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# Taste of Dirt

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TASTE OF DIRT

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by

Brianna L. Heisey

May 2009

## **Dedication**

To my Mom and Dad, for raising me wild

TASTE OF DIRT

by

BRIANNA L. HEISEY

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Works Cited.....	25
Chapter 1.....	26
Chapter 2.....	32
Chapter 3.....	42
Chapter 4.....	53
Chapter 5.....	57
Chapter 6.....	64
Chapter 7.....	82
Chapter 8.....	98
Chapter 9.....	102
Chapter 10.....	132
Chapter 11.....	148
Chapter 12.....	165
Chapter 13.....	172
Chapter 14.....	186
Chapter 15.....	207
Chapter 16.....	223
Vita.. ..	228

**An Introduction: Life, Politics, and Technicalities in *Taste of Dirt***

## Head in a Tree, Feet above Ground

*“We are all filled with a longing for the wild. There are few culturally sanctioned antidotes for this yearning. We were taught to feel shame for such desire. We grew our hair long and used it to hide our feelings. But the shadow of wild woman still lurks, during our days and in our nights. No matter where we are, the shadow that trots behind us is definitely four-footed” (xvii). – Clarissa Pinkola Estes*

It’s an amazing thing, looking back on one’s life and assessing the series of events leading up to the present. Like the trail of pebbles or breadcrumbs that must be left through an unknown forest, they tumble into the leaves and grass, mingling with the natural elements of the landscape, helping to record and keep one’s journey in the direction of truth. Each event is a point of reference to revisit and rediscover, providing a necessary change in perspective that affects the present state of mind, with wisdom and hope for the future. A future filled with new events and new perspective, continuously filtered through the past. This is the process of human growth, as we all know. Today, with a completed thesis in my hands, a fictitious novel based on real life experience, I am able to assess the endless layers of dynamic exchange that have made this writing possible.

Although time is not really a linear occurrence, a simple and clear analysis of one’s life can be replayed chromatically, like the notes in a music scale. Some of my memories are more vivid and brilliant than others but I certainly remember the place that shaped me most. Born and raised in the southwestern desert town of Tucson, Arizona, my days were filled with sunshine and endless hours of outdoor playtime. My brothers and I were always outside playing in the neighborhood, at the park, in the front yard and eventually in my favorite play place of all, in the tallest branches of our backyard Mulberry tree. I spent hours, entire days climbing in this tree, creating new worlds, having tea parties, tying blankets together to make

castles and eventually, reading my favorite books there. The neighbor kids would come too and climb with my brothers, but nobody ever climbed as high as I did without falling. I climbed high into the tallest, thinnest branches that swayed with the wind, breaking out into the blue sky above, peering over the houses and into every backyard in the neighborhood. I could see traffic coming to a standstill at the main intersection of Ina and Thornydale, then picking up again when the light turned green. I could see the thick skin of the branches that held me up, refusing to let me fall.

Then, when I was eleven years old, my family began leasing a very small cabin located on Forest Service property in South-Eastern, Arizona in the Chiricahua Mountains. I knew the name for the mountains (though I could not spell it) and the name for the creek (Turkey), but I knew nothing of the recreational development in the area. So on many a bright mid-summer's morning, there wasn't much for me to do but explore. This is where my love of nature and sense of adventure flourished.

Standing in the middle of the wilderness, I would pick a peak or other defining landmark in the distance and declare that somehow I would make it there. I did not stop to consider the potential barriers that might keep me from my desired points, but instead, set off at once to reach them. I knew nothing of trail systems and could not afford to delay, within my sense of urgency, to discover these special spots. Tearing up the side of this mountainous terrain, on all fours at times, I always met my destination. For those who have ever done any kind of hiking, it is common knowledge that geographical features located on distant horizons can be misleading. Not only are they usually further than they appear, but are also mixed in with many false summits and entangled topography. The vegetation can range from different types of

trees—ponderosa pine, oak trees, junipers—to various types of bush like Manzanita, oak and sage brush. The bushier and rockier the terrain, the greater the challenge became.

Throughout these many adventures, I became increasingly aware of my body and its abilities. I felt it could overcome anything. When I returned from each adventure, I would examine my new wounds. All my various corners and angles, skinned and bloodied, became holy to me and over time the wounds on my knees, elbows and face blossomed into scars. These scars were the most cherished of all. I was truly alive, they told me, spelled out in a blushing brail of confidence across my body. My discourse of body talk had begun and I was truly listening. My attention to the human body and its place in nature had begun. My instinct and intuition told me to keep climbing. To climb higher.

### **The University, the United States Forest Service and Creative Writing**

When I left for college I was excited. I would miss my mountains and beautiful Sonoran Desert, but I was ready for a change. I was headed for Loyola Marymount University, a small school in the great big city of Los Angeles. I attended my classes, played sports, and engaged with my new landscape, experimenting and growing. It quickly became evident that I was a good writer. I was writing my own papers, as well as editing the papers of my friends. In my sophomore year, I made it official. I committed to a creative writing degree and I quickly became obsessed. My passion for writing came just in time for another major change in my life. I quit playing softball and began running cross country. This opened up my summers and allowed me to, in the summer after my junior year, search for a real job.

I applied for many jobs and just when I thought nothing would pan out, a United States Forest Service (USFS) employee from Monticello, Utah called me. He explained that although I had no experience fighting wildland fires, my status of collegiate athlete told them that I might just be tough enough to handle it. I agreed. I was prepared and physically fit for anything. I had no idea then, just how hard the job would be. Soon I was back in the mountains, blazing trails up hillsides, cutting, digging and even climbing trees again. But I brought with me my new obsession. When I wasn't fighting fires, I was writing about them. Or writing about relevant topics as seen through the lens of a rookie, female firefighter, and passionate writer. I had discovered my niche. I knew what I loved to do and I knew what I loved to write about.

When I finished college, there was no doubt in my mind. I was going back to the mountains, this time to the Coconino National Forest in Flagstaff, Az. Throughout the years to come I would travel to dozens of forested areas throughout the western United States, including Alaska. My writing habit came with me. Eventually, I was ready to share all of my stories with the rest of the world, but I had become quite removed from anything scholarly. I decided that I wanted to learn more about the craft of writing, in order to piece together my collection and improve myself. I went back to school and began an equally strenuous but different kind of hard work. I began the intensive process of revision.

### **USFS Experience and Political Inspiration**

Fighting fire for the USFS wasn't always a happy challenge. The challenges came in other forms as well. At times, crewmembers and other personnel made it difficult to focus on the physical task at hand, as well as on my writing. We all had nicknames, usually good natured

ones, but sometimes I had to grin and bear it. It didn't really bother me too much when they called me Princess. I didn't get upset when I wore blisters into my feet—deep, red and oozing— and the medic on one fire began calling me tootsie, or just toots for short. I laughed out loud because it was witty. Then one day a new crewmember got in my face and called me vagina. Not “a vagina,” but simply Vagina, as if it were my name or title. For a split second there was laughter all around me, laughter at my expense. I was not laughing anymore. After the initial instant of shock passed, I grabbed his shoulder and kicked him with my heavy work boots as hard as I could, right in the shin. He screamed, bent over and grabbed his leg. “You bitch!” he hollered. Another instant passed and everyone was laughing again, but this time they were laughing at him. I had confronted the crew bully. The scene was straight out of a movie, the crowd just as fickle and hungry for more. I barely had time to feel satisfied. I felt remorse and worried about his feelings, because this is what non-bully's do. Feel things. But it was done. I turned and walked away, wandering to a different part of the cooling fire to continue working. Later that day he requested my friendship and we both let it go.

It is no real secret that there are not a lot of female fire fighters in the United States. For the Forest Service, a government agency, I had a hard time tracking down numbers. There is a reason why the recorded ratio of men to women in the USFS, firefighting division is difficult to obtain. Many of the employees are seasonal, that is they come and go with the change in the weather. Also, the government does not like to admit that one of its departments does not reflect the population. However, I can state that in my five years of fire experience working for five different districts, the ratio was usually about seven to one males to females.

It soon became increasingly evident to me that a great need for change existed. The change should not only come from the men, but also from the women. The change would need to be realized by everyone. I wrote about the forest. I wrote about the animals. I wrote about the rugged terrain and the heat of the flames. But mostly, I wrote about the amazing human interactions all around me. The good and the bad. I wrote, hoping to make these issues clearer for myself and the world around me.

### **The Evolution of a Nature Narrative**

*“A truly good book is something as natural, and as unexpectedly and as unaccountably fair and perfect as a wild flower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the East”(185). –Henry Thoreau*

The first novel I attempted during my MFA was a nonfiction piece and a parallel between my grandmother’s life and mine. The story began in a backyard with a little girl in a tree. Then returned in time sixty years to the Great Depression era and another little girl playing in the forest. That little girl was my grandmother. Over the course of a semester, the novel became increasingly difficult for me to write. I felt nervous, like I was not writing well enough to transcribe my grandmother’s amazing story. Like I could never fully capture the reality of her world from my perspective. I realized that I would eventually need to write that story, but not just yet. There was another, more readily available story that incorporated my own personal, political, and physical experiences. This other story, eventually earning itself the title, *Taste of Dirt*, would begin the same way, but instead of nonfiction throughout, it would become pure fiction based on nonfictional experience. I would create characters, events, and

settings that did not really exist, but resembled my memories like some distant hologram dancing in the heat waves above the desert sand. A fictional projection of many stories passed.

*Taste of Dirt* begins with a young woman, a female firefighter with the United States Forest Service, perched in the tallest branches of an aspen tree. She is seeking comfort from the branches, from the herd or pack of trees that all grow together. She is very alone and very naked. She is not naked to surprise the reader but instead to draw attention to her natural tendencies and desires and to focus on the human need to be without social constraints at times, yet still exist within a social group. The initial encounter between Bear, Tom and Matt breaks her routine, forcing a breach in the private realm when the public comes plowing into it, like it so often does. In this atmosphere, a semi-militant and communal one, access to a private life is extremely limited. Many secrets are held, but few are ever kept. A private routine like Bear's, although every precaution may be made, is nearly impossible to keep private.

When I was attempting my first novel idea, my Professor Dr. Jose De Pierola recommended that I read the book *The Baron in the Trees*, by Italo Calvino. The main character in this book, although not the narrator, is of course a young Baron named Cosimo who lives in the trees. Cosimo climbs into them out of parental defiance, then stays there to prove his point. He lives his entire life out in the treetops, experiencing love, adventure and even war from an aerial point of view, refusing to ever come down. Cosimo's character is an extreme example of what lives inside of Bear. A strong desire for independence in the face of authority and repression. A human and wild beckoning to return to nature as a child, forgetting the shallow, pretentious dichotomy of human hierarchy. They are not simply escape artists, but politically fueled and charged artists in need of a familiar landscape and setting. In need of a

world that will let them fulfill their individual potential, as well as to build a strong relationship with the natural landscape that many people around them do not recognize or comprehend. They feel alone in their recognition, as many great conservationists and poets alike have in the past.

