fryer that roars with grease on the aluminum backsplash where the previous owners had carved the Virgin Mary with a burr grinder.

Susan drags a metal trashcan around the kitchen.

“Scraps and seeds for the ladies,” she sings, “Ladies club’s out back.”

The bin fills in minutes. When Susan dumps it into the yard, only the slinging of knife blades could rival the fit of feathers. The older women begin to flick, scrape, kick and throw seeds and stems and skins in the back door’s general direction. Susan pulls the mess into the yard with a hard rake. Squirrels and crows arrive to run and hop, bark and squawk, singing of a feast with the chickens.

Chapter Fourteen

You reach into the pocket of those fade Wranglers to dig out your square Nokia. It's held together by three tabs of Duct Tape. The speaker has been out for years, forcing you to use the speakerphone for phone calls, essentially eliminating the time you spend on the phone. The excuse alone would keep you from upgrading, but you're also grandfathered into the time when the company couldn't force people to buy minutes. No way in hell you're doing that. You break the silence with Condrado.

"I'm gona give her a call."

"Sheri?"

"No, my fucking mother. Yes, Sheri."

Condrado huffs.

Sheri's strong accent fills the truck when she picks up the line at Johnson's, where she works as an official secretary and an unrecognized accountant.

"Johnson's Window and Siding, this is Sheri."

Sheri's inflection makes it a question. Siding sounds like "exciting" without an e.

"Sheri, it's Rob."

"Rob? Jeff called about an hour ago and said they've closed down 227 'cause a fire at the mill. What's—"

"Yeah, Condrado came and got me. Fire started sometime overnight."

"What happened to the sprinklers? It ain't even been that hot yet."

"Nobody knows nothin'. We're in the truck, just left the mill."

"How's it look?"

“Gone.”

There was a very un-Sheri like pause.

“They think you didn’t cross a tee somewhere?”

“They might. That’d be my first guess, if I were the Thompson’s.”

“You talk to them yet?”

“No. Ain’t tried neither.”

“Anything you can think of? Anybody hurt?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Anybody hur—”

“God-damn, Sheri. Not that I know of. We can talk when I know anything.”

“Don’t get short with *me* Robert. This is serious.”

“I know that.”

“Why did you call me?”

“I just figured I should. Let you know and all.”

“Well, you’re so considerate. Try not to be yourself for half-a-second. People are over at Sharks. We should go and bring something. I’ll pick up a pie or something on the way over.”

“Okay. I’ll go back by the park, get cleaned up and ride over with Condi and Inés.”

Condrado won’t say anything until you do. He’ll have a hell of an opinion but won’t say a thing until asked.

“Could have gone better.”

“Could have gone worse, buddy. Y’all will find a groove again.”

“Yeah. We always seem to. Just to fall out again.”

“That’s love man. Getting it and losing it. At least you ain’t got no kids in the mix. Blessing as they are, a little simplicity goes a long way.”

You and Sheri had fallen in and out for twenty years now and she had a go-bag packed the whole time. That’s just your normal, which is something. About five years ago, y’all had this idea that stability was what you needed, that a kid would somehow make things solid between the two of you. You two tried it all. You were taking cold showers and wearing boxer shorts for the sperm. Both of you quit smoking for the eggs. There was a fertility chart on the wall with a week with FUCK! written across the days in bold letters. While you might not have thought it possible in your twenties, there is certainly such a thing as too much sex in your fifties.

“How’s things between you and Inés?”

“It’s hard.”

“Getting better or worse?”

“Just getting different.”

“Councilor helping?”

“They cut that. Medicaid says they’ll cover it through the school, if the school does something with a test and a doctor. I took her in to the doctor, Dr. Parrot, real nice lady who seemed to understand the trauma the girl’s been through. Her meeting me probably only underscored the issue. Test fucked her. Said she was above average.”

“You do good with what’s thrown at you. It’s hard for a kid to grow up these days. Jobs being what they are. Drugs ain’t just grass. Shit just kills. Kids are shits on the computer too. Bully kids worse than beating on them and teachers can’t do nothing.”

“That school ain’t good for her either. She’s smart, Rob, real fucking smart. Don’t know who she gets that from. Fucking weird too. I love her and accept her and all that. I know she ain’t going to have no boyfriend and I know she ain’t going to be her mama. Took me a while to come to terms with that shit, but I did it.”

“I know. Losing Anna, that’s hard. Hard for anyone who knew her too. Temptation is to fill that hole. Probably ain’t ever going to leave us. Little surprising what she says and does, but a little change is refreshing.”

“I’m damn glad she ain’t like the rest of us. I don’t want her having to work her ass off every day for jack.”

“Man, it’s never been great, but with this mill down, we about to get sober.”

Chapter Fifteen

They keep coming, bearing chocolate pies with meringues. They palm cobblers made from peaches, crumbles made with apples, pecan tasties and sweet potato pies. They come with furrowed brows and redone makeup, newly shaved and with searching eyes. They have shut down businesses and taken off work. They have called grown children who never planned to return to Ink, just to tell them of a burned mill. They have prayed and worried, sighed and tidied at the clutter spots and junk drawers which have stayed undisturbed for decades.

Susan walks around the room with eight longnecks in each hand, two racked between each finger. People take a bottle and twist or pry the tops themselves, using keychain bottle openers, keys or pocket knives. Carl tries to lighten the mood by prying the cap off with his teeth. Sean one-ups him, opening the beer with his eye socket.

“Pay at the bucket,” Susan tells everyone who indulges.

Helen had placed a large trashcan at the end of the bar’s buffet. She and Susan trust people to figure their bills and make right on their own.

Walking the room, Susan catches snippets of old stories. Here the rupture of a water line, here a catfish that tipped the canoe, there an old man that could hold a twelve pound sledge straight out, of pool hustlers and pawn shops, hot rods and better times, and, at table after table, the only way to make cornbread. Over time, Ink’s tales have blended together until names and story uncouple. They have all become Ink.

The worn bodies become feisty women and proud men again, living those big stories with unaffordable wagers. Susan can see the twenties placed under two shot

glasses by the bar again. She predicts the hustles and anticipates the sheepish call of the hustled. She yearns to say it: “What’s the flavor?”

Once, workers made lines on the pine-stripped bar from canned Bud heavies with cheap bourbons neat. Susan can’t remember when it turned to Wild Turkey and Johnny Red. Susan’s Ink became Helen growing into a bartender herself, overfilling glasses for extra tips. All at once, workers were old bodies slumped on barstools. The best darts crew in South Arkansas—Emanuel, Joe, Marti, Jose, Dan, Elbert and Mike—took their seats last November after a barcode reader sorted the lumber faster than their gloved and glove-calloused hands ever could. Susan hasn’t seen them play a cricket game since.

Daddy Thompson, the mill boss, said those workers OSHA labelled as “at-risk” had to go. Burt, they said, was at risk of being sucked into the circle saw during pre-cut alignment. The barstools said “at risk” meant “risky for fucking idiots.” Susan figured everyone was at risk when the robots got cheap enough. Daddy Thompson called safety “our pansy society’s guilt trip,” alleging that OSHA was “in cahoots with big lumber and industry supply.” Susan knew Thompson’s men, not its books or its politics. She lined the walls with tables as the shifts shrank.

Helen wipes at the hog grease, vinegar, beans and potato salads. Beans have jumped from plates and mouths onto tables, chairs and the floor. Grease has dripped and soaked through the plates. In between tables, she tosses children in the air and tells a particularly chatty toddler to ask everyone who put the porcupine on the grill.

After a few minutes, Hector queries the crowd: “Who the fuck saw grilled porcupine?”

Helen shoots back, “What else you get with hog and nopales?”

The room rolls.

That was Susan once: comedian, counselor, preacher of practicality in a mill town. Susan had bought the bar because of a dead mother, fucked Robert just because and raised Helen up like her own mother couldn't. She never planned to tie her fate to a lumber mill's. Regardless, Susan swept sawdust from pool felts, tabletops, seats, and walls nightly. Pine sap had discolored the front door in the bar's first year. Six months in, Susan hung a squirt bottle of grease cutter on the spigot by the bar's front door. When the men ignored the subtlety, she painted sunflowers on a plywood plank and leaned it against the spigot.

Only thing worse than an ugly shit is a filthy ugly shit. Wash your ugly self.

Susan adopted her first flock of rescue birds when Helen was six. She strung a hose from the spigot to the other side of the parking lot and asked the men to wash further out. She added *Keep the Birds from Getting the Cancer!* to her sign. Drunks were always tripping on the hose on the way to their trucks. She'd call them a ride when they came in bloodied and gravel pocked.

Daddy Thompson killed the old mill and its sawdust in a single meeting when Helen was six. He'd said that "more boards ain't economical anymore." Men had toasted more boards at Sharks for nearly a decade. They'd argued over how to make it happen, how to get the log crews to cut faster and how to open the National Forrest to more cuts. The environmentalists, the unions and the regulations were all against them. Daddy Thompson said "less sawdust" was a motto that could "keep Thompson's whole" for the future. There was less to sweep around Sharks and the bandages, slings and crutches

became rare. A hesitant optimism came to Ink. Some even chanced the word professional.

As necessary positions became “high risk,” efficiency evaluations became paramount. Technology came to the rescue. Robot arms replaced chains and pins. Lasers replaced experience. At Sharks the men worried that the mill was becoming “a god damn video game.”

To Susan words like OSHA, efficiency and predictability dug into flesh like bad cuts. They ran to the bone. Ghosts of working men came as specters of their former selves. The phantoms terrified the living. *I could be you tomorrow*, their looks seemed to say. Susan’s words were sanitized. Theirs were absent. Nothing was said of the divorce, the charges, the lights, the EBT, the run-out employment, DHS, the rent, the water, the truck or the kids’ coats.

“Fewer hours this week,” became the new toast. “Fewer cards” became the response.

Helen’s joke brings the group together in laughter. Hundreds of stories hang in the air as a nervous quiet settles on the group. They mop up the final strands of hog muscle with cornbread and tortillas. They pick at nopales cubes and beans. Vinegar runs on their lips.

Susan raises a beer and waits.

Drinks rise in the silence.

“Better times been here?”

The crowd nods and grunts, imagining.

“Well, better times coming too.”

“That’s right,” someone says. “Uh huh,” says another.

“Ain’t nowhere to run to. You’ve all told me about the other towns. Y’all say Texas ain’t whole?”

“Yeah.”

“Mississippi hurting?”

“Sure is.”

“How many of y’all came from Mexico or Salvador for a good fucking reason?”

“Come on,” a woman says. “I believe,” Father Rory quips, despite the profanity.

“Carolina?”

“No,” a few say.

“Florida?”

“No,” more say with some sureness.

“How ‘bout we just lay down? This fire’ll be our last good deal. Right?”

When Big John shouts “Hell no” from the back, a few begin to slap the tables.

“We got work in our blood.”

More clap against the tables and their chests, never pulling drinks from the toast.

The ancients stiffen with pride.

“My future is right here in this hurt. Ain’t nothing else out there anyhow. So here’s to our future. The future is Ink.”

Some toast to “The future” and others “To Ink” others say. The crowd drinks, silently, draining every bottle and glass.

Chapter Sixteen

While showering, you remember cleaning the trailer with Sheri. She had moved back after six months at her moms and the two of you wanted to start right. You had set a pot of water on the stove to heat and you soaked towel after towel for the walls, cabinets, tables and floors. By the time you made it to the floors, your hands had been pruned for hours. Your callouses were rubbed smooth. You remember Sheri like this: she is home again and you are happy. She is digging at a dime that has been wedged in a corner for over a decade. Grime has covered its shine for years.

You remember the torrents that broke on the plastic ceiling tiles, the walls and the refrigerator. You remember that color of burned canola oil and bacon grease in the water, how it put of rainbows by the window like an old boat motor in the lake. You remember the smell of the final application of backing soda in the carpet, still oily and dusty and reeking of mildew. You were as filthy as the scrubbing towel and so it was easy to place it on your back and burn your skin to release the tension by your spine. You remembered the giggle that you and Sheri shared when the dime broke free.

This cold water reminds you of the three showers you took every night that summer, just trying to get some sleep. They said that was a 100 year summer, but the next was nearly as hot. A box fan can only do so much. The money was real tight then which probably created extra stress that you and Sheri couldn't afford. She had told you she came back because you believed in something, that you weren't afraid of work. When you and Sheri finished with these floors, she threw the pot out of the door, into the dirt.

Mud balls rolled with the grease. You remember how the remaining grease made the linoleum shine like it was waxed.

In the twenty-seven years you've lived here, Sheri has always moved in and out, packing her things into a few boxes before she went. When she would return, she'd just put those leaving boxes by the couch. She has never unpacked the photo albums, cassette tapes and all those sizes that she planned to diet her way back into again. Each layer of three boxes was another leaving and coming back, a final warning and forgiveness and you fucking it up again. Maybe you two have always been packing this relationship in. You think that maybe she had only come back for the ritual of things and wonder if it will continue or if it's gone like everything else.

Stepping from the shower, you feel the coolness from the condensation move through the trailer like rain. You think of that day, that same coolness reaching Sheri, chilling her nape. You think of the fan of curls that she had pulled into a ponytail. Her hair always had too much for restraint. It was like gravity was a surprise. Maybe that's how she was too. You'd always find her staring out windows. When you'd say hello or ask if she was all right, you'd know that you've said the wrong thing again. Those were the times you were sure of her: she wasn't seeing you beyond the window. You just bring her back to the place that she's been dreaming out of.

Standing and dripping naked, you think of loving Sheri, remembering it in phases. When it was young and giggly and could bookend the sides of a lazy Sunday afternoon; and then when it was slower and more careful like you were tending to the other's soul, reaching across tired bodies and the kiss of two fallen stomachs. Those phases hurt to remember because of this third phase: when the stack of boxes represents your time

together, in which all of her belongings reside; when you pray that she'll return with her boxes from this latest leaving, if only to throw them on top of the others and begin another season.

Chapter Seventeen

The workers who haven't been replaced take off more for carpal tunnel than broken bones or deep cuts. You've waited it out as manager. The receiving yard still has people. Discretion and surprise. You've heard about the computer, though; they say it can show how a log will look peeled. Thompson's will never afford it, so it will close. You've got a hell of a job security strategy, Robert.

You figured Condrado would want Miranda Lambert the Goat out of the truck bed, but he hasn't said a word since arriving at the park. Approaching the incline for the pass, he lets the Green Machine coast to a jog, and downshifts for the climb. He can't be doing more than thirty.

Condrado drums his fingers on the wheel then knocks on the dash.

"How you figure Jake then?"

It startles you. "What the fuck about him?"

"He works twenty on the picker, gets paid for twenty, right?"

You watched Jake on that picker for five years, thinking that if this job was going to keep working for you, that you'd like to move up to a picker. Everybody was sure that the mill would be expanding. There was so many new houses. Thompson's would get a second tractor for the yard and you'd pull some strings to get on the picker.

"Not seeing where you're going with this."

"Jake's got that mojo, Rob. You don't get this shit."

"With Daddy Thompson? First it's white, now it's black?"

“Not the same as white boy mojo. Not even fucking close. But yeah, he’s got a thing. Thompsons’ love Jake’s people. Makes them feel better or something. Guilt shit.”

It’s true that after Jake flipped the grapple trying to pick up too big of a load, Daddy Thompson kept him on payroll. He moved Jake into a short term office job. When the doctors said that Jake’s would keep his bad leg—he couldn’t afford a more specific diagnosis—Thompson called the community college and hooked Jake up with some aid and scholarship. Thompson said something about Jake being a *fine* example for Mountain Pine’s African American community, “a shining example of a hardworking family man.” He had said it like it was an anomaly.

“Well fuck, Condi, we going to blame Thompson for being Christian about it.”

“No, but it’s that selective application. Thompson don’t want to help. He wants to choose who to help. He’ll help all the whites and a certain type of black. Not a fucking spick in the show.”

“That’s a bit fucking much, man. How about this. Take Burns.”

“Fuck him. Happy for that puta being dead.”

Burns might as well be in the truck with his stench of sweat and long-cut chew. He’d march out of the office trailer twice a day, his belly falling over his pubis, just to examine the piles and scold the yard.”

“Yup. Piece of shit to us every day. Twice a day, five ‘till lunch hour, thirty ‘till whistle. Every fucking day.”

“Yeah, he had that mojo. Or else he’d have been out of the mill and carved up by one of us for the shit he said.”

Plywood review days were the worst. Nothing got better than BB after '72. Instead of calling up the mountain crews and yelling at them for cutting knotty shit, he'd come for you. He'd say the sorting was bullshit. Everyone wondered when you'd have enough and throw your brow into his teeth. He was Daddy Thompson's second cousin, and they were raised up together.

He'd walk to the peelers, point at two to three logs at the bottom of the pile and demanding that they be moved to lumber. No overtime for fuckups, he'd spit into your face. You could never take care of business. If you were the point man for your crew, you'd make logs roll. Give the shift the pleasure of hearing his upper ribs stab into his lungs.

“Sure, maybe mojo like you saying, but I suspect he acted horrible because he was miserable. He had to hee-haw in that trailer all day with Daddy Thompson, act like he was from the hills. He came after me because I had my job because I could sort, because that shit was a honest to god ability. He was strait bullshit and his job was more and more dependent on it. I didn't have to be redneck about every fucking thing to Daddy Thompson. I had skills.”

One day after shift, Jake told the crew at Sharks', that if Burns were to step one *goddamn, soft-ass toe up on his rig*, that he'd push the fucker off. That the motherfucker would *slip*. The two worked side by side for three years after Jake flipped the grapple.

“You think that's it? That Burns told you to move peelers to cuts because how fucking competent you are?”

“Exactly.”

“Shit, that mojo runs deep, don’t it? Shit runs downhill, man. Motherfucker come out on you because Thompson had just ripped his asshole. Doesn’t have shit to do with you, if that white boy ego can handle such a notion.”

“Fuck you, Condrado. I was trying to make conversation.”

Cars are parked on the side of the road, a half mile from Sharks. Kids are racing through the grass. Soon, the cars begin to pile up. The highway has become a parking lot. Troopers direct cars into the westbound lane in shifts.

Condrado won’t apologize. “A fucking mess here,” he says.

The brake pads’ filaments scratch at the Green Machine’s rotors. They squeal with every move in the start stop traffic. This was supposed to go differently, slower and less dramatic. Maybe it’s better to grieve all at once. The mill would have gone to computers and half shifts. The joke went that eventually they’d cover the cutting floor with robots and alligators. Whoever was left on shift would feed the alligators. The robots would do all the work. The alligators would eat anybody who got too close to the robots.

The Green Machine interrupts the little huddles at Sharks from a half mile out. They glance toward the road at random as the throaty exhaust interrupts jokes, stories and lamentations. The pauses are embarrassing, so each group resumes, muttering *‘bout time* and *wonder what took ‘em*. The people shake their heads and smile together at the terrible noise. The room breaks into 27 versions of how the Green Machine lost its pipes. Since the storylines are roughly the same, the groups almost laugh together when they hear how Condrado stomped around and scowled for a week. Everyone has heard him scream for the Green Machine to *quiet the fuck down*.