### **Writing Process- Clear as Mud**

It is clear to me, as well as those who have read and commented upon both my fiction and poetry, that my writing moves into and across many terrains. It often begins with a physical experience, then attempts to capture the metaphysical that is always a part of any actual physicality. In my writing, as well as in my life, I attempt well-roundedness: a balance between the body, mind and soul. My writing is birthed from a realm in which spirituality and sensuality conceive of concepts to work hand in hand, overcoming confines that might attempt to keep them separate. My poetry and prose preside and parent over other issues of temporality such as guilt, lust, body image, sexuality, responsibility, religion, and desire. Using images that inspire this infusion, thoughts of love are permitted prevalence. This is both self-love and love for other living entities. All the while, they are conscious of the process. A process that involves and includes all living organisms.

It is from a physical experience or vision that I develop complex thoughts. It rarely seems to occur in the opposite order. Maybe this is simply the human condition or maybe it is admittance to some hedonistic tendencies, I don't know. It is just an honest process. I often long for subject matter that provides depth. I think it is important to write about relationships that exist not only between humans, but between people and other living species of animals

and plants. Even rocks. Sometimes these relationships are even stronger than the ones we might hold with other humans. It is certainly the task of the writer to emphasize these. For me, there is an earth first. The natural elements exist with or without humanity. Therefore, we logically should come second. Unfortunately in reality, this is not how it is. Reality begins and ends with consciousness. We decide what is most important to us and what takes precedence in the world around us.

### **Landscape and Language: Digesting the Elements**

*"I'm always taken by how deeply women like to dig in the earth. They plant bulbs for the spring. They poke blackened fingers into mucky soil, transplanting sharp-smelling tomato plants. I think they are digging down to the two-million-year-old woman. They are looking for her toes and her paws. They want her for a present to themselves, for with her they feel of a piece and at peace" (33). —Clarissa Pinkola Estes*

When I was a very little girl, before I had the arms of my mulberry tree to hold me, I ate mud. I am not kidding. I made mud pies in my sandbox and was so overwhelmed with the desire to eat them, so convinced by my imagination that I would bite into them, savoring the wet dirt smell and the sound of grinding rocks. Although I did not swallow it, I chewed and crunched on that mud pie for some time before spitting it out. At the time it seemed like a simple, whimsical, and slightly insane thing to do. Now, I realize that my desire to taste dirt was a direct symptom of my anemia. I ate dirt, not as a socially deviant action but because my body told me to. I was craving iron. I was craving the earth.

As an often overly civilized civilization, we fail to notice the elements that our bodies crave. We fail to recognize the need for that which is wild, in order to maintain our sense of self and un-self. We refuse to taste the soil, the air, the natural landscape and wildness around

us. We refuse ourselves because we have forgotten how to say yes to our bodies. When life becomes void of natural obstacles, we become soft and dim-witted. We are soon forced to search out new methods in order to re-sharpen our previously sharp selves.

Setting and landscape are the most important elements in my writing. The use of natural or wild landscapes to develop character need is pertinent. Most of my characters are inseparable from their natural landscape and, like a child in need of nutrients, dependent upon it for nourishment. The character's relationship with their natural landscape puts flesh upon their naked bones. It puts thoughts and words into their empty mouths. It drives them in everything they do. Bear, in *Taste of Dirt*, is certainly no exception.

Associating a character with landscape is not a new idea. The use of poetic language to twist the two elements of craft, forever entangling them is not a new concept either. There are many writers that I have examined and found inspiration in their use of landscape, in prose and poetry alike. In Sarah Vap's poem "Trees Have Been Witness" she writes:

From pine's to pinion. From caterpillar's hair—  
plus anticipation. The feeling is:

a viewing, and the whole thing missed.  
People already know about faith

And the end of privacy; the hidden  
ways of each. (75)

In her poetry, Vap is keenly aware of her relationship with a natural landscape. Throughout her book *Dummy Fire* she uses language to capture this urgency. Other poems like "The Hunters" and "Blue-Norther" weave in and out of an abstract, but tangible reality in which the wildness of her natural landscape incites wisdom.

Although this recognition of the connection between a character and his or her natural landscape has not been a traditional or canonical practice in the United States, with the exception of writers like Whitman and Steinbeck, it has always been a part of Native American storytelling. In the past thirty years, thankfully, this marginalized group of writers has come together in an accepted form of literature called Native American Literature (or American Indian Literature). It is in this literature that I find my greatest inspiration, in quality of writing as well as the sheer number of writer's that share my world view, both on the page and off.

In Debra Magpie Earling's book *Perma Red*, she creates a human world rich with the harshness of the natural landscape. In the first chapter she writes, "He was leaning over her, whispering to her, whispering a story. His voice was in her ear. She felt Sister Bernard pull Baptiste away from her. The back of her head danced with silver stars and Louise fell back into dreaming, a snagged fish released again to water" (Earling 4). Life on the Indian reservation is physically harsh and completely inseparable from the natural landscape. The view of reality is that of a woven web, each living organism as connected. Earling uses metaphor to remind us of this world order. She uses her love of language to bring it home.

Kiana Davenport, a Hawaiian writer and one of my greatest sources of inspiration, blends the lines between human, animal and natural landscape in her book *Shark Dialogues*. Through language and metaphor, Davenport makes magic a reality:

Standing in the surf, she felt her jaws tighten, then contract, something growing like a snout. Then she was swimming... huge sharks suddenly bladed along beside her, playful, amorously nudging her... in the eyes of one of them, she saw her reflection: a white-

tipped reef shark, powerful in size, moving like a bullet. Schools of smaller fish scattered as she lunged. The taste of blood. (Davenport 102)

Although the transformation of a human being into a fish or a mammal is not necessary to write a great novel, it is done to show the complete connection, both surreal and real, between the main characters and their natural landscape that formed, nourished and challenged them.

Authors like Earling and Davenport have been mentors throughout my writing process. Their landscapes, language, and world views strongly influenced the creation of *Taste of Dirt*.

### **The Elements that Nourish: Structure, Passage of Time and Narrative Voice**

Native American or American Indian literature is also known for its unique structure and passage of time. A popular structure, because it mimics their worldview and ideals of strength and life passage, begins with the damaging of the main character's soul and the alienation from tribal tradition and the ways of old. Then, the hero or heroine must embark on a quest, or, because of its ability to break rules and transcend normal space and time, a supernatural vision quest in order to regain tradition and heal themselves. A vision quest is a turning point in life taken to heal oneself and to find one's intended spiritual and life direction. When an older child is ready, he or she will go on a personal, spiritual quest into the wilderness, often in conjunction with a period of severe discipline. This usually lasts for a number of days while the child is attuned to the spirit world. Often a guardian animal will come in a vision or dream, and the life direction will appear soon after. In Leslie Marmon Silko's book *Ceremony*, her main character Tayo has returned from captivity as a prisoner of war in Japan. It is the end of World War II and his return to the Laguna-Pueblo Reservation increases his feelings of estrangement and

alienation. He must embark upon the quest, rediscovering the true nature of the universe and the invaluable stories of his tribe. Silko's Shaman character says:

'Accidents happen, and there's little we can do. But don't be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain. It is very peaceful with the bears; the people say that's the reason human beings seldom return. It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for the seedlings as they become plants in the field.' (130)

Silko permits the old Shaman to put Native American wisdom into words. This is the plotline and structure of her novel.

In N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning *House Made of Dawn*, the structure and character need is very similar. At the end of the book, when the spiritual journey is complete (although nothing is ever really finished for the American Indian, life is cyclical and a new journey is likely to begin again) he says, "He was running, and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. *House made of pollen, house made of dawn. Qtsedaba*" (Momaday 185). This is similar to the end of a prayer or a chant. The opening and closing words of *House Made of Dawn* reflect Native American storytelling tradition. The novel begins, "*Dypaloh*" (1) and ends, "*Qtsedaba*" (185). In keeping with tribal tradition, these words indicate both the beginning of a story and its ending.

In the construction of *Taste of Dirt*, the tradition of Native American storytelling served as an inspiration and a guide. A vision quest may be a part of shamanism, more exactly, the

learning and initiation process of the apprentice for achieving the ability for shamanizing, mostly under the guidance of an older shaman. In Bear's case, it is simply a process of meeting wise persons, particularly the women that she relates with whom help her overcome her fears and weaknesses. The people, as well as the animals and the natural landscapes, give her strength. The animals, the women, and one man come in the form of spirit guides. She is under great stress and discipline. She has trouble distinguishing reality from dreams and hallucinations from real life events. Just like the Native American vision quest, Bear enters the wilderness as a rite of passage. Instead of fighting her intuition, she embraces it, with the help of her mentors. This allows her to fulfill her potential, making her journey and quest a successful one. The novel never really ends, really, but indicates that Bear must continue the fire season, as well as the rest of her life, with her new found strength, and embrace the challenges to come with confidence and peace of mind. With the knowledge of the earth and its cyclical processes.

The passage of time is a crucial technique that makes the structure of *Taste of Dirt* successful. *Taste of Dirt* is not a fairytale or a fable, yet it does mingle with the fantastic and surreal worlds, relying upon archetypal images to lend to the sensation of timelessness. It is a story about a journey that takes place over the course of no more than two weeks, yet it carries the weight of some very heavy, historically important themes. The reader's mind must stay in the present, focusing upon the present each time the book is read and the journey is experienced. This story actually exists in a timeless realm, where reality and dreams can take place at any time or any place. The landscape and element of timelessness permits magic. Each time the story is read, the events occur over again. The present tense also highlights the

vividness with which it may re-occur whenever it passes through the reader's mind and because it is a work of fiction, it will re-live with every reading.

In *Taste of Dirt*, the pace is quick. It's a story of urgency with pressure on the main character and action, with excursions into dreams and internal contemplation. Some present tense narratives have been said to lack reflection, as well as any connection with previous events in the story. This is not the case when using first person narration. A series of very important events are happening, the main character/narrator is constantly reflecting and digesting them, but the character must keep moving towards the realization, or change. The combination of stressful events and internal struggle permits the character to grow and the change to eventually occur. This reflection time within the novel can be referred to as "psychological" (Vargas Llosa 60) time, which passes at a different rate than "chronological" (60) time. Time passes subjectively, as the main character drifts in and out of live time and dead time. Vargas Llosa says:

...it is chronological time that eats away at us from the moment we are born until the moment we die and presides over the fateful life curve of all sentient beings. But there is also a psychological time, of which we are conscious depending on what we are doing or not doing and which figures very differently in our emotional lives. (60)

Weaving in and out of psychological and chronological time, through internal reflections, hallucinations, dreams and the harsh reality of manual labor, the novel moves with its own unique time. This sense of time is nonlinear and oscillates within moments of psychological time, then plunges ahead at the moment of a physical encounter. Maintaining present tense allows this to happen seamlessly.