The room gawks and readies a canned anger as Condrado drives past the line of cars parked down the road to park directly in the bar's drive.

Susan moves behind the bar to chair the welcoming committee.

"Ah, what the fuck, boys? Even peg leg over there hobbled in from the road."

Styles Zapata had his right leg amputated at the hip in Desert Storm. *Stupid fucking mistake* he said to anyone who'd ask. When he came back to Ink, the Thompsons gave him a security job. To those that could, he became peg leg almost immediately.

Styles fakes a limp toward the two and offers a handshake. When Condrado moves for the shake Styles pulls back. "Y'all lazy motherfuckers."

"Fat fucks is what they are," Gerald said from his chair in the back. Due to his weight, he couldn't stand for more than twenty minutes.

Marie held up a chicken bone. "We've waited all day on you two. Food done got cold and wasted away."

"I tell you what, I'm fucking offended." Elbert said, stuffing a piece of pie into his face.

Susan waves him off. "Ah, Elbert, shut your fucking pie hole."

Elbert opens his mouth to show Susan his food, but pie falls down his dress shirt.

"My fucking goat died, you motherfuckers. We had to ice her down on the way over."

The room went silent. Faces fell. Hands went to faces and necks and through hair.

"Miranda Lambert?" Helen said.

"Miranda Lambert The Goat."

"We got his goat, so to speak," Condrado tried.

The room groaned at the sacrificial joke. The reality of Miranda Lambert the Goat, iced down in a truck bed surprised the group. The mill fire hit all of Ink, but Miranda Lambert The Goat was just a trailer park goat to most everyone. The way a man like Robert cared for the goat, something tender while still acrid and stilted, changed how the town understood him and his position in the yard and, later, as a supervisor. If it weren't for the goat, it would have been harder to accept his criticisms and his unsolicited charity. Miranda Lambert The Goat's dying took an intangible something from Ink. The crowd nodded in recognition of the significance.

Thompson Junior pulls his truck behind The Green Machine and pauses to look at Miranda Lambert the Goat. A mud hole has formed under the truck bed.

Susan yells, "Thompsons are here. Shape up already."

The group sobered and set themselves into normal postures, but Junior didn't come. The crowd avoids the windows, respecting Junior's right to ready himself. They grow silent and look to Robert.

"I'll go check on him. This ain't going to be easy for any of us. We hurting."

Outside, Junior rocks from foot to foot, crying by the Green Machine's bumper. He sobs for everything he never told his father. He realizes that his idea of being a man is self-inflicted and now, permanent. He sucks snot into his head and spits it in the mud.

"Sorry about the Miranda Lambert, Rob. I know she was something to you."

"Caring guarantees hurting. We're going to need you and your dad. Y'all hold us to something, you hear?"

"He's dead. Dead as this girl here. Heart attack this morning."

"Fuck this, man. I'm so fucking sorry."

“Why do we say that shit? Sorry, I mean.”

Junior pushes ice off the goat’s corpse and pets the soaked fur.

Robert nods and leans against the truck metal and looks to the goat. He waits.

“I’m sorry for Miranda Lambert here. You sorry about my dad. We all sorry about this fire. This goat is fucking dead. My dad is fucking dead. The mill is fucking dead. Sorry don’t mean shit.”

Robert palms the back of Junior’s neck and pulls him close. “It means I hurt. I’m alive to hurt and you’re alive to hurt. It means we ain’t dead just yet.”

“Seems awfully self-centered.”

“Sound like lving. When the hurting stops, that’s when we dead. We live with shit. We’re going to move forward without your dad. We’re going to figure this town out tomorrow and the next day. It’s disrespect to do otherwise.”

“Dad was selling the mill. Had to. It was closing it or selling it. Some prick down in Dallas with some capital group was going to work the money. Shit was in the works.”

“And now?”

“Lawyer is looking into all that.”

“You’re the boss now, Junior, but I’ll tell you what I’d do here.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t say shit about money. Money hadn’t done nothing but fuck us. Now, sounds like it’s going to fuck us out of a mill. Speak to what we got in there. Speak to that real shit.”

The crowd stands as Junior walks into Sharks. Every mouth tries to form words, but only a spell could meet his anguish. They see his swollen eyes. Junior stares into silent faces, the parted lips. Robert stops slightly behind him. The crowd realizes that Robert has taken Junior's position and that Junior has taken his fathers. Shift supervisors stood to Daddy Thompson's left. Junior stood to his right. The crowd knows that if Daddy Thompson weren't dead or dying, he'd be here. It washes over the room with deep inspirations.

Junior meets everyone's eyes. It's too tense for crying.

"I can't express what it feels like to have you all here. This is the good in us. We are whole here. Hurting, but whole. Feel free to sit, though I'm going to try and keep this as short as I can."

The crowd looks around, slowly sitting on tables, chairs and pool tables, leaning against walls and the bar.

"I should begin by saying that I am hiring third shift back on. Everyone has heard that."

Third shift workers look to one another and to first shift and second. Robert tries to control his face, but he's always been easy to read.

"I'm sorry. Condrado, can you come up here and translate for me?"

"Yes sir."

Condrado moves to the place of the shift supervisor.

"Señor Thompson dijo que el turno de noche está contratado."

"Now that everyone has heard that, I'm going to say that everyone here, including the newly hired third shift is fired, effective immediately."

He looks back to Condrado.

“Todos obreros están despedido.”

The room shifts, understanding Junior’s move.

“Unemployment ain’t charity. That’s just doing right. My father would have done that and so I’m going to do that. Many of you know that my father would be here, but this was too much for his heart. He died this morning, trying to figure out how to make this work. Paramedics weren’t able to do anything and I was there for the whole thing. We’ve lost a lot of people these last five years. A lot of people we love.”

Junior pauses. Many look to Robert and Condrado, pleading that they steady him, but Robert stands in his place. This is Junior’s time.

“My father could be an old cranky ass and, worst part was, how proud he was of that.”

Relieved, the room laughs.

“He could judge people too fast and he came to anger too fast. But I will say that he loved this town and its people. He really loved all of you. I wish he would have said it more, so I’m going to say it for him. He watched kids come up through that school, cheered for them at ball games and tried to sit still through the plays and concerts. He’d tell whose kid has moves, whose kid has pipes and whose kid is always on the honor role. He loved your families and he loved this lumber mill. We made a lot of lumber in there. That built a lot of homes. Our people made this town. We ain’t gone and we ain’t going to be.”

Robert began to clap before Condrado could finish translating and the bar joined in, rising again. Junior looked from table to table at the people and their clapping hands.

All those hands that belonged in work gloves. He moved toward the crowd, shaking and holding the calloused hands. The people held him, letting their bodies say what they could not.

Three school busses arrive and mothers and fathers look to make sure all of their children had been told to come. The youngest throw off backpacks to chase the chickens around the yard. The faster kids catch the birds that had become bloated and slow from so many scraps. When the chickens claw and peck their captors, the children throw the birds high in the air. The birds fly to roost in the pine trees and land on the roof, to cling to the bar's gutter. They peck at the pine needles and soil for earthworms and grub.

The high school students walk inside. The men walk to their mothers, hug them and move toward their fathers for handshakes and, in short time, hard hugs that stood for words. The women went to their fathers, desperate to show them what remained. Ines lingered outside watching the children chase birds. Condrado went to her, held her. He told her that this was going to work itself out.

Middle school students huddle in small groups. They just old enough to be ashamed of chasing chickens. A soccer ball passes around and the players show out. Here, just a heel flip, there a head bounce. A few begin tossing the ball into high arcs, dancing a bit before the fall. Two head the ball back and forth, backing further from one another after each bounce. Eventually one trips over the sidewalk and they all laugh.

Nearby a few students pull school-issued instruments from battered cases. There are four trumpets and a trombone. The trombone blats out the first notes of "Basta Ya." There group giggles but the trumpets answer it after a pause, straining to squeak out the

higher notes. Someone from a nearby group hits a beat on the Hog Truck's fender. A soccer boy dances over, holding his eyes while singing in falsetto, *He prohibido a mis ojos, El mirarte de Nuevo a la cara*. The horns blast when they hear *cara*. They all fall into giggles and start up again.

Nobody will take over the vocals, but the horns keep on. The boy returns in falsetto and sings in English, *I'm going to keep that dignity. I won't be falling into your game*. A few more join in. *We just going to cry and cry until we can't never remember your name. No te pueda recorder*, they sing, turning the last note into an endurance contest between the horns and the falsetto boys.

Chapter Eighteen

I am in my new situation. I am not in my old situation. My old situation was up in the air like standing while flying. The Old Human is gone. This New Human makes noises like the Old Human but New Human does not make the sounds of the Old Human. My New Human watches me like I have come to take from the Hens. Sometimes it is like my New Human has never met me. Sometimes New Human won't speak to me, sometimes New Human will. Old Human spoke to me.

It is good that New Human keeps my situation near the ground. It is like a hole that is open on the front and to the sky. I am in a constraining situation again. My situation is made of two constraints. A small constraint is kept within a larger one. My small constraint is large enough that a Hawk could not grab me. In my old situation, my feathers poked through the squares of air in the metal. A Hawk could shred me through the metal.

I know this too: my old situation was not the Outside. I was in the Outside before the room of air, but I do not know it. The Outside has Foxes, Dogs and Hawks. I have seen none of these before. I have heard about them from Hens. My Old Human brought me a Hen before The Ring. They would speak of the Outside before I would show them my circle dance. My circle dance is the best. I drag my wing tips in the dirt at the Hen's feet. Hens want me. Hens praise my dance, saying what I know: my dance is the best.

Some Hens note the presence of something in my space and its absence in hers, or the presence of something in her space that was absent in mine. I know this about a Hen: a Hen always wants me. I know there is a presence of want and an absence of want. This

is why I always get a Hen when one is brought to me: there is always a presence of want, even if she hides it from me. I hold hens down, ripping feathers from them.

I know this too: when a Fighter has lost in the ring, the Humans take that loser to The Outside. That Loser is gone forever. I once asked a Hen if she was a rooster that was gone, but she said that I was a rooster which is not a Hen and that she was a Hen which is not a rooster. It is still possible that a Hen is a rooster which has been taken from The Ring, but I think a Hen would know what she is or is not.

I am thankful that I am situated in this corner. I back into the corner of my new situation so that I make the most air between me and the metal. I am safe here. I half sleep here. With one eye open, half of my thoughts are put to sleep. I must watch for a Hawk. I am remembering The Ring but am dreaming it into this big space where New Human has put my small space. There is a rooster, puffed in all directions, large but no match for me.

I am Randall. I am a terror. The Humans will remember me when I am gone. This ring is my space. The Humans are making their Human sounds for me. Throwing their Human hands into space, waving their paper Human food at one another, trading it with the food man, fighting like us when it is lost. Some eat if I win. Some hunger. The Ring is my space.

Just as I am ready to run this cock from The Ring, he reveals himself. He has been a Chicken Hawk all along. No! He is a Fox. Then a Chicken Hawk. Then a Fox again. And I know I will die against this Fox-Chicken Hawk child, but I will defend my space. I have no hens, but it is like I do and I throw myself at this Fox, throw my daggers at his chest.

Old Human has melted metal fence on my claws and ran a slice of glass in my spur. Old Human knew that the Fox and Chicken Hawk would try to hide in a Rooster.

Run hens! Run loves! Just as I think this, I remember that I have no hens.

My awake eye and awake brain are seeing this big space that New Human has put my little situation into. My sleeping eye and sleeping brain fill this space with remembering. I remember waking in the ring like a dream. I remember that the Chicken Hawk and the Fox have hidden again. Now, they are hiding in a flopping, bloody rooster, like me but smaller and deflated. The Humans are louder than ever, throwing their food and fighting again.

I wake my sleeping eye to see this space with both eyes and both brains to remember what is gone. Old Human made Rooster into the Fox and the Chicken Hawk. New Human has hens. Old Human had no use for hens. I am hidden from the hens, but I hear them.

Perhaps I have been bloodied and do not know. I do not remember losing in The Ring, but perhaps a fighter forgets a loss when Outside. The hens say the New Human brings food twice, before it is hot and after it is hot. I hear the hens say there is always fresh water. They were kicked by their Old Humans, crowded into cages with no air. The coop has no Snakes, no Hawks and no Dogs. I know that I want to be where the Snakes, Hawks and Dogs are not.

If I have lost in the Ring and am in an Outside situation, then I am. I know, and I am.

I am Randall. I am terror. I know these things.

Chapter Nineteen

Condrado eases the Green Machine off the highway. It hasn't rained in weeks and the heat feels like August. Fireflies dance on the trailer tops, lingering near exhaust vents to lick at the grease. Something growing in your colon pains your shits. When Condrado told some of the old ladies about it, they told you to eat more beans. You said beans blew you up and they said to soak them longer. Mrs. Gonzalez lives near enough to take offense to the bean increase. You didn't even know her first name when she banged on your door to say, "*Paico*, ten minutes before you finish beans." When you told her that you'd been eating Bush's, she held up her hand. "I bring beans tomorrow. You fart less."

The beans didn't help. You've been eating onions, garlic, Dandelion leaves and chilies ever since. You take shots of cayenne and lemon juice. Condrado told Elbert at work and he brought you a bottle of Mamou extract that night. "Cousin makes it from Bayou plants," he said, "kills anything thinking of growing in you, brother." You pray that when it is time to die, it will go quick like the mill fire, not slow like Miranda Lambert the Goat.

"Condrado," you say, "we need to bury her."

"We ain't got daylight to do that."

It's still ninety degrees. Sweat runs between your shoulders and into the creases of your back fat. The torrents explore your folds and eventually pool around your anus.

"Doesn't matter, Condi. Dogs will get after her otherwise."

"Can't you put her up in your place for the night?"

You gave her tequila when she started vomiting. That had always settled her. It's only been twelve hours since you've found her, plus the others when she must have been laying dead under the trailer as you slept.

"Fuck that. She'll stink up the whole place. You ever tried to keep a dead dog until the mud settles?"

"No."

"I did, as a boy. Kept him in my closet. Mama beat the shit out of me for that. He juiced under the plywood and into her room. She said we'd all get the fucking parvo."

"You think that's what got your goat? Parvo?"

"Shit no. She was clean and looked good until she got into whatever she did. Goddamn shame is what it is."

"A goddamn shame on it all today."

Condrado stops in the drive and directs his headlights toward the front of your trailer.

"You're going to have to put her on your pad."

"I'd rather that."

Condrado throws the truck in neutral. A horse blanket has covered the torn seat leather since squirrels buried three pounds of acorns in the cushion last fall.

"I got a couple shovels under my place. I'll go get them."

"You got a pick?"

"Yeah."

"This shit's hard. We going to need a pick."

Diesel exhaust pools under the Green Machine. The exhaust pipe is hole ridden like all the shot up stop-signs. Some prayer holds the Green Machine together. The fumes have mixed with hers. You hear a dog whine at the truck bed. His paws are on the bumper.

You come out of the cab and turn toward back bumper. Your momentum is still goes sideways. Your knee buckles under the weight of you, shrugs at the challenge of your mass. You're in the air and then in the dirt, rolling while praying that you don't pick up a nail, a hanger or some angle iron. Surely you have. You'll get the lockjaw for sure. Your mind believes your body is still going for the dog, that this falling is your foot under a Blue Tick's breath. It will howl and tell the other dogs to stay away. Tell them that Miranda Lambert The Goat is not motherfucking dog scraps. Tell them that you're still watching out for her.

You roll to your side, press up to sit for a second, to catch your breath, to beat the clay from your whiskers. You take a knee and brace yourself. The bones will gnaw at one another. Ligaments will enable their bickering.

Condrado throws the shovels over his shoulder. Their faces smack together like two kids' first kiss. You won't let him find you like this. For Christ's sake, get up, Robert. Your IT bands are lines of gasoline. The fire travels into your hips, moving to your groin. You wobble, but you're up. You slap at the dirt in your blue jeans before minding the darkness.

“Let's get this on,” you say to Condrado.

“Going to need some beers.”

Condrado mounts your stairs and pulls the spare key from behind the old dirt dauber nest. You climb into the truck bed, lighting your shoulder, back-straps and lumbar. Your hands feel for her in the dark. The ice melted hours ago but her fur is still soaked. The humidity condenses on her hooves, her nose and the outline of her on the truck metal. You wonder if she's frozen solid or if she's taken on death like people do.

You'd like to pat Miranda Lambert The Goat's face, but her eyes are still open. You just can't close a dead goat's eyes like you can a person's. Even with the ice, the bugs have started eating at them. The eyes will pop all the way out. This is just how it is with goats.

Condrado sets the beer down on tailgate and takes Miranda Lambert The Goat's rear legs. You're not ready, but you can't tell him that. You take her front shoulder and lay her legs in the crook of your arm. Her neck is short and it has stiffened enough that it won't flop. When you lift and begin walking sideways with her, the neck bends and her tongue wiggles at your pocket.

The yellow of her eyes is curdled milk in the headlights.

Condrado says, "Let's set her down and dig this hole."

"Shit man, we can't put her down in the dirt. Ain't respectful of the dead."

"Well fuck, if we leave her in the truck like she was, them dogs'll get at her."

The engine heat will start cooking her on the hood and the wench takes up the bumper.

"All right can you run in and grab my old blanket from the recliner?"

This all feels wrong without Condrado's shit talk. It's hard to give Miranda Lambert The Goat the attention she deserves with the mill and Daddy Thompson.

Condrado has the blanket bunched over his shoulder like it's heavy.

"Sure you want to use this one?"

"Sheri's been on me to throw that ratty thing out for years. Can't tell you the fights that started over that fucking blanket."

"Sounds like an attachment you might consider."

"I think you just like my musk on it."

Condrado snorts. "You're musk smells worse than Elbert's messy asshole, you fuck."

Condrado takes the rear legs and you intertwine your fingers under her chin. Her whiskers catch between your knuckles. You roll her into the blanket. Her chest has hardened into a breastplate.

Condrado throws the pick into the baked earth.

"If she wasn't so sick, we could have butchered her. That's how you respect a goat. Life from life, you know?"

"Shit, they better keep me away from you when I go."

When you roll her in the blanket, her legs stick straight in the air.

Mid-swing Condrado asks, "Break them down?"

"Shit no. We'll lay her sideways."

Out of breath, Condrado hands you the pick. The railroad swing sends pain into your eyes as the spike meets the clay. The thirsty earth pops when you rock the handle. You feel your lumbar going by your ninth swing. You've only dug a foot.

"Let me have a go again. I'll be in a hell of a mess if you stroke out. I'll have to dig a big fucking hole for your fat ass."

You take a shovel and force a laugh.

Condrado makes it into rock shards on his fourth swing.

“Hold up,” you pant at him.

Sweat fills your mouth, salting your gums. You go to the water hose, pull your shirt over your gut and your shoulders and your fallen chest, feeling it cling to your skin. The hose runs hot for a while. When it turns cold, you throw your face into the stream. You wash the grime from your back. The water warms as it wraps around your sides to meet on your gut from which it drips like a spigot into the dirt. You take a good long drink. It fills you, making your heart race and swell. Thinking of Daddy Thompson, you slow your gulping.

“Condi?”

Condrado peels his shirt and soaks it with his hat and rag. He sprays his body and fills his throat while you stare at Miranda Lambert The Goat wrapped in your recliner blanket. Death holds her legs in the air like a mule. You’ve never seen a dead mule. Those fuckers are immortal.

Condrado steps into the hole. The surface is at his thigh.

“Her hooves will be a little shallow, but I can’t go no more. Damn near midnight.”

Two bubbles have popped on your palm and a third, an inflated thumbprint, will go anytime. The park is sweaty and half-drunk, the other half gone to bed. The mosquitoes have quieted, but the bullfrogs keep on.

“All right. Let’s get her in.”

You take off your belt and wrap it around Miranda Lambert The Goat’s swollen neck. She’s started smelling, but it’s hidden under scent of humus.

“I ain’t got a belt on,” Condrado says. “Got an ass for that.”

“Hell, I got a critical case of NoAssAmatosis.”

Condrado lays the back end of the goat into the hole and the belt tightens. You imagine Miranda Lambert The Goat’s eyes bulging further. You hope the belt will push the puss and fly eggs out from behind her eyes like morning sleepies. Miranda Lambert the Goat’s weight pulls the leather taut.

“She’s down, Rob.”

Hand over hand, her face descends into the trailer park’s clay. You try for an even pace. You pray her tongue hasn’t slipped any further, that her neck won’t pop and spill fluid into the Earth. You pray her stink won’t call the dogs to her.

This is your only belt, so you go to your knees on the edge of the hole. Your knee bones run into one another and your femur rams into your hip. Your gut almost leverages you into the hole, but you grab the edges and scrunch your face as you feel the bones.

“You think animals like her have a soul, Condi?”

The veil of sweat and flies and darkness lets you talk like this.

“I always figured they might. You can see it in their eyes.”

“You know I ain’t religious, but I’ve always thought people should have the choice to be. And I don’t really know how we could have given Miranda Lambert The Goat a choice.”

The edges of the hole crumble then bunch. You scoot back onto your belly. Your gut spreads and pushes at your ribs, your lungs, your heart, and your liver until your colon feels the pressure.

“When I first crossed over into Texas, I worked for this rancher, real rich Mexican down near Uvalde. Tiny town. This Mexican had a whole bunch of cows. Damn near 10,000 head which was a hell of a lot for a Mexican in those days. Still is.”

You feel for the buckle. It has pulled a patch of fur from under her jaw.

“Now this fella was real fucking Catholic too. You work for him and you’re doing mass before work. Five, every fucking morning. Since we was out there with nothing but sky and cows and mass and coffee all the time, we did a lot of thinking on things. We had a couple working monk types with us too. One of them monk boys: on and on about Saint Francis.”

You loosen the belt and it snakes along her windpipe, past the spot she loved for folks to tickle.

“Now this Francis, he was a Frenchie, he believed all the animals had souls like poor folks. One monk boy said Francis’ town had a rabid wolf or dog or something that was getting at people. And everybody wanted to kill this thing because it was rabid and all, but Francis went and found it outside town. Monk boy said Francis told the dog that he loved him like a brother—Francis called all the animals brother and sister like a preacher—and asked that dog or wolf to come on for salvation.”

You sit and feel the weight of you on your sitting bones.

“You know what that dog did?”

“Bite him?”

“Fuck, Rob, this is religious shit here.”

“Well fuck then, I guess he calmed down, came to Jesus or whatever.”

“Sure thing. Went off and acted like a natural wolf. Never hurt nobody again.”

“You believe that happened?”

“No, but I think it could’ve. And that’s the point.”

“So you saying they’ve got souls?”

“You think poor folks got souls? Think brown got souls?”

“That ain’t the same thing.”

“Maybe not, but monk boy said it was to Francis.”

“I get you. It’s like the wolf. Not that it is for sure true, but there’s use in it nevertheless.”

“Exactly. Not saying me being from Salvador and Miranda Lambert The Goat being a goat are the same, but that a lot of folks think of us as different in the same type of way.”

You sprinkle dirt into the hole and think of the times she’d eat gummy worms from your hand. Her tongue as long as your palm. The way she’d bleat around dinner time when you came home to say *feed me asshole* or *hey buddy, welcome home, how was the shift* or all at the same time. Speaking goat lets you say a lot of things at once.

“Don’t take this wrong, but say we was burying you and we never thought about you in any other way than color. Say we just figured out how I’ve always know you, but figured it out right when you was in the ground. What could we do about it?”

“Not a goddamn thing. Because I’d be dead. Best thing you could do is start treating the other people like people. That’s how. But you aren’t asking about that. You’re asking about how to do right by Miranda Lambert The Goat.”

“That’s right.”

“Probably the same fucking thing. Give that Francis thing a go.”

You lift a shovel, embarrassed of the honesty and cover Miranda Lambert The Goat's fur with dust until her belly is covered, and her neck lies beneath, until soil covers her bulging eyes and flopped ears, filling around the four legs that point upward at the two of you. The dirt barely covers her hooves.

Condrado leans on his shovel in the dirt.

“Concédele Señor, el descanso eterno, brille para ella la luz eterna, las almas de los fieles difuntos descansen en paz. Amén.”

He crosses himself and walks into the night toward his trailer.

“I'll miss you, girl,” you finally manage, breaking, “we did real good together.”

The dogs' din wakes you. Or maybe it was the sun, which lights one side of your trailer, warms one side by a few more frightful degrees, makes a little breeze out of the temperature differential. No, the dogs seem to speak to that gash on the horizon, an arched blood-let of the sky. They growl outside and yip and fight then laugh it all off, turning tight little half-moons in the dirt, their rear legs sliding like a dirt track race. You turn, feeling the resistant sweat-soaked sheets cling to you. The heat comes on your lower back where it beats at you. To leave the bed seems impossible with your body like this.

The dogs sound confused and angry, then hopeful and ready, when you remember Miranda Lambert the Goat.

“Ah motherfuckers,” you shout and her memory gets you up past the fire in your gut and the throbbing in your back.

You knew burying her would be hard on you and that seems right, to hurt after putting her in the ground because she's dead. But you're surprised to hurt like this. You felt better after Jake hit you with a log when the picker went haywire.

For once you're thankful of the shortness of the trailer and its uneven pitch. You limp and slink ignoring your colon's mutiny, milking the momentum the pitch gives you. When you blow through your door, the dogs won't scatter. They've got her hooves and her ankles in their mouths, their tongues explore her fur. She's not quite bleeding, but there is blood on their jaws and up their noses, worked into the pit bull's white fur and the hound's flopping ear. The hound, Elana's, named You Too, gets stepped on by a big mutt who's getting giddy in the mess.

"Shoo," you shout, "leave her be," you plead.

Still, they lift as a group against the cling of the clay for your sacrifice.

You throw boot after boot from the top of your steps. They strike at dog spines and dog hips, dog tails and knotty heads, there's a yip or a shout but the mass of them just ignores you.

"Ya' get'otta here" you bellow, time and again, when the Green Machine tries to wake over at Condrado's, tripping over its gummy injectors.

The dogs pay it no mind. You should pepper them with the rat shot you keep in the tube of the 12 gauge by the door, but an eviction is the last thing you need after yesterday. *No Discharging of Firearms in the Park*, the sign says. 4th of July is an exception, of course.

They pull her up by her stiff legs, exposing her body to tear at her hams and her neck. A ligament pops and her hind leg flops as one dog laps at the groove of her knee as

jubilantly as a dog can manage. Fur begins to scatter across the dirt. When each dog gets a bite they take a lap around the circle with it wiggling in their mouth. She's gone rancid by now, but the mouthfuls still bleed a little like a plum might.

One team pulls Miranda Lambert the Goat up by her neck, her ears, her teeth and her tongue. One dog's tooth dislodges a googly eye. The Green Machine fires, its injectors puking diesel. You see the smoke drifting around the trailer hitch. The dogs pay it no mind because they've almost got her body out of the clay. Her neck snaps and a few run away with her head dragging in the dirt. The Rottweiler has already eaten her tongue. Fluid hits the dust, and beads and dries, making little mud balls that the dogs lap up like dry food.

Condrado slides the Green Machine around the trailer, slows and pushes the remaining dogs off of Miranda Lambert the Goat's grave with his bumper. Three dogs go to their bellies, acting like alligators, neck jerking and body turning with her hip bones in their mouths. Eventually, the engine heat and exhaust scatter these dogs to lope away with her rear legs in their mouths, her pelvis between them. When he's sure they're gone, Condrado backs the Green Machine off the grave. He turns around in the drive and backs the truck bed over her to cover her body with the axle.

"Can't blame 'em," Condrado says as he leaves the driver's seat. "They's hungry, that's all."

"That's why I didn't shoot none of them."

They've bloodied and slobber soaked her torso. In the distance dogs play with her legs and her head, laughing in yips.

"People going to be hurting for dog food worse than before," Condrado says.

“Shit, people going to be hurting for people food worse than before.”

Chapter Twenty

Kawuatz hadn't come for months. While I tried, I just couldn't believe that she had left me. My whole life I had heard everyone say that we'd be better without the mill, that we'd make off better if it weren't for Daddy Thompson and Junior. Every day was someone's last at the goddamn mill. Then, after I burned it, the mill was the best of Ink. The mill made us whole. Junior and his last minute fix was our savior. We had six weeks left on the checks, maybe. The paper said this capital group in Dallas was fighting the move, calling it corporate theft. They had even opened an arson investigation, naming Junior as the primary suspect.

One afternoon, after gathering some pad shirts from Hector's place, I looked to that middle pitch between the A and B side of the park where we used to play soccer. Gringos on one team, us on the other. The white kids didn't always lose. Since the pitch was uneven, we'd switch sides after every goal. Whichever team had just got scored on went uphill.

I sang of the matches, weaving words like fullback, zig-zag and blindside, lineman, tackle and inbound, midfield, corner-kick, and mayhem. Goal keeper, slide, yearning, dive, sideline, shift, kickoff, header, shot, overtime, tip-in, loss. Goals galore.

These balls had animal stomachs for their insides and leathered animal skin for their faces. They'd be made from pets and food stock and found carcasses. Then, they wanted to kick around rubber. There was ancient precedent for that. The early ballgames used boiled latex. The tree grew in healthy rainforests. Then they bastardized it, boiling it and adding sulfur for strength in their cars and their warplanes. They used armies and rapists

and slavers to shore up their greed. They spread the seeds around the world, killing off whole systems for groves of the trees. Everyone wanted in on the trade. The Nazi's tried to make it from dandelions. The Congolese wanted it from vines.

Chapter Twenty-One

Squawks woke Helen and Susan at 4:30. The hens' panic-driven talons resonated through the chicken-wire becoming in the night a collection of loose power steering belts, water kettles and washboard players. Susan jumped from bed and ran the length of the trailer shouting "hey now" and "ladies, ladies" so loud that her voice cracked on the long vowels. Helen pulled her pillow over her ears. When Susan got outside, she saw the skunk climbing the side of the chicken wire, squealing and grunting at the birds pecking at his hind legs.

"Hey you! Yeah, you, motherfucker," Susan shouted to the mustelid.

The skunk let out a long piglet squeal and sprayed the flock. The birds responded by smothered him, forcing him to climb to the top of the coop where the chicken wire top had him trapped. Susan ran inside and reached around her door for her single shot .410. It had two shotgun shells and a .45 hollow point pistol casing duct taped to the stock.

"This here's the snake-charmer you smelly, egg-eater!"

She loaded the pistol round into the shotgun.

"You done got your warning," she said, snapping the action closed.

Susan ran with the shotgun pulled across her skin, the cracked wooden stalk trying for the softer skin between her bare ribs, the gunmetal slick with dew, dampening her fallen breasts. She high stepped through the field pecked and scratched clean by the flock. Her cotton shorts said Jazz across the ass. Sweat had run down her spine in the night made a dark line between the Ja and the zz like a phonetic guide. She had chicken shit between her middle two toes.

She didn't pull the trigger when she put the shotgun to the skunk's exposed chest, but the gun exploded anyhow. She had pulled the hammer, but let it slip on her sweaty thumb, blowing the skunk's spine across the coop. The birds flew into the top at the noise. They collided into one another and pecked at each other's eyes, made mad by the snake charmer's violence.

Helen jumped from bed at the gunshot. Susan stood in doorway, the gun bridged in her hands. The smell of skunk filled the trailer.

"What the hell, mom?"

"Skunk got after the ladies. Had to put him down."

"He spray you?"

"Got him through the heart. Can't get zombie sprayed if you get them in the heart."

Susan trembled in the night air making the gun barrel bounce just enough to throw glints of moonlight through the kitchen. Mercy killing cats and dogs was the only killing Susan had done. She had used the gun barrel to nudge rattlesnakes from under her stove and possums from her porch. When a pack of abandoned hunting dogs cornered her cat, she had fired a warning shot over their heads. They'd turned half-wild in their years in the mountains, but had come back to humans out of hunger. Susan had driven to the Piggly Wiggly for dog food before she cleaned the trash scattered in the yard.

Susan snapped the gun's bridge.

"He was trapped in there. Only sprayed because he was scared. Of course, the ladies are all sorts of fucked up over it. He probably just wanted an egg for his kit. I'd have given him an egg. Didn't need to be no killing over it."

"We got to spray you off outside or that skunk is going to be all in here."

Susan nodded and turned outside. Helen went back to her room and dressed. When Helen got outside, Susan stood with her shorts in her hand facing the water spigot. Helen tossed her a bar of soap and the spray bottle of vinegar.

“You wash. I’ll rinse.”

Helen turned her face from her mother’s nakedness, turned from the scar on the back of her neck that a curling iron raised from flesh, turned from the waviness of her vertebrate above her lumbar, turned from the crease under her buttocks that had grown with age and fat, turned from the dimples in the fat that had multiplied over the years like freckles in the summer. Helen turned her face from her mother’s thin legs, muscled in the years spent standing before a stove and behind a bar, standing before the mill men who’d collapsed into bar stools with their boots propped on a rail. Helen had turned her face, but she knew her mother’s nakedness.

Dawn was on them before the washing was done. A red hue showed through the eastern mountain pass, no brighter than an ember blown from a campfire. Susan drip-dried, still soaked in the morning humidity. Helen tossed her a towel with a sun setting behind palm trees. A small yippie dog pulled at a blond toddler’s swimsuit bottom, exposing a pale ass. ‘Don’t be a paleface’ the towel commanded in neon. Helen left her mother to dry in the night air.

The skunk smell lingered in the entryway, denying any chance of sleep Helen had left. She went to her room and took a wrinkled camisole from the floor. She flopped on her bed and wiggled into a pair of last year’s Levis. She sat on her bed to catch her breath. A wax stain adorned her stuffed elephant’s ear after it leaned against a candle for a summer. An adopted cat, Chester, had shredded her baboon’s tail. The bar stove had

burned the rhino's horn. These were the only animals to survive her childhood and the teenage purge. Real animals belonged to themselves, but these showed Helen the animals that she and her mother couldn't help. When the rhino lost his horn, Susan had told her of extinction. When the baboon lost his tail, Susan spoke of homelessness. When the elephant's ear was spotted, she spoke of funerals and collective stress for a species under attack. They could work with cats, dogs, squirrels, birds, coyotes, panthers and snakes. They could rescue the chickens, always, the chickens.

Most days, Susan woke before Helen to feed the chickens and open up the bar, but after the skunk neither could even try sleep. Susan dressed from the dirty clothes hamper in the dark. It was a comfy morning. When she passed Helen's room, Helen rose and followed her through the hallway and into the yard. The chickens threw themselves against their fence, bowing the chicken-wire into little bubbles. When their bodies fell against the coop, the house reverbed like a bass drum.

“A bunch of failed musicians in chicken-wire.”

Helen had heard her mother tell this before.

“Made it from old records. Probably some of the best blues we never heard of.”

Hearing Susan's voice, the chickens flocked against the wire.

“They made the stuff for gabions. Holds a bunch of rocks, like industrial sandbags.”

She fumbled for her keys in the dark. She turned a light switch in the entryway, looked at her stove and sighed.

“Holds it all back. What's it mean?”

“What's what mean?”

Susan scooped coffee into her filter and poured water in the pot.

“To hold back life. To make musicians and record labels so desperate they sell their life work for cages.”

“You keep the birds safe too. Keeps the chicken hawks out.”

“Egg sneaks are supposed to get in and take a few. That’s how they live too. If it weren’t for that cage, they’d have run him off. No killing necessary.”

Susan swept at the clean floors.

“Didn’t need to be no killing. I’m the wire. Holding back life. Cooping it up and shooting it dead.”

“It ain’t like that, mom.”

“It’s like it is. I’m woman enough to stare that down. I protected the ladies. I’d do it again. But now, I got to think how I don’t want to do it tomorrow.”

Susan poured a cup from the pot and poured her cup and the pot into the sink. Helen knew better than to comment.

“Made tea. I ain’t for that weak shit today.”

The smell of the roast clung to the coffee steam as it dispersed to fill the room.

Helen had planned to wipe the blinds and walls, so she began pulling the plastic tabs one by one, the action bogged down by grime.

Susan went to unload the dishwasher and restarted it instead.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” She walked around the bar and sat.

Helen heard her mother, but kept pulling tabs. Nothing could be said.

The sound of the truck startled them. Helen pulled a set of blinds, sending dust into the air. Sharks hadn’t had a breakfast guest in over a year. Third shift had been down for five.

When Junior walked through the door, Susan asked,

“Mr. Thompson. Anything your heart desires.”

“I’ll start with a coffee. I see y’all already got a cup?”

“It’s our first.”

“You’re up early, aren’t you,” Helen asked.

“Couldn’t really sleep. Took a drive. I wanted to hear you two out on something.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“Black.”

Helen motioned to the table by the window. The sun hadn’t risen.

“I had to kill a skunk this morning.”

“What for?”

“Trying to eat my girls’ eggs back there. Got himself trapped in the coop.”

“You get sprayed?”

“No, got him in the heart. Put a forty-five in the four-ten. Fucked him up good.”

“Has to go down like that sometimes. How about the birds?”

“Their wacked out, but whole. Sprayed the whole flock, so I’ll have to figure that out.”

Junior and Susan sipped from their coffees. Helen sat down.

“What you chewing on Mr. Thompson,” Helen asked.

“I’ve got the mill lawyer working on something. Charlie Rodriguez.”

“I’ve heard his name,” Susan said. “It’s been too rough of a night to dance around the thing.” Her breath on the coffee sent steam around her ears.

“Sure. Seems like some elements of dad’s sale were still in motion. Some private equity group down in Dallas. They called last night to discuss our situation. Big conference call. Turns out they still wanted the property, but for practically nothing. That’s when I started calling Charlie who called down to some people in Dallas.”