Present tense is used in many pieces of literature, in both fiction and nonfiction.

Norman Maclean uses it in his nonfiction piece *Young Men and Fire*, in which he relives the tragic events from a forest fire that took place in 1949. Many firefighters lost their lives and the urgency of this extreme event is best felt in present tense. But it is the voice of the narrator that must complete this urgency, however close to the main character it may be. In my novel, *Taste of Dirt*, the narrative voice is first person singular and the events are happening now (in psychological time). As Diane Thiel says in her book, *Crossroads*, “Choosing a character within the story as the narrator has the important advantage of immediately engaging the reader. When the narrator is the story’s main character, there is a sense of immediacy created” (17). This is true, from the very beginning, with *Taste of Dirt*. The story belongs to Bear and must be told in first person. It is from her perspective—through the eyes of a young female firefighter, coming to terms with herself, her natural landscape, and her peers— that the reader must experience every aspect of the novel. It is sitting within the door of her tent, reading her books and watching the other characters pass by—mingling with the stars, mountains, and trees—that we all must view the world within *Taste of Dirt*.

### **Telling a Real Story: Re-Capturing Landscape and Wildness with Fiction**

*“The people stood aside. They watched her crawl. She pulled her frail body up the hill. Her eyes still held strength. She turned her head. A howl echoed out. A blood-curdling howl reverberated across the land. The howl of freedom flowed from her lips as her body changed into that of a white wolf. Her legs gained strength. Her eyes glowed silver-blue. She loped along the hills to her freedom” (59). –Teresa Pijoan*

My main character, Bear, is wild, but needy. She is fond of trees, particularly Aspen trees, for the strength and shelter they provide her. For her ability to let go in their presence

and still feel completely safe. It is the wildness of their limbs, the uniqueness of their light bark that attracts her. The aspen is very similar to her character development because it is the first tree to die in a wildfire, but the first to grow back in its wake.

Bear's crew of firefighters is based out of the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains and is sent to protect a group of historical cabins in the Idaho wilderness, an infamous area called the Frank Church Wilderness of No Return. These locations do exist and the wildness of both regions is in question, particularly in Idaho where a current controversy exists over the wolves that were re-introduced in order to curb the elk and deer populations. Idaho, along with Montana and Wyoming, is currently fighting for the right to both hunt and slaughter wolves through aerial attack. The local ranchers want them dead. The local townsfolk want them gone. The re-introduced population of wolves, recently removed from the endangered species list, hardly stands a chance in the face of so much anger. The re-appropriated species must bear the fickleness of human nature and the surrounding wildness of its landscape.

Similar to the healing purpose of Clarisa Pinkola Estes's book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, the heroine in *Taste of Dirt* is on a quest to regain her wildness. How she has lost touch with it is not important because it is too common. It is an attempt to, in the face of a very masculine world, regain the parts of her that have not been allowed to flourish, such as intuition and individuality. She meets many helpers along the way, as well as helping many people too. Although the majority of these events are fiction, the world of the forest firefighter is something I am all too familiar with. Before returning to graduate school, this world constituted my life. This life was my world. I had my own relationship with my natural

landscape, as my own quest for wildness. Because of these similarities, the issues of nonfiction and the need for fabrication require special attention.

I must admit that when I first began writing *Taste of Dirt*, because of my connection to the main character and knowledge of the landscape, I felt as though I were narrating the story. Perhaps this was necessary to trick myself into writing with emotion, passion and believability. Yet, as I continued to write and create this new world, I felt a distinct departure from the main character. I am not sure how long this took, but suddenly I was no longer viewing Bear as myself. She became a completely different character and I became excited to see what would happen to her, in both her physical fictitious world and her psychological, fictitious character development. As Vargas Llosa says:

...the narrator—that is, the person who tells the story— must not be confused with the author, the person who writes it. This is a very serious error, made even by many novelists who, having decided to tell their stories in the first person and deliberately taking their own biographies as their subject matter, believe that they are the narrators of their fictions.

They are mistaken. A narrator is a being made of words and not of flesh and blood, as authors tend to be.... (42)

These are words that ring truer than ever in my open ears. The writing of my novel, *Taste of Dirt*, has taught me so much about writing. Not only was I able to digest techniques involved with the craft of fiction writing, but I was able find perspective on my own past experiences. Like *Taste of Dirt*, my own experiences now exist in the ether as stories that may or may not have ever taken place.

## Returning to the Political: The Roots Reach Deeper

*“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his”*  
(74). – Oscar Wilde

The political drive and inspiration behind *Taste of Dirt* not only derives from my own life experience with the United States Forest Service, but from my mother’s life story. My Mother, as a child, was a great equestrian, but she never would have called herself that. She was a farm girl, mostly. Simple, by her own words. It was her job to break and train the horses, a tall order for a young girl of slight build and no great physical strength. She was also expected to feed the pigs (to this day she will not eat pork) wean the baby cows (or veal) and help harvest corn in the surrounding fields. She did all of these tasks to the best of her ability. These physical responsibilities kept her mind, body and spirit attuned to the surrounding rows of agriculture and grassy hills dotted with grazing cattle. Naturally, the necessary routine of academics fit into this world, but it came second. My mother came to know the world in a way in which little girls that spent most of their lives working and learning indoors did not. She had an education both inside and outside of the classroom.

As an adult, thanks to the empowerment of physical labor and the knowledge granted through kinship with her natural landscape, my mother was not intimidated by new places. She moved away from home, leaving the Midwest cornfields behind for the great desert lands of Arizona. Here her environment was different and she, at first, struggled to find a decent paying job. Eventually, thanks to her experience with operating heavy equipment back on the farm, she soon found one working in the copper mines, wielding front end loaders and earth shakers for endless hours each day. Operating heavy equipment for the mines was one of the best

paying jobs around. In 1977, she was earning 12 dollars an hour (\$15,000 annual, more than I make now!). This was quite possibly more than many female professionals were making at the time. It was this job, this skill accrued through knowledge of her previous landscape which permitted her to not only successfully transition to a new one, but instill the confidence to even begin this transition in the first place.

My mother was able to save money and soon met my father (a broke college student attempting to finish his accounting degree), fell in love (which happens even to the best of us, I suppose) and eventually bought them their first house. My mother fully supported my father while he worked to get his accounting business up and running. Although I haven't pried too much, after 29 years of marriage, I doubt that her financial stability was the only thing that attracted my father. My mother's confidence, both physical and mental, was a great challenge to any mate. She worked hard, by reshaping the space permissible to women, to be seen as an equal and never once gave into the taunts of the male miners, or the wives of the miners that mocked her with eyes and words of jealous inferiority. My mother, without even knowing it, had developed a unique understanding of herself that was both political and ecological. She represented a new work place for American women through the relationship with land that she was so close to. Not just as a laborer—for hard manual labor is certainly not new to women of this country—but as a laborer in a position of power. Her connection with the land and space around her is an example of the feminine need to reconnect with the land. This connection will help further the equality of genders and the freedom of women to reconnect with a natural space as an individual.

Whether we like it or not, our environments define us. Both our natural and unnatural landscapes give us a sense of identity and permit us to construct relationships with the rest of the world in which we will either flourish or flounder. It has been my own firsthand experience that both an understanding of and relationship with and respect for my natural landscape permits confidence, identity and strength in character that reflects a relationship with one's landscape. I feel that these connections with the land, although important for everyone, are particularly crucial for women because in present day, physical reality, this relationship is rarely stressed. If this relationship were stressed for women, or even better, for young girls, the eradication of the women as weak farce would move along more rapidly and the true vision of women as wild would return. Females would be permitted, from a very young age, to foster a connection with the land in order to gain strength and attain equality. This re-arranging of place permits a new discourse to occur between women and natural landscape. A discourse that would provide both intellectual and physical understanding. A discourse available to all. This is the discourse that I have attempted to create in my novel *Taste of Dirt*.

### **Utilizing New Identity: A Novel Idea**

*All of us can be as placed and grounded as a willow tree along the stream-- and also as free and fluid in the life of the whole planet as the water in the water cycle that passes through all form roughly every two million years" (81). —Gary Snyder*

In his work, poet and essayist Gary Snyder emphasizes not only the importance of a connection with one's landscape, but the need to break down gender barriers for the benefit of both women and men. He discusses it through ecology, stating that ecology serves as a method of study to better understand this transfer of energy. Ecology is the scientific study of

relationships, energy transfers, mutualities, connections, and cause-and-effect networks within natural systems (Snyder 75). Or, as stated by Webster, ecology is the scientific study of the interactions between organisms and their environment.

Not only does an ecological understanding of the land and wildness permit women strength and empowerment, but it can also begin to loosen other social constructs that exist for men as well. "It is likely that men may become creative when they touch the woman in themselves, and women become creative when they touch the woman in the man in themselves" (86). As gender constructs are broken down, new relationships are permitted between all organisms. Snyder emphasizes the need "To grasp a sense of intertwining systems that all collaborate to the success or detriment of one another, because human beings are actually located completely within the sphere of nature" (75). Understanding this world view, similar to the philosophy and religion adopted by the Native Americans in their lives and in their literature, is the vision quest that Bear embarks upon in *Taste of Dirt*. Regardless of cultural dissidence, this is the necessary journey of a hero or heroine in both fiction and reality. It is critical that both men and women attain a new sense of self through ecological understanding. A new sense of perspective on self and place through natural landscape, wildness in nature and the wildness within. I truly hope my novel, *Taste of Dirt*, will inspire this.

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"Riprap," by Gary Snyder

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks.  
    placed solid, by hands  
    In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
    in space and time:  
Solidity of bark, leaf or wall  
    riprap of things:  
    Cobble of milky way.  
    straying planets,  
    These poems, people,  
    lost ponies with  
    Dragging saddles --  
    and rocky sure-foot trails.  
The worlds like an endless  
    four-dimensional  
    Game of Go.  
    ants and pebbles  
In the thin loam, each rock a word  
    a creek-washed stone  
    Granite: ingrained  
with torment of fire and weight  
Crystal and sediment linked hot  
    all change, in thoughts,  
    As well as things.

## *Taste of Dirt*

1

I am dressed in aspen leaves. I am very quiet because there is no one else here, in this part of the forest. The veins of this tree give my clothes a pattern of natural paths. My skin shapes to this second layer and I look like a lizard or a tree frog. It is a difficult task, squeezing into the tallest, smallest branches of an aspen. They aren't domestic trees. They move in herds. They don't have thick arms, widely spaced, sweeping low to the ground. They don't provide the climber with a clear ladder. But I have found one today, as I do every time I am feeling this way, and my new outfit is rich and brusque as brazened leather. It fits perfectly because it still breathes.