“Sounds like they ain’t interested in running a lumber mill,” Helen said.

“Never were. Their line of business is wide. Up into Canada and down throughout the Americas. As much as Charlie can see, they keep all their holdings partitioned off so they can have businesses buy from one another, equipment and such, to move debt around. Then they fire the workers to make the corporate futures look nice.”

“Bar talk here, Mr. Thompson.” Susan poked at her head.

“I never believed your act, Susan. It’s Junior. Mr. Thompson, well, he’s dead.” They cracked into giggles.

“All right, all right. So these pricks were going to fuck us, huh?”

“Not sure. They ain’t exactly Christian about their line of work, that’s all.”

“Fill me in here, Junior. They’re dressing the books?” Helen says.

“Well, sort of, but in a legal way.”

“This bar could look real nice if we had access to that sort of bullshit, huh mom?”

“Calling up Wall Street.”

“That’s what I’m here about.”

“I ain’t Christian about much in my life, Mr. Thompson, but I don’t do no shady shit with my money. If you thinking that sort of thing, we both know of several places around town with “alternate income streams.” She made the quotes around the phrase with her fingers in the air.

“I appreciate the honesty, Susan. This group, headed up by this Sanders guy, while they are doing all this money moving, hyping shit up for investors, their real aim is oil and gas.”

“They think we got oil?”

“Charlie found a report published by their investment crew saying there’s natural gas up under the lake. They were going get at it from the mill site.”

“Seems like a big sippie-straw to me. Why not just go at the shoreline or under the water?”

“National Forest won’t let them go from the shoreline. They’re trying that angle, but environmentalists got the word out ahead of them. Water is run by Army Corp. Not a gas deal either.”

“Sounds like this gives you something to bargain with.”

“My daddy would have never done that type of business. We’re good with trees. Lot of folks say gas fucks up the water.”

Susan stands. “You’re going to need another cup of coffee before you decide to throw millions away. I understand principle, and I respect that, but if you’ve come for opinion, I’m going to give it.”

“You’re going to want a third cup of coffee before you get mom’s opinion.”

“Shit, you two are good. Makes hurting easier. Can I help make up something?”

“You want to?” Helen asked.

“Breakfast for three?”

“Normally, I’d tell you to stay out my kitchen, but on account of your grieving and me already killing a skunk, go on.”

Junior found a pot of red beans and Andouille in the fridge. He heated a cast-iron over a burner. Yesterday's corn oil permeated the metal. He tossed a Ziploc full of pre-chopped onions and chilies into the pan to caramelize. Susan and Helen had already put a pot of grits on. Little bubbles push corn bits from under the lid. They ran down the side and burned in the flame. Junior mashed an entire garlic head and picked through the paper. When he found the dried chili mix in the cupboard, he poured it into the skillet, coughing as it heated. Oils ran from chili seeds. He added the red beans and sausage. The sweetness of the pork filled the air. He chopped red potatoes into squares and tossed them in the oil, watching it all draw up. He rolled his thumb through a collard green leaf in his palm, pushing veins from the lamina. He tore the leaves into ribbons and threw them into the pan with pinch of salt. He spooned as many grits as he dared and cracked eight eggs over the mix.

Helen brought him his second cup of coffee.

"Can I get a lid," he asked, pointing to the cast iron.

"Sure thing. Iron or glass?"

"Iron if it fits."

He held the metal to steam to the yolks. The egg whites solidified and whitened.

Helen reached around his waist and turned off the burner.

"Let that iron do the baking. We pay for the gas."

Junior nodded and drank from his coffee.

"You serious about not selling that land to them?"

"You think I'm fucking up?"

"In terms of water or money?"

“Right and wrong.”

Helen looked into his cup and walked to the bar. Junior followed and pulled three stools to a table.

“You’re a church man?” Helen asked as she poured.

Junior blew on the top of the coffee, burned his lips and then blew again with so much breath that a ripple broke against the rim.

“Suppose I try.”

Helen sat beside him. Susan just kept working on the blinds.

“How’s that lean on this?”

“Not sure. Try not to mix business and faith.”

“If you have morals, don’t you have them all the time?”

“This sort of deal could bring a lot of new people to town, but it could ruin the water. We’ve got good water here. Plus, I don’t know if they’d hire the people we had at the mill. Different line of work. Specialized. I don’t always live like I should but if I’m fucking people over and fucking up the water, it wouldn’t be right for me to make money off it.”

He took a long draw from the coffee and put the backs of his hands against the table.

“What would you do?”

“I’d look for other options.”

Susan hung a blind and shouted, “them yolks are probably done.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Helen's reputation as a softball catcher and basketball center hung on her frame at Watersmeet High School like Nimrod who adorned her jerseys. The bust of Watersmeet's Nimrod stood in profile, curly hair and beard rounding his head and the sharp points of his temple, his chin and his face. A single horn emerged from his forehead, strapped there by an animal's tendon. While she had the summer without workouts or camps, her teams called her up most weekends for pickup games in the night heat. Students called Helen the shit-brickhouse, a defensive power. Players that could pull a pity foul from the refs got a technical out of Helen. She'd started a rhubarb in summer league for tossing the Crossett pitcher who'd slid cleats-first the game before. Faculty struggled to call her Helen.

Many of Helen's friends, her teammates, had gone to community-college in Hot Springs or university in Magnolia, Texarkana or Monticello. A couple had gone as far as Little Rock and Conway. Most the class had stayed, hoping for jobs in logging or milling lumber. Men trained in Watersmeet's Votech program, getting their certifications in HVAC and Small Engine Repair. They told women to take electives in Home Economics, Art and Drama. Watersmeet required four years of Spanish, four years English, two years of math, Chemistry, Biology and an abstinence-only Health Course. The school had been threatened with consolidation for years, but Hot Springs was too far for the buses. Graduating seniors tested, on average, at a fourth-grade reading level. Creationism was de-rigueur in Biology.

Cheryl Fuller, the new principal the state had hired in its takeover of Ink's school system, took notes as Helen pitched the cooperative. Cheryl had graduated from Watersmeet in the eighties, the daughter, granddaughter and niece of mill-workers.

“Here's what I know: we've got almost 90% free lunch. We're facing a shutdown if we don't get our Benchmarks up. I was able to graduate from here, get out of this state and get a Master's, all on scholarship. Your class data says that's impossible. What changed?”

“While I can't say it all has to do with the mill, it seems that Ink's health has been tied to the mill's these past ten years.”

“How's that explain the statistics on Black and Latino students?”

“Third shift was cancelled five years ago.”

“I remember nights are Black, and that is certainly one cause for my African-American students, but it doesn't get to the root of it.”

“This is a racist region of the state.”

“And how is this cooperative going to address that?”

“To tell you the truth, Ms. Fuller—”

“Cheryl”

“—Cheryl, I hadn't considered that.”

“Language is another problem. We are a multilingual community. This must be a multilingual economic initiative. Multicultural too. Mexicans—north, south, brown or Spaniard—Salvadorians, Guatemalans and Romanians. They make our community stronger.”

“How can the cooperative take advantage of that?”

“That is your job, Honey. I’m the principal and I got a hell of a job set out for me here. My career’s on the line.”

Helen sat and folded her hand over her knees. Cheryl opened a faculty planner and ran her finger down the spreadsheet. She swiveled and started pulling files from the filing cabinet.

“How’s your mama?”

“You know her?”

“My mama would be around this town if my daddy didn’t like his drink. I guess I know your mama in that roundabout way.”

“My mother is doing fine. Thank you for asking.”

“How’s your father?”

“Dead. Liver Cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure he’d be proud to know that you’re a part of turning this school around.”

“Your daddy?”

“I never knew him.”

Cheryl pursed her lips and Helen waited for the insult. The school principal would be an unfortunate bridge to burn, but Helen was ready. She had a reputation to uphold at Watersmeet.

“I’m going to put you in touch with your old Coach. Bolhofner’s teaching art.”

“Who’s doing Biology?”

“I am until we get the position filled. Darwin happened.”

“Thank you.”

Helen rose to leave.

“That’s not all, Honey—”

“—I’d prefer something other than Honey, Cheryl.”

The stare between them was flammable.

“Helen, or would you prefer that bruiser nickname of yours?”

“Helen’s just fine.”

“I’m going to make faculty and classes available for service project skill development. Your initiative, if successful, will provide us with the framework for that to succeed. If my career’s on the line, I’m in full-force and so is this High School. You good with that?”

“Yes mam. As a representative of the cooperative, I am looking for all partners.”

“And personally?”

“Personally, I think you got a chip on your shoulder. You’ll level.”

“We going to get along, Helen. Fellow ballers and all.”

Cheryl pointed to the Mississippi State diploma.

“Point guard. Starter.”

When Helen knocked on Coach Bolhofner’s art class, he was reading the section on action painting aloud to the class, trying to convince himself mid-lesson that throwing paint was art.

“Come on in.”

Coach Bolhofner clapped when Helen came through the door.

“Y’all want action art? Watch this woman play basketball. That’s some art.”

The art students groaned at Bolhofner.

“What can I do you for?”

“Cheryl Fuller sent me down here to pitch a project to your art students.”

Bolhofner deflated at the principal’s name. As his frame crumpled into itself, the art students raised their heads from their hands, fists and desk tops. Bolhofner nodded.

“As most of you know, I graduated here last year and I decided to stick around. We all know that the mill burning down has been a major blow to our economy, but you probably don’t know that it also threatens this school.”

Bolhofner nodded.

“That mill was a huge tax base for this town and this school. If everybody leaves town like they are expecting, this school will shut down. Those remaining will be bused 45 minutes to an hour away. That will suck.”

The group laughed.

“The mill manager, Junior Thompson, and I have decided to do something. Your principal, Cheryl Fuller has also committed to the initiative. So now I’m here. Are you in?”

Helen basked in the silence until someone sheepishly offered a “maybe.”

“I can work with maybe.”

The group offered a forced and nervous laugh.

“What will Ink look like in 15 years?”

A woman wearing a backward flat-brim raised her hand.

“No hand-raising. We’re just talking.”

“How do you know there’s going to be an Ink in 15, hell, 5 years.”

“Language, Kendra,” Bolhofner said.

“It’s a place, ain’t it?”

“Cut the lip. Detention is a place too.”

“Kendra, Coach, can I finish up here?”

Drama stalled, Kendra nodded and Bolhofner waved Helen on.

“We can choose to have a future or not. Right now. And we’re going to have to live with the consequences of that decision.”

“What’s our concrete options?” The voice belonged to a man in the back with gauges the size of a dot on a die.

“What was Ink in its prime?”

“Employed.”

“I mean what did it feel like?”

The man stared.

“Anyone?”

Women near the front offered happiness, safe and peaceful.

“And you, sir?”

The man smiled.

“Swagger.”

Coach Bolhofner had the class split into five groups, each responsible for a sample poster. In two, a river emerged from a mountain hollow. In one, kayakers and canoers floated toward the hem. The clouds spelled Ink Keeps Rolling. In another, pink turtles

floated on logs. Wisteria bloomed on the banks. In another, a woman with long braids danced with a black bear. Her braids spun into wreath.

Helen chose the poster with a color wheel of eight fists turned inward. Multicolor arms made a sunburst. A light sketch of the Ouachita Mountains was the background for an almost cartoonish, bubble lettered title, Ink Forward. The group called their project “Hands In” like the athletics chant. They said no matter how bad you lose a game or a match or a race, the next week you’re putting your hands in for another go. Helen took the poster to the print lab and made 200 copies to hang around town. At the bottom of the poster she wrote, Sharks. 5:15.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When the cars started parking at Sharks, Helen told herself they weren't there for the interest meeting, that they'd just come for a drink. She watched Junior move between the trucks and cars in the parking lot to shake hands and hug and pat shoulders. Sharon said something to Junior to embarrass her husband Jake who played at hitching a ride from the lot. She clapped, her smile infectious. They were the only ones from the Complex. Without black members, Cheryl would pull her support. Hollow Springs had arrived in force. Marie and Hector leaned against the Green Machine talking with Robert and Condrado. Everyone looked as Cheryl Fuller pulled up with Mr. Henly, the technology lab instructor. When Junior walked over to greet the two, the small crowd wandered inside, ordering beers and whiskeys at the bar. Susan took the time to offend as many as she could.

“How's your mama, Jake?”

“Dead. 20 years.”

“Well, I obviously know that. But how is she?”

“Dirt, I imagine.”

“Na, buddy, they pump them full of chemicals. Make them like a Big Mac. That shit never rot.”

Mr. Henly sat beside Cheryl. He tattooed a Tweety Bird rolling a push mower on the back of his head. His hairline had receded further than the reach of the mower so, with time, Tweety had become an increasingly vigilant figure, seemingly stalking the stray hair.

When the chatter began to die down, Susan walked from behind the bar and swung a towel over her shoulder.

“All right, all right. Y’all came around because you didn’t have nothing else to do. Well, now you’ve done got yourselves signed up for some shit. I’m going to let Helen and Junior take it from there. Welcome, have a drink and don’t tip like cheap asses.”

Junior looked to Helen to begin.

“Good evening everyone. Thank you for coming. I want to start off by thanking the High School’s art classes for designing the poster advertising this information session. Those fists at the bottom mean something. Young folks like me, we don’t want this to be color coded anymore.”

Legs shifted and crossed in unease.

“Now, I’m not saying we’re all going to change how we feel all at once, but I am saying that we can’t have three shifts on this. I think we all saw what happened there.”

Jake said, “that’s right.”

“This cooperative will be owned by those Inkers who produce something sold under the Ink Forward label. Cooperative decisions will be made by members and risks will be taken by us all. In short, this idea lives or dies at the Ink level, not the individual level and absolutely not at the color level. I think that’s a good thing. I’m going to let Junior talk about the technical details.”

“Thanks Helen. I think what you just said was absolutely fundamental. We are not in competition with one another. We need to support the other projects that will be a part of this. That’s how we live.”

“This is all good feeling and all, Junior, but how’s this work?” Robert said.

“I have worked my father’s life insurance into a foundation. That foundation will award grants to project proposals based on marketability and financial soundness. This isn’t a charity. This is a business that takes advantage of a shitty situation. We hustle this mess.”

“What’s going on with the mill. Any chance of getting it back going?” Justine asked.

“The mill is in a legal limbo. If I had our lawyer here, he’d say we couldn’t speak about that right now. But he isn’t here and this isn’t an official statement. We’re just talking in a bar. You all know that my father was financing the mill renovations with a capital investment group.”

“Dallas rich boy,” Hector said.

“Yes, Sanders is his name. Because of that finance, we had to take out a larger insurance policy. Frankly, it was larger than we could afford, so it was running us in the dirt, which is what I believe Sanders intended.”

“They got the money from the fire?” Marie asked.

“I’m under investigation for arson. They think I might have hired somebody to burn the mill for the insurance money.”

There had been rumors, of course. Rumors became something just short of truth in Ink. Still, Susan spoke up.

“We know that ain’t got a lick of truth. Don’t we?”

The crowd nodded. Hector said, “hell no.” Robert said, “not a lick.” Marie said, “won’t believe it.”

“Hold on, hold on. Thank you for your trust. When the arson investigation concludes, we should be set up to receive that insurance money. My father was in negotiations for the sale, but there was no sale. Thompson was using the negotiations to drum up speculations which raised the stock price.”

Nobody knew exactly how to ask it with manners. The mill was private and so the insurance could stay with Junior. The silence asked for their manners' sake.

“When we get that insurance money, it's going in the foundation like my father's life insurance. Ink is going to survive.”

With that Junior took a seat, motioning to Helen to take the stage again. Hands grabbed for his as he passed. He touched shoulders and nodded. Their eyes said thank you for everything, thank you for keeping us whole and I wish we could have been like this all along.

Helen motioned for the school principal to come forward. She rolled a stand with a large paper tablet near Helen. She uncapped a sharpie.

“Ms. Fuller and I have worked on some priorities for the cooperative. First is Diversity.”

The principal wrote Diversity on the paper.

“You want to speak a little about each initiative as we go?”

“Sure. We are all aware that a lumber mill historically staffed the strongest men it could find. My daddy worked in that mill and my uncles, two of my brothers and a few cousins all pulled shifts in that mill. As I came to understand it, y'all were lifting trees above your heads and slicing them into boards like a block of Velveta. And I ain't going to hear nothing else but that.”

The group laughed, breaking the tension of a scolding.

“Now, what I don’t understand is how that culture did not change once the new hires were required to lift less and steer more. I think we all know some leather palmed gals that come from round here. Susan for one. Gardenia, Marie, hell, couldn’t I go on and on?”

“That’s right,” Susan said.

“We also know how that mill was shifted by color. We know that third shift was African American and the most vulnerable to cancellation. We all know that Latino workers were disproportionately put on second shift which is also vulnerable. That history, and Junior will agree with me here, that history is, frankly, fucked up.”

Junior broke the silence from the back of the room.

“She’s right. It’s got to change. My daddy knew it. I know it. We all know it. Time to face the music.”

“How we going to face it? We have it as our first priority and we’re going to keep it in mind. This can’t be a white boy recovery. We ain’t Congress.”

“We will establish a diversity review board comprised of ten members. At least three of those members will be the minority gender at the time in the Co-Op and at least three will be African American and three Latino. We will elect those members for one year terms either from the owner populations or the larger community, depending on how we vote later. The diversity review board will operate like a court. They will review documents, policies and diversity-based appeals. They will ideally sign off on decisions and hold a reverent place in this cooperative.”

Chuck raised his hand. “While I support making this thing open to everybody, how’s these boards and things going to make money sense?”

Most the white guys nodded.

“This is not a private business or a corporation. This is a cooperative that will showcase the best that Ink can produce. We need the widest applicant pool possible and we need to make sure that we aren’t accidentally setting up hurdles for certain groups.”

Jake chimed in. “I’m obviously for that in theory, but what’s that look like on the ground?”

Having a black man voice skepticism eased the group a bit.

“Say the diversity board requires that all the documents be put in Spanish and English, so somebody’s abuela can sell something. That’s the sort of deal they would rule on.”

“That’s fair,” Jake said, glancing to Cheryl and Thomas, the only other black workers in the room.

“Okay. The other priorities are less contentious. Second is Evaluation.”

Helen wrote Evaluation under Diversity.

“We need to clearly outline how funding is determined so applicants can propose successful projects and if somebody isn’t funded, well, they can go right over to the evaluation metrics. This is what we talk about in education and it’s what we should talk about here.”

Cheryl paused for questions, but everyone nodded.

“Next is Accountability. Like we were talking about in Diversity, this is not a private company or a corporation, but a cooperative. We are accountable to our

customers and to one another. We must develop a system where each producer feels that accountability.”

“Do you mean how we can fire somebody?” Jorge asked.

“Yes, that’s one part of it. More importantly, how do we avoid getting ourselves in that position? How can we create a work atmosphere where people do right, just because. Ink’s a hardworking town. We just got to make sure it’s harder to lay down than keep standing. Feel me?”

The crowd liked that.

“Okay, our final priority is probably the most vital for the long run. Recruitment.”

Helen wrote Recruitment under Diversity, Evaluation and Accountability.

We have to make sure we are recruiting and developing talented producers from our high school, from college graduations and from around the state. There are a lot of people that are doing things. If we can get them to move their operations here, that’d really stabilize what we’re doing. On the flip side of that coin is money. We have to recruit funding from grants, investors and churches. We have to look at every funding opportunity, no matter how far-fetched, and ask ourselves, how we can work that into Ink Forward.”

Helen circled the first letters of each word, spelling DEAR. At the bottom she wrote, DEAR Ink Forward.

“This is the address, the opening, the way we get this started. Just like any letter you write. What happens in the letter itself, what’s said, well, that’s up to our producers. I consider this our first interest meeting. If everyone could go out to their neighbors and drum up support, we’d be getting started. Mrs. Fuller is going to start trying to integrate

this as service work into some of the high school classes. Junior will be looking for grant opportunities and most importantly, shops which will feature the Ink Forward brand of products.”

Junior spoke up from the back. “And if any of you know people interested in marketing, especially online marketing, have them write a summary of their experience and submit it either to Mrs. Fuller or here, to Susan or Helen. We are going to need to get this cooperative in the 21st century.”

“Absolutely,” Helen said, “Any questions?”

In the lull, the background chicken chatter raised to a fit of a hundred hens.

“Fucking Randel,” Susan shouted.

The racket continued until Susan grabbed a mop and ran out the screen door after the rooster. The cotton strands of the mop head straitened with Susan’s swings, sending squirts of water onto the hens’ tail feathers to pool in the dust by their claws.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Only the Green Machine's exhaust song sits between you and Condrado. Ink passes by your window. There's the Washateria which didn't open again after the mill fire. That gas station closed last year. Three mechanic and machine shops stand as hollow as the gaps in the mountains. They had twenty people on strong pay between them in the sixties. Haddix waves from the fire station's front porch. He's obscured his white ear with a white ball cap. A sign in front of the station says BUSTED ENGINE – TUESDAY PORK PLATE FUNDRAISER - \$5 (or more!). The houses by the road have fallen. Their porches have collapsed. Their residents are ruins of themselves.

Helen is your daughter. Maybe you've always known it, but wouldn't admit it until halfway through the Ink Forward meeting when you saw your mother's nose in her face. You'd asked Susan once before and she said no. All these years, childless and wanting. Now, passing by Sulfur Spring Hollow, you see that you were the daddy down the road all along.

“What you think, Rob?”

You shrug, knowing it won't do.

“What you mean?”

“Cooperative. Junior's in. That's something.”

A squirrel runs in the road, hesitates then shoots the gap between the tires.

“It's something.”

Condrado slows to cross the single lane over Blacksnake Creek. Two men fish off the side, beers in their hands and thumbs on their lines.

“Y’all having any luck?”

The older of the two pulls a headless water moccasin from their bucket.

“She’ll eat,” the older man says.

You belly laugh until your colon aches.

“Shit,” you say, “she’ll eat. Shit’s rich, Condi. Fucking rich.”

“Black folks eat anything,” Condrado says, shaking his head.

“Shit Mexicans eat?”

“Don’t eat no fucking snakes.”

He’s got you there. The Green Machine slows as it climbs the pass.

“You eat pig brains. You really going to talk shit over a snake?”

“*Sesos* are cow.”

“Brain.”

“Yeah, cow brain. Don’t you eat any sauce-of-the-day Doritos?”

“Dorito,” you open your arms from glass to glass, “Not a brain.”

“Corn.”

Condrado says this like the conversation’s complete. He whispers it again, almost to himself, filling that sliver of silence left by the exhaust with the word.

Susan must have known that Helen was yours. All the times you helped out around the bar feeling guilty about the sex, you should have been guilty about the child.

How are you supposed to ask about a thing like that?

“Everything’s corn,” you remember to say, “Corn’s not brain.”

“Yeah, but Doritos are corn that don’t taste like corn. How you not see that as fucked?”

“What’s brain taste like?”

“Not much on its own. Tastes like *chilies* in the taco.”

“Your brains taste like chilies. My tortilla chips taste like whatever sauce they’re supposed to. Brains are creepy. Corn ain’t.”

You feel the blood rush to your face. He’s fucking with you.

“Corn’s got a taste, though. Your Dorito powder just overbears it. While brains probably got a slight taste on their own, they’re mainly a texture companion to all them chili flavors.”

“Maybe your sauce just overdoes it.”

Condrado laughs. “I know you ain’t talking shit about my *mole*.”

“I think you got a problem with white folks doing something to your tortilla chips.”

“They’re amusement park chips. What you’re calling a tortilla chip is a *totopo*. Y’all make them greasy and they taste like shit. That’s the reason for the dry rub. They’re like dehydrated *chilaquiles* but with such a nasty *mole*.”

“Still ain’t brain.”

The truck drops into the hole at the park entrance. It’s too hot to sit inside the trailers and those with the AC units are too scared of the electric bills to crank them. A pack of dogs runs across the path, nipping at one another’s knees, yipping and barking with group movements like a tornado. Maria pours water on a tomato plant. Hector waves, a handful of weeds in hand. A group of older women sits at a picnic table under an oak laughing and laughing.

Condrado parks the truck in your drive.

“I’m going to tell you something about eating brain. Used to be, you could live on brains.”

“Yeah?”

“They’re like eggs.”

You pull the tailgate and sit. The warmth of the metal moves into your pelvis.

“How the fuck are brains like eggs?”

“A lot of ways, but we’re just talking about cholesterol here.”

Condrado smiles again. He’s missing two molars on his jaw.

“Are you trying to fuck with me?”

“No. I’m trying to tell you something you may never hear again.”

“Well get to the fucking point here. Brains, Doritos, Eggs and everything are stressing.”

“Fine. To live on brains, is to live forever.”

“You lost your fucking mind?”

“That supposed to be a joke?”

“Oh, fuck that. This is too much.”

You’d like to jump up and make a show of leaving, but you’d feel it in your knee, your hip, your gut.

“I’m serious here. Before the factory farms and the pesticides built all that toxic shit up in our brains, they had power.”

“Flush this out for me. How did eating brain make somebody immortal?”

“Your body becomes brain. Well, not brain, but all that stuff that makes up your brain.”

“Right, fat and meat and sugar and all that.”

“That’s what they say now because they made everything dead.”

“Who’s they?”

“I don’t know. Whoever thought Mexico should be a wheat country. Airplanes spraying everything under the sun with pesticide.”

“What’s this got to do with brains?”

“Under the Wheat Mexico thinking, grasshoppers are pests. Chickens eat grasshoppers. Mexicans eat grasshoppers. Mexicans eat chickens. Mexicans are pests. Get it?”

“Still not seeing the brain connection.”

“Brains are made of something. They die and get remade. Die and get remade. Die and get remade.”

“You’re saying they get remade with pesticides.”

“And they used to be made from chicken, grasshopper and corn.”

“The way I heard, the brain is the pickiest part of the body. We eat all these bodies—chickens, grasshoppers, turnip greens—and some small parts remake our brain.”

“Why so picky?”

“Cause the brain’s electronic. The body’s electric.”

“I got you. The body’s like the mill. The line is electric. Strong arms, sharp blades. But the control room’s electronic.”

“Yup. And they don’t let me or you or anybody but them computer folks up in that.”

“We’re the grasshoppers in this scenario?”

“If we are, we’re living in a wheat world. Corn ain’t recognizable. Don’t even taste.”

“Sure feels like they been poisoning us.”

“Mill’s burned. Bodies on bodies now.”

“I can see tree guts, plain as day.”

“You eat pork brains, Rob? Shit will give you crazy dreams.”

“All I eating is them Doritos.”

“White folk’s pork brains.”

“You believe people used to live on brains forever?”

“Before the Spanish, yeah.”

“Then believe I can see a tree or anything that’s come from a tree.”

“What’s this to do with brains?”

“My brain.” You rap a knuckle against your skull, feeling the oily secretion of your scalp.

“Heat’s getting to you, boy.”

“Maybe, but I think I’m in this cooperative. And I want you with me. Equal partners.”

“What we going to do?”

“What we was meant to do. Wood.”

“Milling?”

“Everything. Milling to finish carpentry.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

For 30 years Thompson's closed twice a year annually, on 4th of July and Christmas. At Hollow Springs Court, there were fireworks both days. The first couple of days after the mill fire had all the people of a holiday, but none of the fireworks. At first, the mill men just stood around like a long break. Nearby the trailers, left uneven for years, begged for levelling. After the first group pried back the trailer skirt, it wasn't a half hour until the entire park was under maintenance.

Small groups of neighbors crawled in the leaves with jacks, levers and hammers. Sweat ran on their arms cutting the thick masks of soil. The men became muddy like this. And in all that cranking and the pushing and oiling and grunting of the jacks and leavers, the muddiness rubbed from one man to another. When their sweaty hands slipped on the metal, they'd punch one another's hands and palms and forearms.

With the trailers righted, the groups noticed the algae on plastic siding. The mold patterns made faces and shapes on the plastic. Using vinegar and hard bristle brushes, the men shaped the mold into foxes, bear claws, pickup trucks and clouds. They stood back, giggled at their creations and scrubbed away again.

You jack the back corner of the trailer around seven. An hour later, you place two-by-fours and one-by-fours between the concrete block and the aluminum. The metal bends under the pressure. When Big John comes around the side, you slip a second paint stick in the gap. He carries a thermos and a stack of fliers. He misses your boots sticking from under the skirt. You think that it be funny to play dead for him. The leaves from last season smell of humus. Grub worms and inch worms wiggle under your back. You'd put

a king snake under here a week ago to clear out the copperheads. You pray that she was diligent.

John starts to climb the stairs. The trailer shifts. You shout, “Whoa,” startling him. The frame shatters through the concrete columns into the damp soil. The level is off. It will need another paint-stick.

“You going to bring this sucker down. Give me a hell of a haircut.”

John backed down the steps.

“Need help?”

You rock your body across its spine in the worms and the leaves and the dog shit that you thought for a moment might be Miranda Lambert the Goat’s.

“Oh, no, just a slow careful job. Pretty nasty too.”

John pulls an earthworm from your pocket. His fingers are the width of deer sausage. Their hue like pig casings.

“Coffee?”

“Yours?”

“Wouldn’t bring nothing else.”

It tastes like tobacco and campfire.

“That’s you all right.”

“What you taste?”

“Coffee. Put hair on your chest coffee.”

“Flavors?”

“Old school chew. Something grilled over a fire. Say a big hunk of cow.”

John writes something on his notepad. You fight back a smile. You've tasted for him before. You like to think it's your refined palette that brings him back.

"How you and Sheri doing?"

"Oh, she's around if that's what you mean."

A dog fight erupts across the park.

"You think she'd drink this?"

"Put enough milk and sugar in it, sure. She'd love it, I bet."

John hands you a Zip-Lock of grounds.

"Make her some of this tomorrow morning. Bring it round, you know? Surprises. That's what women want."

A woman screams promises to Jesus Fucking Christ in Spanish, swears to intervene in the dogfight with a handgun.

"You cupid now?"

"Just heard that I wasn't surprising enough. I'm the steady-type. The type that my love interests never want."

The woman fires the handgun. You and John look to commotion. The dog pack sprints down the drive.

"Ain't none of us the snake-charmers we used to be."

"Heard that."

John pulls a flier from his stack and hands it to you.

"I'm going to try and turn this coffee roasting into a real thing."

The paper says Big John's Roast Shack in bubble letters above Grand Opening September 14th - Music, Coffee and Pies. There's a picture of John raising a coffee mug

with a smiley face on the front. John's been made to smile for the shot and in his unnatural state, he bares both sets of teeth. He's missing a canine and a bottom premolar.

"Good for you buddy. You already know your coffee is professional."

"Maybe, but it's got to be good enough to move everyone to paying a little more a month."

You sit at the picnic table under the Oak. John paces in the gravel.

"Going to be a tough sell right now."

"Impossible sell if people don't scare up some jobs."

"Maybe you and I got different ideas about an economy. Who's hiring?"

"The cooperative."

You breathe in the morning humidity. It frees phlegm from you lungs. You spit.

"Sure, for folks like you who got skills."

Big John lowers himself onto the other bench. The table groans under the stress.

"Robert, I was good at one thing. I'm big. I lift that whole goddamn trailer off its blocks. I said that I can pick up logs and that's it. Well, they replaced me with tractors long before that mill burned. It was only a matter of time before I got cut."

The skin hangs from his frame. Fullness lost to atrophy years before.

"What did you do at that mill?" He asks you.

"I was the shift manager."

"Why were you the shift manager?"

"Cause Daddy Thompson liked me."

"Fuck that. Why were you the shift manager?"

"I can see through trees."

He gives you a toothless smirk which is about as close to a smile as he dare.

“Was that bullshit?”

You shake your head.

“Can you see through concrete? Sheetrock? Tile?”

“No. Just trees.”

“That’s a skill if I ever heard one.”

He knocks his knuckles on the table top. There’s a knot under his left palm.

“Wood work?”

You imagine siding jobs. Birdhouses. Decks. Cabinets.

“Too broad.”

“What you use all the time that’s made of wood?”

“Stairs, decks, tables, chairs, cabinets.”

“Sounds like a pretty big line of jobs.”

“Too broad still?”

“Yes, for you. However, when this gets off the ground, I imagine that you’ll hire a couple people and run basic jobs like cabinets, stairs and the like. You got experience as a manager. Cooperative likes to hear about future plans.”

The thought warms your gut like Cayenne. Managing labor, never your dream at 30, seems ideal.

“First though, you got to get something that’s yours. Something that you alone can do and that people can buy pretty cheap. Less than thirty dollars.”

Your nicest tool is a pen knife. The Thompsons loaned you everything else.

“All my tools burned up at the mill. They down there in that heap.”

Imagine molted metal scalding the last of the tree cores, running into their veins, and filling their imperfections before releasing their carbon into the air.

“With cooperative funding, you can purchase tools. Just got to get a line out there.”

You wake early with Big John on your mind. In the kitchen, your fingers and thumb try to grasp a spoon but your hands are swollen. Warm sink water restores your grip. The fingers twitch as the blood wakes in your palms. Your fingers tremble. The spoon barely holds its load. Five spoons of coffee grounds and you shut the stained lid. The machine gurgles to life as the smell of percolation comes over you. You stare at the plastic coffeemaker and feel nothing. The glass coffeepot seems cold, but you have no sense of its structure. You cannot see the bits of plastic that will wash into your coffee and your gut. You cannot see how the fractures in the glass will line up to split to pot and burn your leg. You cannot guess the number of times this pot was dropped before Sheri bought it at the Goodwill. The glass, like the plastic, will never allow your gaze.

The park owner made you paint the cabinets white. He said the trailers should look like they did when you moved in. That was thirty years ago. He said it was for future tenants' sake. You wanted to rub the wood with Corn Oil and Beeswax. The glue holding the original Formica melted during last summer's scorcher month. Sheri was moved out when the shelf fell so it was only Beanie Weenies, Vienna Sausages, SPAM and canned corn that burst on the counter ledge. If she had been there consistently, you would have lost pickled okra and jalapenos, jams and jellies, home-canned salsa and tomato paste. There would have been a tub of Nutella that she loved to eat like ice cream. Maybe her absence broke the seals. Maybe the heat just weakened the glue, and allowed the plastic

to pull from plastic. Had she stayed, the pantry stock wouldn't have fallen to such levels. The weight wouldn't have accumulated in the middle or stressed the edges.

The paint obscures the pine like bark. Still, you know how the grains run. Narrow bands run the length of the slats. They were the pine trunk's sapwood. They moved water to the needles and sugars to the roots. These were the workhorses of the pine machine, their fibers lean and taught. The bands differ slightly. The widest bands, like the one between the plates and the bowels speak of wet times with lots of light, like those swollen river summers before the dam. The narrowest tell of the dry winters that turn to dry, hot summers when the mountains burn and fish die in puddles which were creeks. Some say the biggest trees are gone because you've milled them all. You wonder if they haven't just gone like the rains.

The billowing grain puddles of heartwood spill near the middle of each door. You run your hand over the doors. A four inch balloon covers the tray of half-melted Tupperware lids. There's an embarrassing knot below the sugar bag. Daddy Thompson let you set up the old gang-saw, Baby Bertha, after shift. You stood at the end and called for degree corrections. Condrado worked the engine throttle and watched the gauges. Baby Bertha hadn't been run in three years. Big John worked the blade end. He was the only man strong enough for safety. Everyone knew how Big Bertha, Baby Bertha's predecessor, had ripped Grady Stevenson in five pieces before the engine man could flip the kill-switch. Daddy Thompson and Junior came out to watch Baby Bertha run. First shift stuck around. Second shift was late. Drivers delivering pine left their trucks idling in the drive to watch the men and their machine split 100 years of pine into boards. Black diesel smoke poured from Baby Bertha. Sawdust filled the air. Big John sweat through

his flannel and soaked his jeans and boots. You only saw Baby Bertha's blade working down the heartwood lines. You felt the obstruction coming like one of Sheri's leavings. You yelled for Condrado to gun it and for Big John to hold tight. This was a knot that could hang a blade and pull arms from sockets. A knot that could twist a spine into three. Condrado dropped the throttle. Baby Bertha's cylinders turned 84 times a second. Big John threw 374 pounds behind a 50 pound iron and broke his beard with a scream. When the knot broke, the tree split 50 feet down its length. Baby Bertha bucked, but Big John threw her back into the cavity.

You hear Sheri rising as the smell of the roast fills the back of the trailer. You pour two cups and mix a splash of milk and two spoons of sugar into hers. She's pulled on an old pair of cutoffs. Her tee shirt says Victor's Body Shop and Customs.

"Morning," she says, pushing her hair into a ponytail.

"I made you a cup."

"Sugar too?"

"Yes mam. Bread's in the toaster. "

When she raises her eyebrows, you remember how John said women liked surprises.

"You got a minute, Sheri?"

She looks to the clock on the microwave. It's been out for a year.

"It's a little after six."

"Sure. It's Friday. As long as I'm in by 8."

You open the door and the hound, You-Too bays.

"For the love of Christ," you say.

Sherie laughs as she follows you down the stairs to the picnic table. That laugh that just kills you.

You sip from the top of the coffee. The bitterness reminds you of a divorce.

“I’m thinking of applying for that cooperative funding. Junior and Helen’s deal.”

Sheri looks out the window and drinks half her coffee in three long draws. You’ve learned to wait.

“How would that look?”

“Carpentry. Cabinets, framing, decks, tables, chairs, spoons. Anything I can carve or join.”

“That’s a lot.”

“I’d start carving spoons and one big job at a time. Cabinets probably.”

Sheri stands and walks into the trailer without a word. A redhead woodpecker taps at a rotting pine. Between two trailers in the distance, two dogs growl, then bark, then scuffle a bit out of boredom.