Though aspen trees are hard to climb, once you are in them, you feel safe. They are very durable in the wind, never bending. It is windy today but the pale, white branches barely sway. Only the leaves move quickly. I lose myself in the shuffle of crisp, round edges. The music of water falling upon stones, refracting sunlight: green, blue and yellow. The natural movement of a tree soothes me. Its quaking leaves suppress my nerves.

There is much folklore surrounding the aspen tree. The leaves of the Aspen tree are said to tremble continually, even without wind, as if they were shivering. The shivering tree can help cure fevers, but only if the nail clippings of the sick person are taken and placed in a hole

cut in the trunk, late at night, then sealed over.

Christianity creates its own lore, claiming that Jesus Christ was crucified upon a cross made of aspen wood, and the tree has trembled, full of anguish and remorse ever since. Even before this, it was said that Jesus was walking in a forest and all the trees bowed reverently. The only tree that didn't was the Aspen. So he cursed the tree, and the leaves began to tremble. I've heard it said that the sound of the leaves is like women's tongues, because they seldom cease wagging. But none of this is important to me. It is my favorite tree. I believe the tree cannot stop moving because it's overflowing with life, its branches connected to a trunk, connected to a root system that unites every aspen in the stand in one endless process of photosynthesis. The aspen tree is a largely misunderstood creature from the soft wood family, misrepresented and anthropomorphized by the human desire to be a part of this connection. A part of everything. The most important part. Right now, naked in this tree, I am trying a new method of connecting.

I admire Aspen, with their capacity to live all over the world, at the greatest elevations. I want to see the world too, from the tops of trees. The process of photosynthesis up here in the tallest of tall tree tops takes place at alarming rates. I feel my skin and lungs respond, swelling with the brilliance of extra oxygen. I am truly high. I consciously slow my breathing, exhaling as much carbon as possible. The tree responds to me, breathes me in. Reparations of peace begin and I become the tree frog or whip-tailed lizard. My place in the universe is perfect.

I hear voices. Suddenly, and without warning, I begin to shake. I tremble within my new layer of skin, swaying in the wind, I shiver, goose bumps brimming. Down between my feet,

beneath the bleached branches below, I see the familiar figures of my coworkers approaching. It's Matt and Tom. Matt is chiseled with tan skin, Neanderthal dimensions of chin and forehead. His eyes—a deep azure and always focused— often snag upon me like cat claws as I walk into a room. He is lean, muscular, and a good six inches shorter than Tom. Tom is pale, freckle-faced and luminous, his eyes like warm moss, soft and inviting to tired skin. He is tall and thin, but strong. Together, they make a tempting pair.

They don't see me, at first. They don't notice the trembling leaves aloft in the still air. It is very difficult to see me. Aspens sprout tight and nearly seamless. But Tom knows. He is probably the reason why they are both standing beneath me, following my invisible trail. He stops directly below and listens. Matt stops too.

"Do you hear that?" Tom asks.

"Hear what?" Matt replies.

And then he looks up. The calloused bottoms of my bare feet, the roundness of my bare backside, the L shape of my right arm covering my breasts, two bloodless hands gripping tight framing pursed lips. I am holding my breath, hoping for control. I have never been sure of my movements, out here alone. If they are real, taking up real time and real space. If my tremors in the trees are audible to any other species. But I am sure now.

"Hi." I squeak out, as Tom finds me. I think I have managed to cover myself, as Matt's gaze follows the sound of my voice. Tom doesn't seem surprised. But Matt does. And I can't blame him. I doubt that this exact thing—this specific type of encounter—has ever happened to him in his life. Or in many other lives. Maybe, though, it has happened to Tom.

"What in the hell?" Matt turns and twists his head, squinting up through blonde hair.

"Bear? Is that you?"

"Yep," I say.

Tom is grinning, amusement splashing from his green eyes. "Wow. How did you get all the way up there?" He asks.

"How did you get all the way down there?" I ask back, motioning with my head. It is strange that they have found me. My tree is nowhere near a trail.

"We're looking for Walnut Canyon," Matt says. He is physical and easy to interpret. "Kalie swears there are ruins and this guy swears we're going the right way." Matt nods at Tom.

"You still have a few miles to go," I tell them. I wonder if they can see my mouth, or even my eyes. Probably, since I can see theirs. "But you are headed in the right direction."

I know where the canyon is because I went a few weeks ago with Kalie. Kalie is my roommate. She is not a firefighter, but an archeologist. She is so rarely around though, when I am.

On the only days off we have shared so far, she told me I had to see them. She caught me on my way here, to this tree. "Wanna go look for ruins?" She asked me. I was surprised that she wanted to work on her day off.

"Don't you wanna take a day off?" I asked her. I did.

"Yeah, but this is different. No bosses. No organization. And I get to pick the place."

"And the company," I smiled at her. That day was a good one. Rare as ruins.

"Wanna come with us?" Tom asks, and I have no idea. Those green eyes, like the leaves around me. Like the selective refraction of white light, honest and natural. Green like

me in my tree.

“We’ll turn around while you get dressed,” Tom continues. “Where are your clothes, anyway?” He is looking around on the ground. They both are.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m good. I’ll be back for dinner.” I reach, with my non-covering hand, for a higher branch. I have stashed a small red notebook with a tiny pen inside the loop of the wire binding it. I don’t always use it, but I keep it with me just in case, like a crutch, for awkward moments of silence. To escape. I flip the paper book around a bit. “I promised I would write some letters,” I say, even though I never write letters. Not to anyone.

“Huh? You can do that later, come on. Get dressed for God’s sake!” Matt doesn’t get it.

“See you later Bear,” Tom says, and waves. Maybe Tom does.

Matt is still unsure. Finally he waves too. “Have fun, ya nut,” he calls and jogs to catch up with Tom. They move in mismatched cadence away from me.

I am alone again and full of thought. Full of human momentum. Did I do something to tip him off? Did I send a signal? A message? A silent wave of energy or ultra violet light? Of sonic correspondence? I am hyper conscious here, in my occupation, but I don’t remember. Mostly of my female body surrounded by its male counterpart. Here, there are many gazes to consider. My own, the male, and a third—perhaps the most unnatural and overwhelming, like a movie camera—that exists only in my mind. Inside of my head, affecting and infecting the others. It notices everything and it analyzes. My signals and motions are always premeditated, conscious of this third eye. But I don’t think it made me plan this. This encounter. I did not consciously lead them to me, but what are the chances of such a coincidence? This moment is a tiny breach in my controlled consciousness. Did I really want them to find me? Maybe.

Maybe Tom.

I have very few audible skills and nearly no people skills on days like this. No available explanations. I am thankful for the return of solitude. The purpose of my escape, my only solo ritual—one that I have taken with me from forest to forest, state to state, region to region—is not ready for foreign contemplation. Childlike and natural as milk froth, the thin white branches of the aspen provide surface tension. The fire season has just begun. Some secrets should still exist.

My internal camera flickers and fades just a little, losing some of its steady confidence without company. I don't know. I open my notebook and begin scribbling.

It's our Monday again, which is the rest of the world's Tuesday this year. We don't have an assignment yet, so overhead is doddling, telling us to keep busy and out of sight. I grab my radio and head behind the cache, where all the supplies are kept. There's a large pile of evergreen poles there, bark intact, waiting to be stripped by hand. I figure this is where they will send us for project work today, if our crew is not ordered within the hour. They'll all come this way, but I'll have time to hide my book beneath a log if I hear about it on the radio. If we are going to a fire, well, I'll hear that too. As much as I hate the heavy plastic radio, it is a necessary evil. There is the small matter of it keeping everyone alive. In this job, good communication—they tell us over and over—is imperative.

Every action is supposed to be deliberate in a militant environment. But it's not. That is, I believe in the possibility of chance. Of simple coincidence. Of lightning striking the same place more than once. In fact I've seen it. Not the actual event, repeating itself first hand. But I have returned to the same exact area many times to smother flames born of the earth's natural ionic charges. If we're quick to catch the fire, the tree still stands. And the odds of it being struck again are, believe it or not, very good.

When a tree has been struck by lightning, a series of things occur. The charge enters through a tiny spot up high in the crown and leaves loudly, blasting a new back door out somewhere closer to the ground. Splinters of wood are found twenty to thirty feet away, littering the forest floor. If there is precipitation, the fire will usually go out by itself. But if there is not, it is up to someone to stop it or the fire will creep its way down the trunk and rush

itself bigger, consuming more trees. It will grow and grow until something puts it out. I have seen huge Ponderosa Pines with multiple lightning exit wounds, or ancient Alligator Junipers twisted jagged in more than one direction. You can usually tell which is the most recent strike by the coloring around it, or if the black charcoal smears when you touch it.

Instead of straddling the length of the branchless trees, I sit in front of them in the dirt. The ground is hard, but familiar. There hasn't been rain since winter in the eastern Sierra Nevada's and summer is already a month deep into June. We've only had a few small, local fires, no big ones yet. And we haven't left the forest, either. But they swear, up and down, that new records will be set, the environmental conditions primed for natural disaster. I savor the silence while I can.

I reconsider my plan and decide to get a hand tool from the cache, just in case I am surprised by a boss looking for trouble. The small wooden room reeks of gas, oil and saw dust. I grab a Pulaski from the tool rack and check its edges. The axe head and grubbing edge are both already sharp. But it doesn't matter. I grab a large metal file too and walk back out to my pine pole spot.

I just started reading *On the Road* again. I love my paperback copy, so dirty and used. Its cover bears witness to the similar fictional world inside of it playing itself out in reality all around me. Kerouac's two dimensional creations traveling through mine in three. I take this book, along with many others, to each new place I work. They are books that continually refuse me entrance. I've tried to read them all once or twice, *On the Road* three times now, but I can't

seem to stick it. I can't focus. The ground beneath me is moving too quickly. Nothing is concrete. I am not sure if anything is really sticking these days.

I once read something about poetry that reminded me of this lifestyle. It said that fragmented ideas or images should be assembled within a cohesive form, allowing the jagged thoughts to juxtapose and flow. Stagger the physical manifestation of form with its content so that they might embrace in a perfect hug, head to chest and so on. I suppose that while living a transient life, it could be excessive to read about one. There's nothing solid to hold onto, the earth turning too quickly, churning tiny dust devils beneath my Vibram soles. But I keep trying. I will read *On the Road*. At least for a few more days to see if maybe this time, I can stick it.

Matt and Tom haven't breathed a word about yesterday and I'm glad. I've barely seen them today, and since I got back late last night, I didn't see them at dinner either. They were at morning briefing—0800—with everyone else. No one said much, listening closely to the situation report of the western United States read out loud. Particularly Region Five and all of California. People are hungry for action this early in the season. Ready for the training to end and the real challenges to begin.