Sheri comes back with the milk jug. She pours milk until the coffee meets the brim.

“I got no doubt you could make the best cabinets around. But that don’t make the money right.”

“What are you saying?”

“Okay. We run Johnson’s for two reasons: windows and siding.”

“Right. I’d run cabinets and spoons, then spread out.”

“People’s windows get broken all the time and their siding gets all nasty.”

“You don’t think there’s a need for carpenters?”

She lets out a long breath.

“Hear me out here before you get pissy.”

You drink down the smoky roast.

“All I’m saying is that you got to sell something people need to replace.”

“See, that’s the business problem with wood. It ain’t fragile. That’s why we get fucked on it.”

“So why would you stick with wood? Why not look in Little Rock or Hot Springs for something?”

“Same thing as wood, Sheri. That’s a scheme meant to fuck us.”

“Last I checked, Robert, we got one active paycheck. That mill? That mill and this whole mill town fucked us.”

You bite your tongue. The last thing you need is for her to leave you again. This would probably be the last time.

“You’re smart. You know how to keep an office afloat. And you’re absolutely right that this whole system is built on replacing shit that breaks or wears funny or just isn’t cool anymore.”

“So you going up against the system?”

“We don’t have no choice in the matter. If you make shit that can be thrown away, you can be thrown away. They’ve been tossing Ink in the dump for years. We cut our own trees to build their houses and now look at us.”

You walk from the bench to bang against the trailer wall.

“We living in plastic, and aluminum, and asbestos. Nobody in this state even make trailers anymore.”

When you sit, Sheri takes your hands in hers and looks. Your fingers are stiff and swollen. Callouses have grown over the nail beds.

“Remember how hard it was when you first got on shift at Thompson’s?”

Your body remembers the swelling in your heels, hands and shoulders. You think of a twisted knee, a shoulder out of joint.

“I ain’t dead yet.” Your colon throbs.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The heat had even gotten to Kawuatz. It built every year from March until July, bursting somewhere in August. The old timers said it had gotten hotter and drier, but I had never known their normal summer. The worst-ever became normal and wildfires became normal and the piles of heart-stricken deer were normal. This year, my mill-fire gave a start to the dog days.

This was the heat to come together on. The heat that made it all a little slower. We could stay a minute longer on porches to hear a long story about horse dancing from an abuela. We could knock on doors with the excuse of checking on our ancients. We could let dogs and mules and goats and chickens into storerooms, living rooms and bedrooms with the excuse to keep them from the heat.

I had watched my father and Robert lay down Miranda Lambert the Goat. I sat at my window whispering at the dirt, hoping to soften it a bit. Their racing heartbeats pushed my song from the hole, so I made space for the two hearts, two heads of a base drum. Their dirt leapt and cracked on my tongue. My molars ached with each split rock.

I was asleep before they had her down and I dreamed of a valley of pigs. On that first night, I only saw pig sign—dug soil, tossed leaves and rooted trees. On the next, I walked with a twisting bayou in the bottoms. I went on like this every night until I saw the pigs on the fifth night. They were hairy and black with spindly legs and potato bodies. They had a valley all to their own. They dug rhizomes of ginseng and cattail roots.

In the dog days, everyone rode from school to the spillway. The mountains pulled a breeze across the twenty stories of concrete. The dam was our swamp cooler. We were all

half-naked and sweat-soaked, so it was like a swimming pool made from warm, humid air. I'd usually catch a ride back to the park with Candice, Hannah and Alejandra. We were friends with training wheels. There was always park drama and school drama to go on about, tests to compare and homework we'd forgotten. It was nice to have things like that.

We were always surprised to see second shift when we'd get back. There were so many men. 17 is the worst age. They'll stare then realize they shouldn't. Then they stare some more because that wrongness excites them. I took note of whose shirts I'd steal for pads.

After I had spent a couple of nights with the pigs, I woke with a burning beneath my face like the glue was melting. Kawuatz swelled in my blood and my heart raced. I slipped into the night woods, past the stumps and bobcats. Even the dogs had gone to sleep.

We listened to man bragging about uncles who had won a war against Muslims. His Spanish was strange. He spoke of waves of bodies pushing against each other. I knew his name. Hernando de Soto. His face was longer and his head rounder than the statues. His chin was pointed like a cartoon man's might be. He paced and shook his hands as he spoke. The granite and marble made him so sure and proud. They'd bought his bust for downtown Ink and put it near the veterans' memorial. His voice cracked often and he coughed a small wheeze. His c sounds hit vowels like a k might.

Pig squeals, huffs and grunts interrupted his war story. Reverence for the pigs hushed the crowd. Kawuatz sang to the pigs from her valley. She sang histories to the pigs and the pigs sang of white faces and rape, murder and mean trickery in return. The

men wanted something no one had so they took food and women and children. They tortured everyone asking for that thing that the pigs and the people didn't know the word for.

We remembered when the Spanish came. Hernando DeSoto. We recalled our song to the Great Woods that ran from streams and springs off mountain faces and into shelters. Our brothers emerged with tattooed faces and their skulls shaped like hammers. We were proud in the way our song affected them, how they heard the call repeated, how it made a song from our wailing.

Run north brothers until you meet the Kaw on our cousin river.

We recalled their running. How our song gave them a galloping beat for their horses and for their feet. They carried spears taller than three bodies. Veins ran across their bodies like tributaries.

Bring every arrow, we had sung.

We remembered the arrows loosed on the river floats and around the campfires. Too often these found boards and shields and protections, but we could cheer when it found the flesh of a conquistador.

DeSoto had them mount in lines against our brothers, on the plains by our cousin river. We saw the tattooed lines turn to smiles. DeSoto was a fool and a murderer. Our brothers' spears were from the spines of our tallest trees. The stopped line after line of horsemen, in armor and with their chests run bare. Our men taunted them, played disorganized, then turned into a quiver like the porcupine. When our men formed, theirs stuttered, were pushed to their death by their kin.

On and on this went, while the archers did war like the birds. Theirs went from crossbows, leverage and metal was their game, and ours were straight Cypress lines. Our archers had sourced them from where the river spread into a bayou, further than the hunting grounds of stories. The crossbows spit the last of their bolts early, before their cavalry charged. They had used so many against our harassment in the night. We lay flat and feigned fear to avoid them, to start the fight which we could win.

We remembered five men with bolts in their legs and shoulders, one in his throat. They stood and walked into the field of battle, tried at a war dance which we knew. The murderers were overwhelmed by a hunger to kill them, so they ran from rank to smash into our front, but behind the dance, our brothers had made their quiver. Our archers rained on the second wave as our spears took them and raised them as sign like their horses had. Our knife men crawled under the spears and cut their legs from the wood for weight. The second wave would come onto them soon.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The mill had been shut down for a week when Hector finally gave up on sleep. He'd taken cold showers and put another fan in the bedroom, but he couldn't sleep, even after the heat broke. When he went outside into the humid night air, the moths swarmed him. One flew in his mouth and deposited powder on his teeth. He coughed and spat it out which set off every dog in the park. As the dogs barked at Hector and to one another for five minutes their people screamed, "Shut the fuck up" and "fuck off" and "for god's sake" and "holy shit Terrell". Raccoons and squirrels scampered from the cacophony. When the dogs and people quieted, Hector could hear two bullfrogs croaking around a pond lowered by the heat spell. Over the cicadas, a Nighthawk announced himself with a peent that sounded like a refused bar code in the checkout line.

The half-full moon dimmed the stars but gave Hector enough light to walk and check for copperheads or cottonmouths. He pulled back the trailer skirt and whispered for his dog, Waddles, but she was asleep. He'd decided to walk the drives between the A and B line and between the B and C line until he figured out what was keeping him up. He'd done the loop five times or more without success when he saw Ines tramping out of the woods. She moved between the trailers, petting dogs that nobody would try. When she sat on the well pump in the center of the park, he walked toward her. She heard him from twenty feet out or more tramping in the gravel.

"Having trouble sleeping too," Hector asked, adding, on realizing his possible threat, "I can leave you be if you need some space."

"No, Hector. I'm good with you. I have all the other nights to myself."

She turned and straddled the well pump.

“Why you up,” she asked.

“Can’t sleep.”

“Why?”

“I’m trying to figure that out.”

“Can I tell you something, Hector?”

“You can. Don’t know if you should.”

“I wanted that fire.”

“Why the hell would you want a thing like that?”

Ines fell silent. They listened to a skunk smashing around in the leaves.

“I’m sorry. I’m just worried about what I’m going to do.”

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you. I was just tired of seeing how my daddy came home hurt everyday. Not hurt hurt but hurting. And we’re always needing money. That doesn’t seem right. To work like that and stay poor.”

“No, it ain’t right, but it’s better than sitting on our asses, ain’t it.”

“Maybe I was just mad that I couldn’t have ever worked at that mill. Too small. Too womanly.”

“I bet you could have worked there, but you wouldn’t have wanted to. People always say you’re smart.”

“That’s just it. Working isn’t stupid. Working your ass off and never getting paid. That’s stupid.”

“Maybe you’re right. That’s what Marie says too. But I was mad about that for years. And I drank and I wasn’t a husband for a damn. And I didn’t have no friends to really speak of. Cause I was mad.”

Hector breathed in the night air. In the humidity, it was almost a drink.

“I burned the mill.”

“Ines, you need to not say shit like that.”

“I sang it.”

“That doesn’t mean a fucking thing. Some fuckers, probably tree huggers, burned it. With real fire. Or Junior. Some people, not me, say Junior had it lit.”

“My songs are real. You hear me right now don’t you? I can say something that hurts you, something that makes you so mad you want to knock me off this well-house. I can say something that makes you cry. How much more real you want than that?”

“I got you. Just don’t go around telling people you burned the fucking mill. You get in less trouble saying you going to kill the president. Everybody says that.”

“I’m not going to tell everybody. I told you. You seem trustworthy.”

“Nobody thinks that.”

“That’s why I feel safe telling you. You’re on the outside. Like me.”

The two of them just sat on the well, speechless, looking at the stars for a while. The night birds did all the talking for them in trills and clucks and hoots.

Hector woke with his back against the well pump as the first streaks of red wandered into the night sky. Ines was gone and Hector was soaked in dew. Hector went back to his kitchen and ate day old chili grits. The sun was up by the time he finished the

bowl,so he walked over to row C where Big John, his old alcoholics anonymous sponsor lived. John had been a first shifter for twenty odd years, so he'd be up. Big John's dogs were barking and sprinting beneath a cable line tied to two trees. A hound dog stopped and pulled the line into a bow while baying, but before she could snap it, a heeler collided with her mid-bay. When Big John came to the door, he was startled to see Hector. They hadn't spoken since Hector stopped AA when his DUI parole was up.

"Hector, you okay? I'm going to make some coffee. Need some?"

"That'd be nice, John. I've been up. Thinking on stuff."

"What's going on? You're sober?"

"I'm sober right now. I drink though. Responsibly."

"Hector. We're alcoholics."

"I know. That ain't the problem I come to talk to you about. You know that I drink when money gets tight. Or something goes out of whack."

"I do."

"Well, the mill going down and us losing jobs and all that makes me worried."

"Well, Hector, we'd love to have you back at St. Johns."

"Bit much on the Jesus for me."

Big John waved Hector inside. The quilt on his old couch was folded and ironed. The shoes were lined in a straight row and subdivided by type. John's boots were hung upside down on a pair of cedar cores. He'd painted the cabinets a light yellow with blue borders. While his plastic counters were cracked like all the others, they shined and smelled of vinegar. John pulled a small percolator from above the stove, filled it at the sink and threw two scoops of coffee in the canister.

“I haven’t seen one of those in a while.”

“I don’t like plastic in my coffee. Coffee oil and plastic oil together. Can’t be good for you.”

“Guess I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Listen Hector, I ain’t telling you this as a sponsor. As somebody who cares, you’re going to start drinking again unless you got something.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“How we going to get you lined up?”

“What you going to do, John? You got rent and shit too.”

The men stood in the silence, broken only by boiling water and barking dogs. When John began to cry, Hector just stared at the percolator. There’s no way to prepare to comfort a heaving nearly four hundred pound frame.

“Oh shit,” John said, “I’m so sorry. I don’t normally let things get under my skin like this.”

Snot ran in his beard. He pulled a dish towel, folded on the counter, and blew into it before saying, “Shit. This is a fucking dish towel. Not for nose blowing.”

Hector looked at the linoleum.

“I’m sorry to upset you like this. First thing and all.”

John came back from the laundry hamper with a towel and a handkerchief. He folded the towel on the sink and filled his hands with cold water. He threw his face into the small pool from his massive palms.

“No, Hector, you are absolutely right. I’ve been sober twenty-two and a half years. This is the biggest disruption I’ve had. When I don’t have a handle on things, I get

nervous. When I get nervous. I want to relax a bit and you know how that goes. We're alcoholics."

"So what are we going to do?"

Black coffee spit against the bulb at the top of the percolator.

"We're going to drink some good coffee and brainstorm. Take a seat."

Hector made his way over to the couch.

"Nice quilt."

"I made it. That thing kept me sober for five years. I'm a shit quilter, so I had to be okay with pulling back and starting over a few times. Eventually, I made it to the end. Made it from pieces of an old one my grandma made."

Hector leaned away from the quilt.

"Sentimental shit man."

"How you take it?"

"Black."

John handed Hector a coffee mug with a cowboy riding a Stegosaurus.

"Where'd you get this mug?"

"Yard sale. Thought it was funny."

Hector blew the steam off the top and sipped.

"Fuck that's strong. I'm going to be wired up all day."

"Not strong. It's just roasted dark. I roast it all in a cast iron. Whisk the shit out of it. Can't stand a burnt roast."

John sat in silence, sipping with his eyes closed. Steam wafted between his fingers from the coffee mug, a tiny thing in his hands.

“You heard about this cooperative,” Hector asked.

“Yeah, Robert came and said something to me about it.”

“How you feel about the whole thing?”

“I don’t want you taking this the wrong way, but it mixes therapy and work a bit much for me.”

“What’s that mean? AA poster boy over here.”

“You know I ain’t a racist, but I just want to work without worrying who I’m offending all the time.”

“I guess that’s true. Still, every job has its bullshit. At least this bullshit means well, right?”

“Guess so.”

John walked around the room and pulled each curtain to a small rope that he tied on each side.

“Curtains. Window ain’t right without curtains.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyhow, you got any ideas for work?”

“Not really. I lift shit. I was born big and I can lift. I can’t work like I used to, but I still got something left.”

“What you thinking?”

“Maybe move to somewhere with a Lowes or a Home Depot or something. I can work their lumber yard. Load pine from Brazil in their cars from Korea for minimum wage. Fucking America.”

“I’m thinking of submitting something for this cooperative.”

“Really? What you got in mind?”

John sat back in his recliner and took a large draw of coffee.

“You know how everybody was working on shit the other day?”

“Doing shit they should have got to years ago.”

“Yeah, well, Marie is always taking laundry over to the Washateria in town.”

“Sure. So do I.”

“Well, I got tired of hearing her bitch about it.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

“No, I did something about it. I went over to the wash room here and fixed the washer.”

“Really? Good for you.”

“Yeah, the dryer is busted, but the washer works.”

John got up to refill his coffee mug.

“More?”

“No, I’m still working on this cup.”

“How’s this work with the cooperative?”

“I’m thinking I’ll fix busted appliances. Start with washers, then dryers and maybe make my way over to dishwashers someday.”

“That’s an idea. But scrap prices are high. You’re going to be working a pretty tight line.”

“That’s my out. I’ll buy a little over scrap and if it goes wrong, I can always count on scrap price to cushion the loss. Payoff isn’t great, but it’s something if it’s steady.”

“You going to work this, huh?”

“Hope so. I ain’t going to just get thrown out because the mill is down. I’ll drink myself to death. I’m man enough to admit that. AA or not.”

John’s cat saunters into the room and jumps onto the counter top.

“Off the counters, Missie,” John shouts.

“How about this coffee thing? Think you could make that work?”

“Oh, I just do that for me. And I fuck up every third batch. Make a decent one in ten.”

“What would it take to make it work?”

“Fuck ton of money that I don’t have. That no bank would lend me. Washers are one thing. Coffee’s another.”

“I tell you what. We going to keep each other sober through this.”

John sat down his mug and leaned toward Hector.

“Yes we fucking are. I ain’t pissing what I got away.”

“Then we going to support each other in these applications too. We going to get funded and we going to run some dinky, barely making it operations. Otherwise, we might as well go crawl in some bottles right now.”

“I’ll try it, Hector. We sponsor each other now.”

Hector stood and extended his hand to John.

John stood and said, “Come in for the real thing,” and pulled Hector’s face into his chest.

“Thank you for coming for me, Hector. Best talk I’ve had all week.”

“Thanks for the coffee. Best cup I’ve had. Beats the piss out of off-brand.”

When Hector opened the door, Missie bolts, teasing every chained dog on the row.

One of Hector's scrap dogs, Alex, had spotted the discolored washer at the metal yard in Benton. When he called Hector, he told him there was no rust and no bullet holes. Alex wanted twenty for the unit and another twenty for delivery. When Hector told him to crush it, he came down to twenty with free delivery. Alex brought the washer to the storage shed Hector was renting from the park for a shop.

Hector had received a five thousand dollar loan from the cooperative for tools and rent. It was the first loan he'd ever qualified for. One of the preconditions was that Hector return to an alcohol support group of his choosing. Since he'd been working with a group at the Catholic church to keep his license after a DWI last year, he said he'd go there. Hector had protested, but Condrado told him that the cooperative wasn't a bank. "The business and the town are linked."

Alex brought the washing machine over to the shop before his shift at the scrapyard and Hector gave him twenty for the haul.

"Coffee?"

"Sure. Been up since four today."

Hector pours him a cup from the percolator he carried from his house.

"How's the work?" Alex asks.

"Been all right. If this turns out a dud, I can scrap it and almost break even. If I can fix it up, paint it real nice and all, I can move this thing."

"How much?"

“Depends on features and all. Looks like it’s a Whirlpool knock off. I could probably fish for a hundred and move it for eighty.”

“Eighty to a hundred in profit.”

“No, eighty to a hundred minus wages and parts and gas.”

“Where do you sell at?”

“You know the bar, Sharks?”

“Yeah? They selling washers at the bar?”

“Daughter of the lady who owns it, Helen, she’s the organizer of this cooperative.”

“How old is she?”

“Young twenties.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, she’s got shit figured out.”

“How about the mill?”

“Ain’t coming back.”

“That sucks.”

“Yes and no. I might have a better thing here, but it ain’t steady.”

“That’s why I scrap. Working the yard makes it steady and the bonuses are in the scrapping.”

“Marie’s got my steady now.”

“She got some work again?”

“Yeah, she’s running the Washateria now.”

“How’d she pull that?”

“That’s the cooperative deal. Ladies who ran it wanted out of town after the mill went down and so Marie put in an application to buy it. Selling point was that I would be contracted for maintenance and she would buy washers from me.”