There aren't many people watching today so my internal camera is capped. Everyone is moving about with a sense of expectancy. With anticipation. They are distracted with trying to distract themselves, trying not to obsess over the next assignment. The excitement and rush of it all. I am still, book in hand, but my mind is racing circles around me, orbiting at light speed. Thought speed. I am worried about the next assignment because hiking with a chainsaw on my shoulder rips my shirt, then reaches deep into the very center of my being and bashes the hell

out of it. It frays every strand of my humanity. I cease being human and turn into a pile of flesh, flexed and tormented.

The loud squeal of a big building door distracts me. A hundred yards across the lawn Matt walks out the back door of the main office, probably looking for a place to hide too. He's staring at the black knobs on the top of his grey radio so he doesn't see me. He seems to consider heading in the opposite direction, following his wandering feet. He looks up, after raising the volume to outdoor levels, and finds me watching him. He tosses a wave my way and follows in its wake. Strong legs and arms pump quickly across the well groomed lawn—we do this work too—of the USFS fire station. The compound is big, but not as big as some. I brace myself for interrogation.

“Reading again Bear?” He asks as he approaches. I ignore the question.

“Any word of mouth? Are we movin' yet?” I ask. Matt might know. He was just inside with the rest of the permanent hires.

“There's talk of Idaho. The Frank Church's got a real tumbler. “

“When did it start?”

“Last night. Early monsoon lightning strike. No precip. Dry as hell everywhere, even in that thick.”

“Yeah. That shit is thick. Isn't that all wilderness?” I ask because the Forest Service has a different policy for fighting fires in designated wilderness areas. The policy is to leave it alone

unless it threatens human development, human dwellings or human alterations upon the land. The more revenue the structures accrue, the more they worry. So the fire must be threatening humanity in some way.

“Yeah, the Wilderness of No Return is there. The fire is threatening a bunch of old historic cabins or something. You know the game.”

I do. “Cool,” I say. Assignments in the wilderness are great because there’s nobody else there and we get to camp in the most beautiful, unexplored places. Places I’d never see if it wasn’t for this job. And they are usually less stressful. There are no important cities with important news cameras and reporters surveying your every move. The only camera out there is mine, inside my head. People just don’t make it out without a tremendous effort, back packing like we do forever and a day.

“It’d be good money. Probably Hazard pay and at least 12 hour days. That’s if we don’t have to work much.”

“Yeah. I’m sure we will though, somehow.”

“Yup.”

We are both quiet for a moment, imagining the assignment. He is standing in front of me, arms folded across his chest without anywhere else to put them. Then the look in his eyes shifts with his body weight, from right to left. He’s thinking about yesterday, I know it. I get up, brush the dirt from my pants with my book and bend to pick up my hand held radio.

“Gotta pee. Be back.” I am already walking. This is believable. I always have to pee and he knows it.

“Watch out for those tree monkeys, Bear, you just never know,” Matt says, nearly splitting his face in half with satisfaction. Even though it’s stupid and not even funny—Matt isn’t very funny— I can feel my face turning red. I walk faster.

“Yeah, yeah,” I toss back over my shoulder. I am already half way to the front of the office building, since you can’t enter through the back. My internal camera is rolling again, the old fashioned reel of film flickering. He watches me walk away, unsure of what to do with his own body. He is easy to read, even with my back to him. My carefully conditioned lens focuses upon his face. His eyes and mouth, taking in my form with satisfaction. Not malicious. With admiration. This early in the season, the gesture is flattering. But it will happen over and over again, I know. In the midst of primitive living, too much attention is never a good thing. My camera catches it all.

Halfway across the adjacent lawn my radio, not too loud because I hate the unexpected interruption of technology, begins talking.

“Squadies round up. Meet in front of the cache, 0930.” It’s John, one of the crew captains, announcing. I am not a squadie but I have enough experience to carry a stupid radio. I look back at Matt who looks as if he just stood up from his sitting position. I hadn’t imagined this. He’s stuffing his own tiny notebook into his back pocket. I have no idea what time it is because I never wear a watch. I don’t need one. There is always someone around to tell me

what to do and in how much time to do it in. Matt is my squadie. He knows I never wear a watch so he hollers at me.

“Five minutes Bear! Five!”

I say nothing, just turn and jog towards the office. I grab the front door and yank it open, running smack into the rigid bodies of two overhead.

“Wrong way Bear,” John says.

“She’s probably gotta pee,” Mark says laughing.

“Yep,” I say as I let them file past me and my extended door holding arm. I smile. It is kinda funny, my predictability.

“Make it quick,” John says.

“Yes sir.” I am rushing down the hall inside. One more overhead in my way. Crew Boss Brian is coming out of the bathroom. He is kind of a manic depressive, maybe, but not too bad of a guy. At least he seems to like me so I use it from time to time. Now, to get information.

“Where we headed Brian?”

“Looks like Idaho.”

I am excited but just nod. “Am I on the saw?” I ask.

“Do you want to be?”

This is the worst question. If I say no, I move to the bottom of the barrel, my status worse than a rookie.

“Yes sir,” I say.

“Good. Take the 460, it’ll build your stamina. Inspect it real close, too. Grease the bearings real good and help Tom mix the fuel. We’re gonna need it.”

“Yes sir.” I begin to turn.

“Bear?”

“Yes sir?”

“You’ll be doing most of the cutting. Anything that needs it.” He winks at me and is on his way.

“Great,” I exhale, turn and enter the bathroom, maybe to puke a little. My insides are switching places with my outsides, chugging along on an invisible conveyer belt. I can barely contain myself, door closed and locked behind me. I am finally alone. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The heaviest saw with the longest bar. I am fucked, fucked, fucked. I teeter back and forth to the cadence of my own cursing while I unbutton my pants. I drop my Nomex down to my ankles. The thick, fire proof, felt-like material makes a dark green pool around my brown leather boots, ten inches and climbing. I force myself to breathe, deep and slow.

They just started me in on the saw team and this fact alone has made me question my abilities in a way that I never have before. It is maybe the hardest damn thing I have ever done in my life. A typical day includes hiking—little to lots of hiking—ten miles sometimes, carrying line gear at 60 lbs and my saw, awkward and angular, at 25. Salt caked and empty, nearly hysterical inside, placid and heaving outside, I arrive. I never feel hungry but I could eat for months straight and never fill the emptiness inside of me. The great void. Just thinking about it makes my bones sink deeper into my skin, anticipating weight.

Then there is the arrival and the immediate jump start into running the thing, swinging it about like a lariat, roping and cinch the burning trees, subduing them before they burn down the world. Just like a super hero. My blade heats blue and the plastic beneath my hands becomes soft and pliable. Running the saw is the hottest position on the crew because you have to hold still in the middle of a blazing inferno. You have to concentrate. And this means war, the worst of which is happening inside of me. Fighting the urge to flinch. My eyes flutter, blinking back sweat, and my internal camera really starts cranking out the cinematic shots from every aerial angle. Panic rises inside of me and I wonder if I really know just what in the hell I am doing. Or why I am even doing it in the first place. Human lives for trees. I am not always sure. I am here though and I do it, again and again each year. I do it to help out but mostly because of the fix. I am addicted, just like everyone else, to adrenaline.

Adrenaline is a love hate thing because it only arrives, naturally, through hard work. The more difficult the assignment, the more adrenaline released and the greater the high. The stakes rise and so does the glory. At times it can be unclear where to draw the line. When to

call bull shit on a ridiculous assignment. I've never seen it done. I've never seen anyone quit in the middle of it all. Not yet. I've thought about it though, drawing a line in the dirt or screaming out *uncle!* Fearing the weight of atmospheric pressure. The elements breathing down my neck, fire, ash, dirt. Shit gets so crazy and happens so fast I wouldn't even know how to begin. These moments are terrifying. These moments are what provide the fix.

The toilet waters sprinkle to life and I relax a little.

"Bear! You've got two minutes!" my handheld radio blasts into the porcelain sink where I set it face down, pitching the weight of big brother directly into my face.

Damn it! Bathrooms are neutral zones. I am not answering them. I am not. Breathe. Breathe. It's difficult though, always thinking hurry, hurry. Pushups if your late. Pushups for everyone. Push ups. Push ups. Push ups.

I stand, pull up my pants, zip my zipper, button my pants and fasten my heavy duty belt, the one that is supposed to hold the weight of a human body suspended beneath it, if needed. I look at myself in the mirror. I look good. Internal camera nods in agreement. Mirrors always provoke it. But the deep cuts in my shoulders—beneath light cotton fabric —bristle with the memory of metal. *Keep moving.* I yank the door open and leave without washing my hands. My footsteps echo as I egress down the empty hallway and leave the building.

“Move your damn books Bear!”

“Sorry!” I yell over the loud stereo, classic country. I really am. I’m sitting shotgun in one of the crew six-pack trucks and a small mountain of books sits bitch. Or at least they did until the last hairpin turn, when they cascaded themselves into Scottie’s leg space. Since he is driving, this is dangerous. Particularly with a manual transmission, all the pedals need to be ready to flatten against the floor at a moment’s notice, but how can they with two or three books beneath them? I continue apologizing to Scott as I pick them up.

Space in here is limited.

“Some kinda co-pilot,” Scottie says to me. “Do you really think you’ll read all those books today?”

“Nah. I just like to have options.”

“Well how about you opt to pick up the atlas and get a clue about where we are. You could help a little, you know.”

“Okay, okay. Geeze Scottie. I said I was sorry.” I grab the atlas and set it in my lap unopened. I put two of the books from my pile back into the bag at my feet and keep one, Coleridge, beneath the atlas. This still allows me to flip the book open, read a poem or two and close it when my co-pilot duties aren’t needed. I am supposed to intuit this or sense it on my own, when it is that Scott might need me. I am getting better but it doesn’t come naturally. I

don't really want to pay attention. Logistics suffocate. Books oxygenate. I keep them near me, always, for a little bit of extra breathing room.

I know that animals with four legs are capable of remarkable speeds, especially when compared to the sluggish amblings of our two-legged pace, so it shouldn't come as a surprise when an elk flies past, right over our truck, faster than the speed of sound, even faster than light because the animal is long gone before we hear or even see it. One second it's not there, the next—after a sudden brown blur, maybe—our truck is careening out of control. I think I see its back hoofs exit the bottom corner of the wind shield, but I also think this might be my desire for explanation, more of a creation. Or maybe my thoughts conjure the image, thinking of what I am supposed to see, after the fact. I don't know. But the elk is nowhere to be found now, down here in this ditch, as and we roll to a stop.

There is a moment of silence and stillness before the radio begins squawking. "Benson, what is your situation? Is everyone all right?"

Loud over the intercom, one of the two speakers blasts right next to my ear. Normally it's the co-pilot's job to speak on the radio, but this accident is on Scott, since he is driving. He reaches forward but his seatbelt holds him fast. He quickly undoes it, yanking the metal from its case, and grabs at the radio.

"I hit that elk! Did you see 'im?" He begins speaking before the radio is in front of his mouth. Scottie Benson is twenty-six, some kind of Native American and exactly two years older than me. He is an avid hunter, so large mammals make him very happy.

John repeats his second question. "Is everyone all right?"

Swiveling on the bench seat, Scott looks at Jeff and Amy in the back. They both nod, affirmation of moving parts. "Yeah, we're ok."

We seem fine, but we all begin groping ourselves, touching our bodies with wonder, as if we have never noticed their perfect construction, flawless design. I am stuck fast in my seatbelt too. I undo it and feel my back, expecting to find bones jutting out like wings or rivers of blood channeling down my skin. I almost want to. Nothing hurts. But nothing feels anything at all, really. I think I am in shock, which means more adrenaline. More of the fix.

John's bearded face appears in the driver's side window. His truck must be parked up above somewhere near. He continues to the front of the vehicle to inspect it. The rest of us hop out to do the same.

I jump out and step right in dung. Maybe elk. What are the odds?

"You must have just grazed it," John says.

"Maybe. It felt pretty rough, though." Scottie is scratching his head. We all nod in agreement. The grill guard and bumper are banged up, but the rest of the hood is intact. Hair and blood cling to the busted headlight, passenger side, but nothing else looks broken.

"This ditch ain't too deep. Think you can make it out?" John asks Scottie.

"Yes sir." Scottie is sure he will get us out. He is probably right. He is a good driver.

“What about the elk?” Amy asks.

“What about it?” John replies.

At this moment, more crewmembers arrive from other vehicles. They crowd around the scene, touching the blood and hair, muttering beneath their breath.

“Are we really going to leave the elk? Not even put it out of its misery?” Amy speaks up.

“We should find it, you’re right,” I chime in. She is right. Amy never insists upon anything but she is insisting now. I need to stand by her. Plus, it’s the right thing to do.

“We don’t have any guns, what are we going to do, bludgeon it to death?” John asks.

“If we have too,” Amy is not letting up. No one else says anything.

“Fine. You two have ten minutes to find it and smother it to death or something.”

Great. Amy and I look at each other, hesitating for just a second, and we are walking to the back of the truck. We have to. We can’t back down.

I open the rear compartment where we keep tools and grab two pulaskis.

“You can’t be serious,” Scottie says.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Great. Deer Hunter, American Psycho la-la land bull shit. Nut cases,” John mumbles this, twirling his finger about his ear to amuse the guys, but we keep walking. I am not happy at all, but I am not, not going.

As Amy and I begin looking for signs of blood, we notice some broken branches. If an elk is healthy, it is graceful. It wouldn't go around breaking or bumping into things. This poor creature is in bad shape, I think. The impact to our truck was no tiny “graze.”

Elk are huge. They are second only to moose in the deer family, and moose are nearly deer dinosaurs. Elk are amazing creatures. Gil and Norbert back in Utah—when I worked in the Manti-La Sals—used to tell me hunting stories about them. They called elk wapiti, in their native Navajo tongue. They also told me grisly stories about skinwalkers, so who knows if they were just full of it, but I loved the stories. I remember one story about a skinwalker and an elk, supposedly Gil's—he told me the most stories because he liked to scare me the most—estranged second cousin who murdered his wife and son. He became a skinwalker and his favorite shape to assume was wapiti.

Gil's cousin was a medicine man. A dream catcher who became greedy and began to misuse the dreams of his people. Most importantly, his own. Instead of balanced insight through vision, he began to use his visions to sneak into the dreams of others. His spirit could leave his body and enter other minds. But only while they slept. One day, by a chance collision, he entered the dreams of an unconscious elk. To his surprise, the elk dreamt in primary colors and there were more than just three. New colors, unimaginable colors, sifted through him. He

could smell them, wildly combined, as they churned and swirled out paths beneath his feet. Beneath his nose and into his open eyes.

Elk dream catching made him wonder about other animals. As he became good at entering the dreams of elk, he decided that he wanted to enter a conscious animal, to control the powerful flanks, chest and instincts of such a noble creature in its waking state. He devised a plot to kill the elk in its dreams. To steal its body away from it in the night and wake inside of him. In this way—through elk dreams—did he master body thieving of all animals and eventually, human beings too. It was just a matter of small adjustments and a few new sacrificial ingredients mixed into his potions. The death of his wife and child became imminent and without coincidence. It was the blood and bone of each that he needed. It fulfilled the rights in his one-sided magic, void of light, sick with dark. He needed the bodies of his beloved to become a skinwalker.

The creepiest part of the story (which is true for any good tale of terror) is that the nameless uncle could continue to assume new human shapes—of people who did not possess the will to fight him off—as long as he was able to trick them into loving him. With a constant new shape and the ability to connive and convince, Gil’s cousin became invincible. The tribe never caught him. Gil, of course, hadn’t seen or heard from him in years, but every time he hears of a husband murdering his wife back on the res, he thinks of his cousin.

“What if he turned himself into a woman, Gil? The wife? What then?” Gil looked shocked. Somehow he had never considered this.

“What?” He protested. “Why would he do that? Then he’d have to get with other dudes and that would just be wrong.”

The Indian wisdom and tale of moral discretion ended. “Not necessarily,” I reminded him. “But you better keep an eye out. She-he could come back and seduce you and you’d never know it!”

Gil shuddered and Norbert chuckled. “Whatever,” Gil said and became quiet.

It was Norbert who told me that the velvet of young elk antlers, if ground into a fine dust and mixed with lichen—or any other type of ingredient that a medicine man might dream up—would heal or create love where there was none. If it really worked, a small vile of it might come in handy. Especially out here on the road.

We aren’t too far from Utah now. This terrain reminds me of it. As I walk quickly across the forest floor, I recognize another set of footsteps. I turn around and catch Tom, his long arms pushing branches aside, his lanky body bent at the waist, maneuvering through the thick brush. We are in mostly oak country here, somewhere in north-eastern Nevada. Probably about 5,000 ft. elevation, the same as south eastern Utah. Pine trees are few and scattered, the scrub oak and Manzanita relentless and stiff.

“What are you doing?” I call to him before he breaks clean into the next opening, the one we just left, before he can right himself and see us.

“Ah ha!” Tom is standing tall now, grinning, “There’s my two wild women.”

“Nice tracking,” I tell him. He joins us and ruffles my hair. He’s not only half a foot taller than me, but he’s also half of a decade older. More. At 32, Tom has travelled the world. The next time he goes, I want him to take me. I haven’t asked, but I think he knows.

“John told me not to come. He told everyone to let you girls sleep in the bed you’d made, with your big mouths, but I couldn’t just stand there waiting,” Tom said.

“So you decided to hop into bed with us?” My grin is even bigger. It trumps his. My stomach flutters.

The ever steady, level-headed, wise man-boy blushes. His eyes meet mine, but only for a moment, then drop.

“Uh, yeah,” He laughs it off.

“Thank you!” Amy says as she rushes forward to hug him. I don’t bother. Sexual tension electrifies the atmosphere, enlivening space between us. If we touch, we will explode.

We all turn and continue walking, myself in the lead. More minutes pass in silence—amidst snapping twigs and the crunching of the earth’s crust—before we find it.

I have never seen an elk up close before. I used to see them from afar, outside my old house in Arizona, through the bedroom window. I worked in the Coconino Forest then. But I’ve never seen one right in front of me. Never right here at my feet writhing upon the ground. I gasp, my breath coming quick. He is hurt badly.

Amy gasps too, then whispers, "Poor baby. Look at his leg."

We are all whispering, standing still. "Man, this is rough." I look down at the special axe in my hand, twisting it around from its digging side to its chopping side. The handle is not much longer than my arm. I will have to get really close, bend over him even. We do nothing but watch for a while as the young male digs his soft antlers into the ground in desperation, pawing at the air.

"I don't think I can do this," I whisper. Self doubt pushes me closer. I walk a few more feet. The animal seems tired now. He is not kicking as much. Stretched out on his left side, his right leg extends at an unnatural angle, projecting into unfamiliar space. He is staring straight at us with his eyes open nearly wider than his mouth. His eyes are pulling me in, their deep brown irises so feral, yet familiar.

"He looks just like Smokey," I say.

"Who?" Karen asks.

"His eyes. They are exactly like my dogs eyes back home. Her eyes."

"Oh God. I don't think I can do it either," Amy whispers. "Can't we just fix him up and keep him as a pet?"

No one answers because it is really a rhetorical question. Amy knows better. We all do.

Tom has not said a word. I look at him, the front of his face, his downward gaze, standing behind me. His face is cinched tight and cloudy, difficult to read. I realize the elk is staring at Tom, the male animal bond between them growing. A bond beyond words. A bond that can incite battle or brotherhood.

Tom stares back. If he had antlers, the pair would certainly lock. They don't seem to notice our presence anymore, as if only they can intuit through the plumes of testosterone everywhere, billowing like phosphorous smoke signals from a lone survivor. The hormone is so thick I can smell it, like rust, skunkweed, grass, and blood. The blood is everywhere, pounding inside and out, pooling at the base of an oak tree, in its shade. The elk is very still, but the puddle grows. I can hear it lapping and bubbling, quenching the dry dirt beneath us.

Finally, without changing his gaze, Tom says, "You girls better head back and tell everyone." Tom does not once look to us. He does not even ask for our tools, staring into the big brown eyes. He takes a few steps forward, giving us his back, insisting upon our retreat.

Every muscle and bone inside my body protests. My mouth opens, "Tom, I..."

"Bear," he cuts in, keeping his back to me. "Just go."

Amy and I take a few steps backwards, then turn on the heavy heels of our boots. If not for the adrenaline pumping through me, I would probably start crying right now. Amy is, I think. She's sniffing but she won't show me her face. I'm glad. Emotions are contagious.

After a few moments of walking away, rational thoughts return. "What's he gonna do, Bear? Snap its neck?" Amy asks. The question we were both wondering but avoiding.

"He has a Leatherman. Or maybe a big rock."

"I don't know," Amy says. "He looked like he was going to heal it somehow. Or maybe even eat it, the way he was staring."

"Yeah. Who knows?" I say.

And then we hear it tearing its way through the treetops, sharp and loud. A shot.

The shot is not that loud, maybe muffled or silenced, but it is definitely a gun shot.

We freeze. The forest freezes too, its ebb and sway motionless. Gun smoke moves in thick upon the breeze.

“What in the hell?” Amy says. “That was a really big rock, right?”

I don’t even want to think about what it is or what it means. The oak leaves begin to rustle. The wind picks up, blowing into our faces. The shuffle and friction make me restless. The forest is whispering louder than our voices could ever carry and I fight back the chills. The desire to run.