“Mutual back scratch?”

“Yeah, they call it mutual support. Good for the marriage too.”

“You find anyone who wants to mutually support a scrap yard boy, you let me know. I need to get back up to Benton. Thanks for the coffee.”

Hector pulls the agitator from the washing machine one of his scrap dogs got at the metal yard.

“O rings are probably all as warped as this one,” he says, holding the O-ring from the base of the barrel.

“How about drivetrain?” Kevin, his first hire, asks.

“I’m going to work in here to check this connection. You want to get that cabinet off and check the motor?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

The word stops Hector. He’d never been a boss or even a supervisor.

“Just Hector.”

Hector leans into the washer top from the side. He tips up onto the exposed steel toes of his boots to bend at his hips like a danseur retreating from a lover or a fairy.

Hector’s jeans slip past his ass crack.

Kevin says, “Maybe you should have been a plumber.”

“This is kinda like plumbing. Hoses and pipes. Water in, water out.”

“Talking about your fashion, brother.”

Hector pulls at his belt loop and the pants sag back past his crack again.

“How’s that cabinet coming?”

“Almost off.”

“You’d have it off if you weren’t staring at my ass all day.”

“I’d have it off if you weren’t waving your ass in my face all the time.”

“Chitter fucking chatter, man. Let’s hear some drive updates.”

Kevin whistles when the cabinet comes loose.

“Lookie here, lookie here, lookie here. We got a strait line drive. Fancy.”

“Hold on,” Hector says from the washer canister. He pulls the agitator and straitens up with it.

“That’d be nice if it all works. If something goes sideways in there, you’re shot. Not as easy as changing a belt or a bearing.”

“We plug it in and see?”

“Not yet. Go grab that ammeter from under the shed and we’ll check connections on this bad boy.”

When Keven comes back with the box, Hector has already pulled the capacitor from the motor.

“This here’s what you call a Whirlpool style. What we got to figure out is if this motor is good. If it is, we got a good find here.”

“Hope so. Otherwise, it’s copper price.”

“Yup. Now switch that dial to the big O there on the left, that’s for Ohms.”

“Not amps?”

“No we want to know how much resistance this motor is going to give. Amps are flow, like a faucet. Resistance is like that sprayer nozzle you put on the end of the hose. You got to be able to control the water. Otherwise, you’re running a fire hose on your fucking tomatoes.”

“Gotcha,” Kevin says, pulling the plastic tips from the probes.

Hector touches two terminals and says, “Touch them here and we’re going to see what shape this coil is in.”

When Kevin does he says, “point one.”

“Touch them together.”

“Also point one.”

“The metal has got a little corrosion on it. Humidity gets to it. What that means is that the motor is good in that it has no internal resistance. Now keep it there.”

Hector reaches behind the motor and begins rolling the shaft between his hands.

“Now?”

“Six point, no, seven and seven, now eight.”

Hector spun faster.

“Now it’s going down. Five. Now four point six. Now four. Steady at four.”

“That means it’s good for all we can tell.”

“Nice!”

“Not so fast. Take a look at this agitator.”

Hector hands Kevin the plastic shaft.

“Tell me what you see.”

“It’s moldy.”

“It got rained on. That’s no problem. Look at the bottom.”

“The plastic is a little chewed on.”

“Yeah. That’s probably why they chucked it. It wasn’t moving their cloths.”

“Can we fix it?”

“Nope. Plastic.”

“How much that going to run us?”

“Probably fifty to eighty.”

“Shit. For a piece of plastic?”

“They want folks to get the new washer.”

“Yeah, I want free cigarettes, but it ain’t happening.”

“You ain’t Mister and Misses Whirlpool are you?”

“No, but I bet they got their problems too.”

“Yeah, like which car should I drive today.”

“Or how little Johnny eats his caviar too fast.”

“Na. You don’t get rich like that without a decent percent of people hating you.

Even if it is jealousy.”

Hector started pulling wires from a switch under the lid.

“Hand me that meter.”

“You think people hated Daddy Thompson. Think that’s why Junior set up this cooperative?”

“This is your water level control. If it goes bad, you’ll either flood the place, never fill or only half fill.”

“What’s the three wires?”

“Hot, the purple wire, full tub, this brown wire, and, pink for for an empty tub.”

“Okay. So I test on the hot and the pink?”

“If it’s empty like this it should be continuous between the hot and this pink wire.”

“Yeah, zero ohms.”

“Looks like this baby’s still in the running. Even with the busted agitator.”

“What’s next?”

“Hot and cold water mixer.”

Hector taps a blue plastic covered piece with his screwdriver.

“Take the wires off each coil. Then put the ammeter on each side of the coil. You got to turn it up to 1000 Ohms though.”

Kevin fumbled with the plastic cover.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

You dig through the pile of used flooring. Mostly oak, cherry and pine. On the surface, the wood is scarred, gouged and split. You pull a stick. Someone has painted the surface maroon, but inside, no more than an eighth inch down, the grains are run. You run your thumbs on the surface, wondering if they would have torn up the floor without the paint.

“Maple,” you say aloud, naming the material.

The board pieces are 5 foot long. Turning the wood on its side, you see bowing where the board wanted to be a tree. You lay the board on your bench paint-side down and look. A series of shadowy grain gashes sit perpendicular to the grain lines. Inside the wood, they seem so slight, but once exposed, they will deflect the light to look like animal stripes. Fiddlebacks they call the grain, much like they call the brown recluse the fiddleback spider.

You draw circles above four small burls and draw X's over two knots. Each knot marks outgrowth where a branch reached out for the sun and the carbon. Each branch risked infection, wind, lightning or fire in the name of growth. Each burl tells of trauma. Maybe a tree-worm or a bug that a bird pecked for. Maybe fungal spores that this maple fought off. Maybe just a recessed bud like an ingrown hair. Your vision only shows you so much. You unfold your line rule and make a mark two inches from each burl.

You clamp the wood into your bench hook until the feet begin to press into the grains' surface. You pull down your Carcase saw, notch one tooth around the edge and pull across the grains. You push the blade back through your small gap, bouncing the

blunt side of the teeth against the new surface until you have half the saw through. You pull again, the blade coming through the wood as easy as an onion. You see the bands popping, drawing back into themselves like capillaries in flesh. Your hand and arm are an extension of the saw and the kerf is kept to minimum. The rocking movement from the teeth in air then wood and back again moves through your back and wiggles your belly. Sweat begins to break on your face and your shoulders, your belly and your groin. You feel the pain of separation in the wood, the loss of what's left of an intact trunk. Then it's over. You move to the other mark, this one, just two inches above a small burl. You rock and wiggle again until the wood pops.

You trace the outline of a spoon onto the wood. In your hand, the tenon saw seems slight. It's blade is but a thin sheet of steel, tightened like a piano string. You square your feet to the wood grain, twist your hips at a 45 degree angle and draw your elbow like a pool cue. The grains attract one another, but your saw will separate them. As you run the saw down the grain line, you feel the mutilation of a nutrient channel, sense the revolting pulls of grain from either side of your offense. Your kerf is narrow, but it always seems a waste. The trauma only solidifies your resolve. You cut across the grain on each side with your carcass saw. Each side clatters as it falls.

The cutout looks like a small mallet. A square peg leading to a block. A sound burl centers the block, the eventual spoon bowl. Three bird pecks lay on the handle. Thin exploratory marks. Too spaced for a drummer. A deliberate digger like a Northern Flicker.

No breakfast for the Flicker in this spoon.

You use your dovetail saw to follow a grain line across the bend. You turn, severing the grain and keep turning, popping grain after grain. The blade begins to heat, but you're almost finished with the turn. You stop a little short. You can see a strong grain that will run down the edge of the bowl, a scraping edge for pot bottoms. The other grains are decent, but not like this. An uneven spoon with a strong edge is better, you decide, taking the length of the grain with three full dovetail strokes. The piece looks like an oversized bottle plug.

You clamp the spoon neck between two thick cuts of leather. You adjust the spoke shave for an aggressive bite. You pull curl after curl of wood from the handle, twisting the shave around the piece as you go. The four corners fall into eight smaller ridges and then multiply and diminish again. You stop, reduce the bite in the blade and pull. You pet the piece with you palm, shave a spot, and stroke again. When it feels round, you stop, pull the piece from the grip and bend it with all of your strength against your leg.

The snap surprises you. The grains looked so strong. You know that nobody would ever place that much pressure on a wooden spoon, but you will call them an unbreakable wooden spoon. Your reputation is built on the spoon's strength. Your artistry relies on its beauty. Wood, you tell people, is the plant world's most amazing show of strength. Ant's you will always add, are animal's.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

John clapped and bellowed “there she’s blows” when the first flakes of burnt coffee husk wafted from the chimney exhaust pipe that he’d bored in the side of Big John’s Roast Shack. Abandoned for most of its life, the building had briefly housed a small engine repair shop and, years before, a saw smith. The metal roof needed patching and the Cypress siding needed painting and the porch couldn’t hold Big John alone, much less with a crowd. Robert and Condrado came over and pulled it apart to reinforce the braces and replace the supports. The front porch looked so good, John decided to call Dallas Bump in Bear for a rocking chair or two. When John told Dallas he’d need a plus sized model, Dallas had told him he’d need to find a big tree, but that he’d get it done. When Dallas and his nephew, Leon, delivered two chairs to the shop they said they made a Bear model for Big John.

To celebrate John’s inaugural roast, Helen had the Cooperative board come by and string a ribbon across the porch steps. In the photo, John stands on the bottom step as the board stands behind. Junior, the tallest, comes to his shoulder. John holds a casserole dish of beans over the ribbon like he’s come to a house in mourning or in celebration of a birth. He’s never known how to turn his face in photos, so it could be either. All the members hold an assortment of thrift store coffee mugs and smile. The photographer had Condrado turn his mug around since it read, Happy Fucking Morning.

When John first approached the cooperative about a coffee roaster, they had asked for projections, surveys and product samplings. Junior had told him that a hunch and a tasty product wouldn’t guarantee his funding. John had just nodded and turned for the

door. Helen realized that the rejection was a bit too formal and asked if John would like support from the high school to put together a portfolio. The math teacher, Chuck Wildworth, had received funding for service projects related to the cooperative. While the help was appreciated, John worried for days over how his meeting would go. It had been thirty years since a blown knee had taken him off the football line and, since he hadn't found the use for classes otherwise, into the dropout pool. He had always struggled with reading, for years memorizing how words looked. When the John and Chuck finally met, Chuck immediately started asking questions about numbers. John pulled out an oversized yellow notebook and began outlining the expected costs.

The first couple roasts were decent but hardly to John's standards. He had developed brands based on roast and bean origin. Per cooperative principals, John had to source all the beans to certified Fair Trade and birds and rainforest friendly operations. Junior had told him, "think of these labels like you'd think of OSHA, a necessary pain in the ass." So John sourced and applied for certifications. He wrote letters explaining his shop to environmentalist coffee groups in Michigan, Texas and North Carolina. Ink's Technology Lab students helped John set up a website and a mail order system through Pay Pal. For a lumber mill operator, John considered himself pretty open to environmental issues, but the labels, like OSHA, seemed more like hoop jumping than anything. His ultimate worry was his roast, which he was still working out. Before he opened to the public, John said that he'd need to be able to roast a consistent 100 pounds of any roast, hitting only the intended flavor notes.

When John sat down with Chuck, who had volunteered to serve as a financial adviser to the shop, he asked about cost. When John was first asked to define the initial

target group, he had said every diner and kitchen counter within convenient driving distance. John had run the phones for most of the first afternoon, calling diners and asking if they'd be interested in switching coffee brands. Most said that they were locked into contracts with supplier brands because they got free coffee stations and grinders out of the deal. A few nicer restaurants in Hot Springs were interested in samples and they said that if they served the brand, they'd be happy to sell by the pound as well. Sharks had been the only bar and diner in Ink for almost three years, so, after convincing Susan of the superior flavor of the coffee and the prospect of a unique blend, she committed. When asked if she needed a sample, she said that "if it isn't good, I tell anyone who'll listen." Susan had always been more of a stick to carrot type of negotiator. The home market was trickier. Many drank Great Value or Folgers and were set on the price. In the follow up meeting, Chuck reminded John that he couldn't compete with bottom feeder prices, so he had to make it clear that he was offering an all together different product.

Big John's sister, Clarice, drove over from Gurdon for the inaugural roast and chatted with Maria and Hector about John and his role as an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor over slices of blueberry pie that she'd brought. She'd brought a peach cobbler too and the group stretched the deserts thin enough for the board, Big John, the photographer, Susan, Hector and Maria. They all took turns sniffing at the roasted coffee beans and John ground some up for the smell. He refused to brew the roast, saying it had to rest for a while before the grind.

"First impressions matter," he'd said, "Believe me when I say it'll be good when you have it."

A week later, John hovered over his open faced drum roaster with Helen, Junior and Hector. In addition to leasing the owner financing of the building, the cooperative had bought the roaster used on Ebay which they were leasing to Junior at 5%. John shouted over the roaster's engine noise.

“Those arms there, they keep the beans moving to ensure an even roast throughout the bean. Otherwise, you get a whole lot of weird flavors that you can't really find in the drink. What you really want is something like this.”

He moves over to line of paper lined jars filled with beans.

“This medium-dark roast, I call it The Honduran Campfire, in here you're going to find predominately smoky roast flavors that are just light enough to let the bean's bright flavor to come through.”

John activates an electric tea kettle which begins to gurgle. He scoops the coffee into a wall mounted hand grinder and looks to the group.

“Ain't no such thing as a free cup of coffee.”

They laugh and Helen moves to grind first, cranking on the iron arm.

“That's an antique. Early 20th is what the pawn shop said. I found it on Ebay and it was covered in old grease and dirt and the gears were all clogged and wouldn't turn. Cleaned it up and now, grinds like a charm.”

Grounds fell from the mill into a glass bulb on the bottom.

“See, I'm not only marketing a coffee brand for consumers. I'm marketing another coffee experience. People can come here and we'll talk about brewing methods, how to pair a brew with the bean, and grinding. What Helen is doing there is perfect.”

Helen turned back to the group.

“Of course it is. Ain’t I a woman?”

“Yes mam,” John said, “the hand crank is a bit of a novelty. I like things like that myself, but your average consumer is going to want electric.”

“Can you make that available here,” Junior said.

“See, it’s looking like inventory is going to be a tough cost to handle at first. I was thinking that I could offer to set folks up with a grinder and initial brewer and give them their first pound of coffee free.”

Helen finished the grind.

“Can you afford that?”

“Not sure. It would be a chance to develop a relationship.”

“Hector, what you think about that,” Junior asked.

“Can you cut it to a half-pound and ask that they come back for follow up questions and such? That will let them buy a pound of their own.”

“Smart,” Helen says.

John pulls the bulb from the grinder and wafts the smell to his nose.

“I want y’all to smell this.”

He passes the bulb around.

“Linger a second on those smells. They’re as important as tastes for a roaster like me. First off, I want you to remember that each one of these beans was a fruit. Think of a cherry or a plum or an apricot. Beans are going to keep their fruit memories in their smell.”

John split the grounds into four cups and poured water from the kettle.

“Now, just let that set up for a minute. We need full percolation. One thing Chuck and I discussed for down the road is these diners, hotels and gas stations that are locked into contracts because of their brewing equipment. If they switch beans, their distributor bills them half a grand for the grinder and plastic coffee maker.”

“That’s why Mom never did that at Sharks,” Helen said.

“If they send the equipment back, however, no cost,” John said, looking at his watch, “but they still don’t want to cover equipment.”

“How much is the equipment actually?” Junior asked.

“I think most these places could get away with two hundred dollars or less and a superior coffee out of the deal, but they’d need serious convincing. Chains are out of the question, but the small joints still have choices.”

Junior looked to Helen. “Small gas stations and motels should be targets for the cooperative. Especially employee owned places.”

John glanced at his watch and said, “All right. Take those spoons and break up the crust. Spoon it over into this grounds bin. Grounds make the best fertilizer.”

“These beans are from Honduras, so they retain a bit of sweetness like you’d find in a raspberry.”

Helen, Junior and Hector sniffed at the crust at the top of their mugs.

“Break that crust up with a spoon,” John said, handing a spoon to Helen.

“As it breaks, really reach in there with your nose. Also, toss those pieces of crust into this bin. All used grounds are composted by the worm compost folks. Get’s them worms moving!”

John's booming voice startled the three, focused on the bits of crust floating in their coffees.

"Now the other smell—and taste, go ahead and sip a little—that you're looking for is the sugars. In the roasting, the coffee beans normal sugars get transformed by the heat. Sometimes those sugars are grainy like barley or rye and other times they can be as light as a darker honey or molasses, sometimes like dark chocolate or nutty like roasted pecans or walnuts."

Helen nodded and said, "I can almost taste something like the pecans on a pie."

"Yes, this is a darker medium roast, so you'll probably be picking that up."

"Sweet though," Hector said, "Almost sorghum."

"Sorghum's a good one," John said, taking a yellow pad from behind the jars and writing a note.

"Last thing, I'm looking for in a taste is how the burnt husk affects the flavor of the roasted bean.

Chapter Thirty

Mario Vargas splashes three waves of water and eucalyptuses oil from a milk carton onto the ironing board that juts from the back of the wood stove outside. As soon as the solution touches the old aluminum, steam raises and coats the cedar planks which rivet lines have pulled to the horse trailer. Mario Vargas wears his typical sauna attire, a hoodie and sweatpants, and Eddie Morales does the same, one trash bag on his torso, two others on his legs. Because of his costume's higher mobility, Mario has always maintained the temperature, 195 degrees. He's been chiding the devil since three, raising the day's heat by ninety degrees. When he sits back down, the cotton wrings itself under its own weight as Mario's makes the single cedar board sag between two concrete blocks.

"Surprised you don't have a lip in, boy. Or are you swallowing." The torrents come through Eddie's toes now.

"I do. I just don't need the cup anymore. Ain't producing saliva no more."

The two have been in the trailer for two hours now without taking water. Neither has eaten since having Raman and Weenies the night before. The men allow themselves one five minute break out in the normal heat for every thirty in the trailer. At the end of the break, they jog five minutes down the highway in their sweats. The jog aims to keep their muscles from seizing.

Eddie hasn't caught a fight for eight months now. Before Eddie's last, Mario cut weight with him. It was tradition for training partners to cut together at Full Contact Sports. The motive was that both partners should be ready to fight, but that only one would. If one partner thought about backing out, the idea of having a match passed to their training

partner would keep them from it. Partners should be hungry and jealous for each other's combat. Full Contact Sports, liked the tradition too. When organizers called Full Contact, they always got a fighter, even if it was a partner. Full Contact Sports always got their cut.

Eddie's last fight had been a backyard tournament in February. The organizers had rented a cage from a company in Little Rock, but decided against the mat. The tournament was marketed in the organizer's Country Beatdown series. For the first two minutes the fight was all kicks and posturing. A few big punches were thrown, first by Eddie, then by the opponent, a white boy in sweatpants from the mountains near Jasper. They took turns ducking these, getting kicky in the interim.