“I don’t know. I’m sure he knows what he’s doing,” I blunder, not wanting her to continue. “Let’s wait.” I want to say lets trust him, but I’m not so sure. I want to say, let’s love him, but I can’t tell. My voice sounds hollow. Can she even hear me with this wind? I want to say he is goodness, pure sacrifice but what do I mean?

Amy senses something too. Our eyes lock and hold. We will not speak of this again, we say, our eyes motionless. Her lips press tight in a neutral line. Mine part, slightly, as I breathe in strength. We will not speak unless forced. I am thankful for her grasp. For her soul’s connection with mine, here in the trees. So much otherness. So much the same.

Twigs snap again, breaking up our silent treaty. Tom immerges from the brush, empty handed, his face blank. I notice, for the first time, a small bulge in the utility pocket of his

nomex, above his right thigh. Was it there before? Tom is looking at Amy, sending more telepathic messages, communicating the need for silence. She nods once, then looks to her feet. Now he looks at me and nods again, expressionless. Nobody speaks in our steady stance, a triangle with equi-distant separation. Equi-understanding.

We are still ten minutes from the trucks, maybe more. I suddenly realize that none of us have radios. "Someone's gonna come looking soon," Tom says, in the next instant. "Lead us out Bear." We fall into single file, Amy right behind me and then Tom. We move quickly like any other work day in the woods. We march with purpose, like everything is fine.

The walk back passes much faster than the one in. Back in the ditch, the entire crew is standing around our truck, still under its talisman spell, bull shitting and reliving their own glorious and partially true tales. Stories of heroism. Of chance. Of the hunt. I speak up quickly, anxious for Tom. "We found it. It was already dead." Everyone stops and turns to look at me.

"Was it a buck?" Scottie circles around from the front of the truck to the side. He is really excited. "I swear I saw its rack! I know I did!" Scottie really has no idea, I think, because until we found him, I never would have known. He wills it to be.

"Yeah," I say.

He begins begging. For more time, for more excitement, for more hunters to rally behind him. He begs John to let him go out there and get it. John is not a hunter. In fact, the sideways floppy way he wears his crew cap hints at a softer side. We all know he used to be an

actor. A thespian, even though he says it was just a tech job. “I did lights and music. Theater was cool at my high school.” Yeah right. And none of this is bad to me, but the need to explain, to justify. It’s just not tough enough. He will never really be one of the guys. Even less than me.

John says no, so Scottie turns to Brian. “Brian, we gotta go get the meat! And all that felt!” Brian is a hunter. A few other guys on the crew begin chattering now, repeating Scott’s wishes. Scottie’s dreams. It’s a feeble attempt at mutiny but still, I am getting nervous and so is Amy. I can tell because she is saying absolutely nothing, staring white faced at me. Guns, just like drugs or alcohol, are strictly forbidden. Not like drugs or alcohol forbidden, but worse. Pot or booze might get you sent home. A hand gun however, well, who in the hell knows. There is no acceptable explanation.

Brian shakes his head and begins walking back towards the hill. “We’ve spent enough time standing around for one day. Let’s hit the road.” The mob settles quickly. Our congregation dispels. Relieved, I look for Tom but he is nowhere. Nobody says a thing about any gun shots. We lock in the tire hubs, engage 4 wheel drive—slipping it as low as it will go—and point the nose of the truck up at an angle. Thank God it hasn’t rained in months. The traction is good.

Back inside the space is even smaller. I huddle against the door, thinking I might pretend to sleep. But Scott has questions.

“Was it messy?”

“What, the elk?”

“Yeah. Was he all splayed out, looking like murder?” I sense a distant bloodlust, but without the crowd—the clouds of testosterone wafting him higher—Scottie bears a hint of remorse. It is a question of genuine interest, not without heart.

“No, not really,” I say. “Just sad. Did you really want the meat?”

“Hunting is a part of my tradition, Bear. I wish we could take the meat, but what would we do with it?”

“Oh yeah, right,” I realize.

“I just wanted the felt antlers and the teeth.” Scottie says.

“Right.” I don’t bother to ask why he wants the teeth, even though I have no idea. I am not a hunter, just a watcher. I make a note, in the margins of Coleridge, to look this up later.

Over the hills and through the woods—Past Battle Mountain, through Elko, between Twin Falls—our heavy trucks climb. Back up into the pine and aspen. The oaks give up their place at my elbow out the window and let the conifers take over. The green needles spread out like human hands, baskets of seed bearing cones hang heavy upon each arm. I watch the vibrant terrain out my window then compare it with the one in my lap, edge-bound and two dimensional. A strange re-appropriation of nature, the atlas is but a distant memory of its past. Trees are innately smart, I realize, whether they are still breathing or cut down and compressed tight, painted and decorated and lap bound. They possess pieces of history.

I have never really done this before. In all my travels, I have never paid much attention to maps. The comprehension in new dimensions is satisfying. I think I am falling in love with a new kind of book and I can hardly believe it because it is the realest reality ever laid to page. A replica almost, no dreams allowed. I am trying to logically blot out the memory of echoes, of the loud, unnatural gunshot that trails behind us clamoring like beer cans tied beneath a “Just Married!” shoe-polished window sign. This commitment feels wrong. The day feels ominous.

If I stop studying the map, even for a moment, the questions rush in like mosquitoes through an open tent flap, searching, hungry and demanding. Why is Tom carrying a gun? How does he hide it? Maybe he doesn't even have a gun. Maybe he summoned up some kinetic energy, loosening it from the depths of rich soil and molding it round, bullet like, in his bare hands. This is crazy but so is the idea of Tom carrying a gun. It doesn't make sense. He is not a hunter, not even close to the type and he hates violence. Doesn't he? The stories of Gil and

Norb quiver somewhere in my temporal lobes, fluttering like gypsy moths. A tiny heart beat brings a new cadence. A phobia. Who are these people? Day in and day out, on the road and at home, surrounded by the same strangers. I have no idea really.

It's quiet in this truck, the radio stations gone, so I pretend to sleep. Amy has not said a word since just before Battle Mountain, after we climbed out of the ditch. She mumbled under her breath from the back seat something like, "Thank you Jesus." No one replied, but I thought it was weird to thank Jesus and not God, if you're going to be thanking any spirit. I don't know if Amy is religious, but I don't think so. Or at least I didn't. It seems like she said it just to take up a little more of the endangered space in here, without even knowing it. She probably heard someone in her childhood say it so she subconsciously reverted to it. It was almost as if Amy had never spoke up to try and save the deer to begin with. She probably wished she hadn't.

We exit off the I-80 heading north, still in Nevada, on this odd-numbered and seldom traveled highway. Soon we push our way across the border and into Idaho, straight through the veil of Twin Falls and into a traffic standstill. I open my eyes, sit up and double check the map to make sure we are not suddenly in Minnesota. Twin Falls, Minnesota? Maybe I am sleeping. I trace my finger across the giant map, up and over to Minnesota and realize I have confused my words. No. It is the Twin Cities and another tiny place called Small Falls, where my friend Paula is from, that makes me think of Minnesota. They are both there, but Paula lives in Flagstaff now. I wonder what Minnesota is like. I've never been. I wonder if their trees are the same as the west, or if they ever fight fires there. I wonder if they use chainsaws at all. It seems to me like the kind of place that ought to harvest its timber with an old fashioned axe.

Or even a cross-cut, two-person saw. If I worked there, maybe I would never have to run a chainsaw again. With this regression, my performance anxieties come back.

I wonder if this is what it might feel like to be the kind of guy who has trouble getting it up. I realize the phallic nature of the tool, of most tools and their masculine associations. My inability to both carry and run the saw with endurance yet my continued desire to, reminds me of an impotency. Amongst other things too. The etymologies and definitions must have crossed paths somewhere in history. I wonder what it would be like to be surrounded by women from time to time. I really have no idea at all. If my metaphors would be much different.

“Hey, what do you guys think about an all female hot shot crew?” I ask, sitting up straight. Thousands of memories race back at me. Things, the last four years of my life, would have been very, very different.

“Impossible,” Jeff says from his back seat.

“Wonderful!” Amy says from hers.

“Nice,” Scottie says, emphasizing the “s” sound, making it clear that he is not only contemplating the theory but picturing it as well.

“I am serious. I’m not trying to be a separatist, I’m just hypothesizing.”

“You can’t have uni-sex teams in a co-ed division,” Jeff says. I don’t usually listen to him because I think he is an idiot. He’s nineteen, still in college and only here for three months. He

is a rookie from a southern California big city. He thinks he knows it already, whatever it is. But this statement may be his first attempt at intelligence.

“Um, sorry to be rude Jeff but this league is hardly co-ed,” Amy says. Amy is young too, but in her second season. She is twenty years old with naturally platinum blond hair, bright blue eyes and one soft layer of baby fat remaining, mostly beneath her chin. She is taking some time off school and in the middle of discovering, without books or a college setting, feminism. But she is still too sweet, has not hit the breaking point yet, to say much about it. I take some secret satisfaction, or maybe not so secret, in prompting her through the process.

“Yes it is,” Jeff says. “Girls are allowed on every crew. They only separate them on the prison crews.”

“They are allowed,” I say, “but there aren’t any. Why?”

“It’s not our fault if girls don’t want to do the work.”

“Well, I’m just saying that it would be nice to play in an all girls league once in a while.”

Scottie reaches out and touches my shoulder, as if I am all worked up and he is about to calm me down or issue the definitive response. “As much as I agree with the image in my head, and as much as I think I might like to be the token male on that crew, it actually sounds like a disaster.”

“Why?” I demand. “My softball team was awesome. That team worked together.”

“And what else did they do together?” Jeff asks. His voice is thick and syrupy, dripping with connotations and innuendo.

I look over my shoulder at him. He has narrowed his eyes, lowering them beyond his stupid grin. “You dumb ass,” I yell at him. “Not every female athlete is a lesbian.” What I don’t say out loud is that in some aspects, he is right. Both of these two idiots, maybe. Even though there are current day, sexist crew bosses who discriminate when hiring—while the rest of the forest turns its collective, bird brained head— creating all male crews, an all female one would require some new and very out in the open kind of rules. Maybe. Or is it just the same? Most crews have very strict rules about intra-crew dating. It is severely frowned upon, unlike my old softball team. It wasn’t some huge lesbian free for all, but I was the minority. It wasn’t weird, but there were girls dating each other. On my imaginary all girls hot shot crew, dating policies would be very strict, to the point of job termination.

“I just think it’s all a big stupid game, anyways,” Amy says. “I mean, who cares who dates who?”

“Sure. And just because a girl wants to do this crappy job, doesn’t mean that she’s a lesbian,” I am just about to add, *look at Amy and I, for instance* when Jeff butts in again.