“Heard that Dax got him a job over at Kohl's.”

Mario nodded. “That motherfucker spars harder than most fight.”

“I know. He bruised up my ribs for two weeks.”

Eddie's crowd started to heckle. He felt the hundred dollar brawler bonus going out the window. He only knew his opponent as Fed, short for Confederate. He had the battle flag on the inside of each forearm and SKIN across the knuckles of his left hand. But they called him Fed because of his southpaw style. Fed favored his hook, always had, and loved to end a fight with it. Instead of wins and losses, Fed got himself on the Country Beatdown card with the number of jaws he had broken.

“Dax says Kohls ain't so bad. Bunch a milfs come round,” Eddie says, laughing.

“Shit. Dax be good to get with their fucking daughters. He's too ugly to be nothing but a perv.”

They took turns giggling, loopy in the heat.

“Yup. Probably hanging around the teeny sections. Trying to pawn J’s.”

When Fed dropped his right hand, and shifted his left hip forward, Eddie saw his opening. Everyone else knew to look for Fed’s hook. It was meant to be a surprise from the Southpaw, but Eddie had heard the gossip. When folks expected a hard knockout, Eddie knew to let them get right up on it, believe in it, to be sure of its imminence, Ali-Foreman style. Eddie needed that brawler bonus as bad as anyone fighting. So, when Fed started thinking south hook, Eddie faked a missed groin kick and leapt off the arch of his bare foot as the briers embedded themselves in his ball. Fed had already cocked his hook, raised his jaw to be proud of it, but when he raised them, his eyes didn’t see Eddie leaning in to get his jaw broken. Eddie had brought his right hand through a windmill and into a superman punch where it spread over Fed’s brow ridge, suddenly two inches higher than expected, the metacarpals fracturing like dam gates after a hard rain.

Mario gestured at the ironing board. “We’re going to need to load a log when we come back from the run.”

“How much time we have left?”

Depends on the scales. I needed to lose 12 pounds and I still had four to go twenty minutes ago.”

“Twelve? Where were you?”

“Two thirty seven.”

“Why twelve, then? That ain’t weight class.”

“Has something to do with the odds. Stevie said he’d throw me fifty if I was lighter than this Memphis boy.”

Eddie removes the trash bags from his legs. “Sorry buddy, I can’t take these bags much longer.”

“It’s good. Do what you need. I’m the one weighing.”

“What you know about this Memphis boy?”

“Tall, black, kickboxer. Doesn’t like to get on the ground at all.”

“You trying to take it there?”

“Beats getting my head knocked off by a kickboxer.”

When Eddie’s hand broke on Fed’s forehead, he pulled back and threw a series of machete-like leg kicks, praying that Fed would tap. Fed had balled up and covered his head with his fists, his cheeks with his forearms and his ribs with his elbows. Eddie jabbed at the top of Fed’s head with his left hand as Fed bent, hiding his belly from Eddie’s knees. Then Fed unfurled from that near heart crouch. Fed’s sinuses had blown snot and blood through his nose onto his teeth. Saline ran over and out of his eyes.

Mario asks, “You think Dax will keep this shit at Kohls?”

“I don’t know. Probably will until he gets a fight. Depends on how he looks afterward. Scares customers to look like that.”

“That’s why they put me in the back at Wall-mart.”

“Same with Lowes. Shit chance for a raise or good hours back there.”

“I heard about some law out in California that makes it illegal to fire folks for having shit in your face or ink or crazy hair and stuff like that.”

“Yeah, but having an eye swoll shut ain’t a fashion choice.”

“You probably right. Just another part of this thing. Makes us hungrier, so it’s good.”

When Fed moved to engage Eddie, Eddie tried to take it to the ground. Getting to the ground was priority one. Fed might have been stunned, but he still had both hands, so when Eddie rushed him and buried his face in his neck, Fed wasn't thinking about getting to the ground, but making sure that Eddie's bare back would land against the packed dirt and winter-stunned grasses. The two bodies landed in this way and Fed started pounding on Eddie's face and head, pulling one hand aside, then punching that side of Eddie's face. Fed had moved behind Eddie, had taken an elbow to the kidney and another to the neck in order to get the crook of his elbow on Eddie's windpipe and his Confederate flag forearm and swollen bicep on Eddie's jugulars and carotid arteries. Eddie was squirming and flailing, as Fed trapped the blood in his brain. With his hand broken, Eddie couldn't do much more. Right then was the moment, he would said later, that he felt a diarrhea coming. He would say that he tapped before the blood choke blacked him out because out of respect to Fed, to himself, to the ring, the to the next fight. The excuse rang hollow though with organizers and fight pitchers, fighters and odds makers. Eddie wouldn't catch another fight unless Mario backed out of one.

Chapter Thirty-One

Elbert Bumbalough begins by tracing petals onto the corrugated metal. He found this oxidized lode in the woods near an abandoned still. Rusted-out holes tear at the marker's tip, leaving an inky, maroon path like outlines of crushed brick. While marking, Bumbalough tucks the front corner of his tongue into the gap between the teeth that he calls his rabbits and his vamps. His eyes work the metal like a kid on a graffiti spree, and the wounded sharpie line widens and narrows as it rises diagonally toward each metallic peak, where it will just linger, destined to fall into another trough or hail divot.

Bumbalough's whites could project his design onto the dulled aluminum: six paisleys with broad, fleshy plains and blunt tails, identical to the paisleys that still adorned Bumbalough's twenty-two blue handkerchiefs. He wouldn't need half of his handkerchiefs, but Elbert Bumbalough never could throw a thing away. Bumbalough had always preached how things were meant to be worn out, regardless of their fashion status. "Make you work for it—earn it," he'd preach.

Bumbalough had been the umpire of the lumber line for twenty-six mill years and deep blue was his color. Five years before the fire, Daddy Thompson brought in a new pitcher, a man-sized band blade, which was more consistent than the old circle saw. So, as Elbert Bumbalough aged, he was moved to action with diminishing frequency. On the clock, Bumbalough was slightly bent, hands on his knees, his crotch holding a pouch of belly, to eyeball the eight square inches of lumber face. Bumbalough claimed that he could know a stick like he could know a salesman. He'd carry on unprompted, "A

crookedness of the body or of the soul can be found out, if you could simply memorize the honest shape of a face.”

The new band saw forced Bumbalough to earn his name, Elbert Eagle Eye. It bucked less than the circle blade when committing a sin. The marketing teams began arriving after the band saw. Once or twice a year logos would arrive on a smiling face and brochures from Morbark and Carbon-tech, KNBD and USNR. Daddy Thompson and Junior shook the men’s hands and listened to their pitches, but never took the bait. Bumbalough’s life depended on the mill’s financial straits.

Slowly, the visits made Bumbalough sweat less, made his temple sound with less urgency, because it was said that no machine could match Elbert Eagle Eye. Then, on a Thursday when Elbert almost believed in the inevitable humanity of his position, the Thompsons bought a unit from Carbon-tech. Instead of Elbert’s storied eyes, three lasers would check for uniformity. A camera would stare down the line like a shotgun. The leather palmed snatchers immediately called the contraption Elbert Eyes, which was meant in reverence, but they soon forgot Bumbalough’s crescendo call—Ya-Epp-there—and Bumbalough’s two fingers as they watched for Elbert Eyes’ green light and listened for the speaker which emitted more of a staccato grunt than the buzz that they first expected. In time, the snatchers even forgot that they had expected a buzz.

When Elbert Bumbalough finishes his sixth paisley, he caps his pen and gazes at the metal replication, stiff atop the picnic table like an anchored cloth. Even though Bumbalough was let go from the mill a month before the fire, the week of smolder broke him. Before the fire, Bumbalough had a silly belief: that he could get work at Thompson’s again; that he could wait for an open position on the yard or at another spot

in the line without a camera; that blood would stain his blue handkerchief purple again; that the dust would send him sneezing and hacking yellow into it until it was green again. It was only a belief, too far-fetched to be called a dream because twenty-six years on a lumber line wrecks a body beyond efficient function. A belief that existed apart from Daddy Thompson's mantra: in the modern mill, machines wait for the bodies, not the other way.

Elbert Bumbalough pulls on his gloves and digs for his straight-claw hammer and flathead screwdriver. The gloves had been sweat conditioned for ten years. Bumbalough had torn his original pair on a piece of barb wire that a tree had grown around and concealed until the band saw exposed it. Bumbalough had almost missed the error until he caught what everyone said looked like a mosquito perched on the stick's ass end. Right above the ass crack, they'd say, like a cute little bow, he'd brag. The barb was Elbert's final Eagle Eye find and it tore through his glove and into his arm with the resentfulness of a revealed con, leaving a jagged, palatinate purple atop the blackness of his skin.

Bumbalough lines the screwdriver's face onto the marked outline of a paisley's tail, raises the straight claw hammer, and in between the two strikes that could have been one—if so, a connection and its immediate echo—Elbert sneaks an undetectable squeal into the interim by pivoting the flathead's face before his second hammer fall to punch a twelve degree crook in each cutout. Bumbalough's design has the paisley tails facing outward like an inside-out membrane so that he could walk around the picnic table while punching. So he punches and steps, resets and punches again like a cabinet carpenter with

a finish saw, each double tap punch the saw's progression and return across the wood grains.

His two-step complete, Bumbalough noses his hawk-bill snips upside down into the first dogleg starter hole. As he follows the concave line, munching at each rib, the tin sheet clatters against the table like thunder. Bumbalough approaches then makes the paisley's cove where he turns his snips right side up and makes the remaining convexity with ease until he rediscovers his original crotch, and snips the first petal from the sheet. It slaps and barks against the table with some glee.

Purposely slow on his first cut, Elbert Bumbalough challenges himself with speed. Precision is no longer a contest. Rib by rib, his snips crunch through rust and shine. A paisley drops from the pattern every thirty-three seconds. When Bumbalough begins his fifth, he looks for a sub-thirty time. Elbert Bumbalough fears his new nicknames, mumbling them into being as he cuts, assuming alliteration—Sunflower Sam, Seedy Sam, Petal Pusher, Pawn Shop Peddler, Salad Man Sam—smiling then distancing himself from this pitiful silliness as his fifth petal drops after thirty-one seconds. It is a new personal record for Sam, but it irritates him enough that he can only cut the sixth petal from the sheet in thirty-five. Feigning fatigue like an athlete before a crowd, Bumbalough gathers his petals.

Bumbalough rattles a can of yellow paint, lays the cutouts in the gravel and coats the surface until the paint almost ripples into the metal's grooves. Six yellow paisleys. This step comforts Bumbalough, even though he wouldn't allow himself to admit it. This is the first moment that the pattern is undeniably petal-like. Only he would remember his handkerchief.

Bumbalough walks to the parking lot and opens the trunk of his Camry. He pulls a green pool noodle from the corner and lifts the carpet to reveal the spare tire compartment. The spare has been on the front wheel for a year and, in its place, Elbert Bumbalough has laid hubcaps and compressed cans, broken lawnmower blades and halves of fender flares. He pulls a fourteen inch Honda hubcap from the collection. The face is broad and its eight spindles squat like Atlas, straining under the logo's weight. Walking back, Elbert Bumbalough reaches down and touches the metal's edge. The paint is dry on all the petals but those in the shade. The late winter sun lets the paint relax into its form. The coming summer assault will bubble them and blister them like uncovered skin.

Elbert Bumbalough paints the hubcap a high gloss black. As he sprays the circular pattern he thinks first of flowers and then the bumblebees headed for them, then of wasps and Round-Up, lawn mowers and the swept dirt from the trailer park, cotton fields and pepper plants, late season watermelons in the dog days, and then, inescapably, of that pine sap dug from the grooves of boot soles, coat zippers, and the fingertips of gloves.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Human is here again. Outside the hens speak of corn and me. I have not seen these hens. They run and peck at the bugs in the wood between the Outside and Inside. Human pulls me from my enclosure to the larger enclosure. The larger enclosure is made of wood and bugs. Bugs are both inside and Outside. When they move into my smaller enclosure I snatch them from the air.

Human pushes my breast to the ground. I do not see the metal that could cut me like a spurs. I know she has the glass and the chicken wire. I fight. I peck. I twist my legs to plunge my talons. The glass and wire have been pulled from my heel. Human is so strong, so big, like a whole flock of chicken hawks at one.

She lays my head into the dust.

She draws a line in the earth with her digit. The tear begins at my beak. The trough is only as deep as claws are high. My eyes begin seeing and dreaming together. At first, I see into the earth and dream into the air. Then I dream into the earth and see into the air. Each eye flops between seeing and dreaming like a dying cock.

Slowly the dreams turn to the earth. One eye is still dreaming and one eye is still seeing, but the two come closer together. Earth and Earth. A small digging in the Earth that Human made.

Chapter Thirty-Three

She called me from the dam face, singing my name into the concrete and rocks. It was still dusk when she began. The bears had just started to move. My waters filled the valley on the other side of the concrete. I trickled from the overflow pipes around the sides. She stood in the sand and called for me. I hardly recognized her song because of its resolve, its power. She demanded my presence.

By the time I rose from the waters, I was sure that I would kill her before midnight. I doubted that her body could channel my wrath. I rose.

“Ines,” I sang, “I slam from the waters to this dam.”

She said, “Rise.”

“I slam from these waters on this dam.”

“Rise,” she commanded again.

“Feel my power, silly vessel of me. Slam ourselves against the concrete.”

She sang a song that rippled across my surface. It was unlike anything I had taught her. She had power that I had missed. So much more than Old Woman Witch. She sang with something primal.

“Rise, Kawuatz and bring the flock.”

My spring waters began to rise through the sunbaked layers of lake.

“Rise up, Kawuatz. Bring the flock.”

I broke through the surface as a fog, cutting the heat with coolness.

“The flock flies.”

She had taken control of me like nothing had done since the quicksand.

“The river runs.”

My voice amplified her song off the lake face. We sounded for hundreds of miles. The birds heard. I sang for my rooster and he cocked and crowed despite the night, breaking through his chicken wire. When I found that old chicken wire in my throat, Ines said to sing. The wire was made from old master records. Bluesmen and country yodelers.

Suddenly Ines had these musicians’ reverberations in her shoulders and she mixed and amplified their songs. The turkeys heard. They rose from the mountain slopes by the hundred, grabbing blacksnakes and copperheads on their spurs. Randall broke from his shed, slashing the hens into action. My calls brought the worms. The hens gorged themselves on the earth.

The hens lifted on our song. The rooster lifted on our voice. The turkeys lifted and flew like raptors. All had filled themselves with earthworms. Their feet wriggled with them and the worms rained from the sky into Ink.

A million Grackles heard the song and seized earthworms and cicadas. They flew. Indigo Buntings followed. Ines sang, “fire fire, where where, see it, see it,” and the buntings filled the tight spaces of sound with their chatter. Painted Buntings, not to be outdone by their cousins’ songs rose in the thousands. Their blue heads looked almost purple in the low light. When the valley took note of the show, the creepers rose, then the thrashers and gnatcatchers. The cowbirds came and the chickadees. The yellowthroats and downeys. All carried earthworms.

The barred and screech owls made their decision, grabbing mice and squirrels in route. The fish crows elected to race from my banks. Ines sang and I hoped. Hairy

woodpeckers turned my way. A hundred red-eyed vireos rose from the hardwoods and a flock of tanagers came with bees and wasps snapped in their mouths. There were sapsuckers, cormorants and a Prothonotary Warbler. A roadrunner leapt from a quartz outcrop with a rattlesnake, gliding to my face. Loggerhead shrikes, the butcherbirds, ran grasshoppers and cicadas onto spines and thorns and rose with their sacrifices. The turkey vultures followed it all.

Randel alone understood what I had known, that a thing can be here and there, present and absent all at once, reverberating. Randel led the flock to the concrete face. When he landed on the ledge, the turkeys followed. Every bird knew to follow the turkeys.

The flock dropped their worms into the lake. Brim snapped at the first worms. A school of buffalo fish turned and snapped, slamming against the concrete. Drum and shiners and carp began to feast. The sunfish ran from all corners of the lake. Crappie darted, grabbing at the hundreds of worms that kept falling. The walleye and striper and bass began to feast on fish. Pickerel turned.

Ines greeted every fish and bird by name and as she did her song grew, twisting around her like a tornado. Pines began to fall on the slope into the lake. The birds kept arriving, perching on the dam, dropping worms into the lake. The fish kept running, piling thousands of bodies on the concrete. My song echoed off the concrete into the valley. The squirrels ran and even the armadillos took notice. The bears ran to the higher crags. The deer jumped from the old river's path. They whispered Kawuatz and as I heard, I screamed theirs. They were recognized.

Ines fell and lost control of me. I rushed from my waters and took up her veins. Her heart raced, but from her own accord. I pulled her into the air. She rose and we sang. Then, like something had woken in her, she pushed me out again, buried me under the waters by the lake. When she sang again, her song lifted the birds. Randall led them all. On her breath, thousands of tons of feather and body took to the sky. The raptors came, slashing them for the trespass. The blood and feathers fell to the lake and the fish raised it to a boil. The panthers yowled and ran to the peaks.

Randall dove, and with him, like beacons, the painted buntings and warblers dove. Hundreds of birds dropped blacksnakes and copperheads and rattlesnakes that twisted and snapped in the moonlight. Randall spread his wings before the water and shredded a brim on his spur. He snapped a trout. A gar grabbed him and took him down. He pecked and clawed and bit at fish as he descended, screaming in the depths of me.

Ines held me down and I fought like the rooster.

The flocks began hitting the water, pecking and cutting at the surface fish until pulp floated through the water like frog eggs. The catfish took notice. The largest from the channel heard the mess and took their run at the dam.

“The waters are yours, Kawuatz, and the air is for the raptors. The land is mine. And the waters are yours.”

She released me to sing and spread through the lake. I rose to the surface to break out and kill her, but her song beat me down again.

“Raptors sing for the air, you sing for the water and I will forever sing for this land.”

The fish smashed against the concrete until it began to crack.

Ines sang at that failure and I sang for every fish to whip and smash against the hardness.

When the first leak sprung an alarm sounded from somewhere on the mountain face. A spotlight fixed on Ines. At her command, the hawks attacked the bulb until it broke. The bats came from the hills, eating and shitting into the night. Mosquitos lay down on the lake and fish broke.

The dam broke and I leapt from its face. I ran into the hollow, past the turbines that I had been tasked with. Ines opened her arms and met me. Her body broke on my face. I broke pines and cypress and hardwood. I wrecked houses and tossed trailers. I killed with disdain. I made the town in minutes. An entire lake swelled behind me. I sang a bigger song than I did for DeSoto and I cleared this land. The school fell and the bar fell and the shops came down. I shred sheetrock and shingles and glass panes as I went. Dogs yowled and ran from me, but the humans only felt me shake the earth. Then nothing.

Tremendous women know my name. No dam will hold forever. I am Kawuatz.

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