“No, but they’re the toughest. They’re the best at running chainsaws and you’re gonna need some expert sawyers on your Amazon crew. Not a bunch of beginners.”

“Fuck you, Rookie.” I fire these three, very important and very volatile words right into his narrowed, mocking eyes. I want to punch him in his overly groomed frat boy face, but Scottie pats me on the knee. More hushing.

“Easy, Bear. Like I said, I would love to be on that crew. I’ll run the saw for you all day and night, anytime.” He speaks in a low and soothing voice, just above condescension. I turn back around in my seat, nervous as hell about the stupid saw still, but too pissed to say anything. I stare out the window again, the space in here completely gone.

“Maybe I’ll just have to kill a couple of guys so I can go to prison and get on a rainbow crew,” I speak into the window, my semi-serious attempt at comic relief. Rainbow crews are all female prison crews, including the guard and bus drivers, that fight fire. I don’t even know if they are allowed to run chain saws. They are not really considered desirable, but deadly, disgusting and desperate. Mostly, unpredictable. Stories surrounding them have reached near mythical, almost legendary status, since nobody ever sees them anymore. I never have.

Everyone laughs at my comment, even Jeff. It’s getting dark outside, but we can’t tell if the sun has set yet. The trees are too dense. I can just make out a mileage sign on the side of the road, 25 miles to Challis where we are supposed to overnight. After ten hours of driving, I want out of this truck. The truck is no longer only void of space, but it is a prison, twice over. I am trapped inside the cab and inside my damned head, picking at its corners with restless thought. The atlas and books of poetry lay idle at my feet, completely forgotten. There is no cure for the final hours on the road. It is only survived through self containment. The trees outside beckon.

The radio suddenly comes to life again, illuminating our silence. All the trucks are awake and listening. “We’re gonna get off at the second exit. The hotel is called ‘The Christmas Tree Inn,’ so stick close.”

“Thank you Jesus,” I say. I have been in the car with these people way too long. I miss my aspens.

I've got my room assignment and it's no surprise that I'm bunking with Beth, the other, other girl on the crew. That means Amy gets her own room tonight. They refuse to room us with the boys, which is great because every third hotel stay, I get a room to myself. This time spent alone, in the semi-leisure and comfort, is worth a million pounds of gold. As soon as we get to the fire, the walls will come down and the dirt will get in. Into everything and everywhere because we are living in it. We are breathing and even eating the dirt, like the mud pies I used to make as a child and actually bite into, but with less water. Probably less enthusiasm too.

Beth isn't so bad, except she snores a lot. She's also more of a loner, with an obsessive flare for country dancing. The best thing about her is she's tough. The guys tease her behind her back because she's too masculine, calling her "shim," and other androgynous word hybrids. I think she knows it, but she doesn't seem to care. She is from backwoods nowhere Oregon, where nearly everyone is either a logger or works at a paper mill (or is out chasing Bigfoot), so she thinks herself normal, and why not? In fact, she is very simple and because of this, very likeable. The longer I live the more I appreciate simple people and their grasp on happiness. Not ignorance is bliss or laziness, just pleasantly satisfied. Beth notices none of this, or just says nothing about this, just listens to her Discman, two-stepping and pretzel twisting herself into alpine heaven without ever lifting a finger.

Mark—our other crew captain who doesn't say much either, only attempts to intimidate with heavy looks that everyone assumes are actually comical because Mark grew up the

youngest of seven with six older sisters who used to dress him up in bunny suits and he clearly has something to prove, but can't ever quite do it without cracking a smile— passes out the keys. He's not smiling now, probably cranky as the rest of us, but he's not mad. I would hate to imagine him mad, his face turning the same shade of red as his hair, making his head into one large, order giving tomato. Who's not going to laugh at that? 'Ol tomato head chewing tobacco and mumbling beneath his breath. That's when the pushups come. Senses of humor fall out of sync.

We're on the second floor, 202. I carry my government issued red canvas bag, jam-packed with plain cotton everything: t-shirts, socks, sports bras and underwear all on top of flip flops, tennis shoes, and one pair of jeans (down time attire). Nothing attractive or appealing beyond the sake of comfort. A big maroon crew sweatshirt is there too. It takes up a lot of space and I don't always need it, but if I do and I don't have it, I'm S.O.L. No one takes pity and in Idaho, it still gets cold at night in the summer time. My book bag hangs from my other shoulder. Beth gets to the door before me, drumming her hands on her thighs, wires hanging out of her ears, waiting because I have the little paper pouch with both plastic keys in it.

"You wanna shower first?" I ask her as I slide one card key into the computer-coded slot.

"Huh?" She says, leaning closer to me without removing her earphones. I reach my hand up and remove one for her. The small white ball makes a slight popping sound as it leaps free. I force myself not to look, not to check the plastic piece for wax. I look her straight in the eye and repeat my question.

“Oh, sure,” she says.

“Cool. I think I’m gonna go for a walk.”

“Take your radio or something.” She’s says. God damned gung- ho goody-goody.

“Mmmm. Maybe. I’m sick of carrying that thing around.”

“Just put it in your pocket. That’s what I do.”

Great. I glance down at Beth’s baggy pant style. She could almost fit all the hand-helds from the whole crew inside those pants. How they stay up, no one knows. Maybe by the deepest forest magic, incantations spun back in her home town of Sasquatch by bearded ladies as we speak. Someone needs to get her a belt.

“I’m gonna change first. We’re not going anywhere tonight. I don’t need to be fire ready.” Every seemingly absurd rule I argue with, past the point of oblivion, whether it’s inside my head or accidentally slips out. I don’t know how I am not more exhausted, since I can barely handle constantly being told what I can and cannot do. It seems like I am always working on my breathing patterns to slow my temper. Counting to ten, ten times: ten cord tugs, ten trees falling, ten “Timbers!,” ten hot spots flaring, ten buckets of water dropping, ten hot hotshots from other crews passing by ten times. Ten times ten times. And it doesn’t stop there, usually. Maybe one day, in ten years from now, I’ll be on one of those crews with the ten really hot guys. At least then I would enjoy the view while staring at their order-giving, flapping faces.

So, the bottom line is, I'm not walking around town with a big plastic, cartoon-like radio—it's long, rubber antennae bouncing in the wind waving hello to everyone that passes—sticking out of my back pocket. I toss my bags on the infamously never-changed outer cover of the bed and begin taking off my boots. The rest of my costume is quick to follow. I don't bother to take my radio out, just my tennis shoes and my one pair of jeans.

Beth is in the bathroom without the shower running and doing who knows what when I leave. Bathroom time on a fire crew is also a precious and precarious event. One must never get too used to the commodity of the commode, since it may disappear at any moment, forever. Or nearly. But cherishing these luxuries, like the tacky, fall patterned bed and old television set, is a necessity.

It can happen where, like a few crews and many seasons past, crew members become unable to or simply forget how to use these amenities. Like the time Turtle took a shit but didn't wipe at all, just put his swim trunks on and came for a swim with the rest of us like nothing. That was a tiny hotel pool too. His roommate on that trip was Nate and when Nate came down from their room he was disgusted. He was so serious he was stunned into using Turtle's real name. "Tim! You disgusting son of a bitch! You didn't wipe, did you?"

"Huh?" Turtle stared up out of the pool, his head bobbing up and down in the water, the smile on his face so deep and wide I could hear it crack. It was hard to tell, since it was dark out, but I think he was a little embarrassed too. Or maybe just surprised.

"Did you or did you not wipe after you annihilated our toilet?"

Speak-grinning, Turtle said, "Why?"

"Because," Nate collected himself, standing up tall to drive his point home, "the plastic wrapping paper is still on the new roll of toilet paper in our bathroom. It hasn't even been touched so you either A) Brought your own and wiped like a good mommy's boy B) used your sock and wiped like a good fire fighter or C) didn't use anything cuzz you're a sick bastard!" Nate finally started laughing, still shaking his head. He must have been planning that speech all the way down the stairs and out into the night air.

The rest of us began ooh-ing and awing, repeating "that's nasty Turdy,"—an updated version of his nickname that stuck to him like his dirty swimsuit. We did this for a while. He did nothing but laugh. "What?" He feigned protest, grinning. "Who cares? The pool water washes it off," he insisted. Completely logical and even sort of sanitary.

"Glad I don't have to do your laundry," I said. "How did your mother not strangle you as a child?"

"My momma loves me that's why. And what's a coupla' racing stripes here and there, anyways? Chlorine kills the germs, the rest are just floaties."

Great. We all swam in big circles, around and around, further away from him. We didn't want to chance any floaties, germs or no germs. Turtle was special, but each year there are plenty more to pick up where the old ones left off.

Nicknames are a funny thing here. A source of pride and shame, the stronger folks taking only strength and camaraderie in their exclusive, collectively established branding. This year we already have a few. Take Cannonball for instance, old name Samuel. We've had only one drunken night so far this year and Sammy capitalized on it. All hell broke loose: fights, car crashes, bonfires, stink bombs, Ever Clear and Carlos Rossi. Cannonball was so drunk he snuck a rose colored bottle of putrid pinkness out of the bunkhouse. By the romantic flicker of the bonfire, he leaped upon a nearby picnic table and hollered "Cannonball!" quoting Bill Murray's anti-hero character in Caddy Shack, then bottoms up for a good ten seconds. The only difference was that Murray's character had himself some home brewed hard liquor. Oh, and Bill Murray was acting in a movie. Cannonball had himself some sweet as hell cooking wine in a giant three liter, bowling ball shaped bottle. So of course he got really sick that night and passed out beneath that very same picnic table, beneath his stage. The only thing that kept the guys from messing with him—mean stuff like stealing his clothes off his body and burying him naked in the dirt, head sticking out—was my yelling. I wouldn't let them. But the name stuck. Like any good nickname, it alludes to the past and provides fuel for future antics necessary to uphold the dream. To maintain his title. A more accurate nickname might have been wrecking ball but it's too late for that major change.

Each year the people are no different really. A similar mix, but this year there are two more girls to share the male space with me. I am thankful for this. It's just a matter of time before we each get our new nicknames. Before the convergence of any two or more well aimed intentions colliding in a twisted train wreck of comedy. Bear has followed me

everywhere, since my real name is Karen, and I can't handle Care Bear, so it's just Bear. It is a classic and I like it.

I walk down the hall, past the open doors of other crew members, and see the boys in towels, bare chested. They pretend to ignore me, but puff up a little. I do the same, averting my eyes. I know Tom and Matt are in room 210. I always listen for Tom's name when room assignments are called out, and they room together a lot. I get really rigid as I pass by their room, but the door is closed so I keep walking, pretending not to skip a beat.

As I pass 212, a voice calls to me, "Hey, Bear!"

"Hey what?" I turn to see 'ol Mikey lounging on top of the large flowered bed spread wearing only one tiny white hotel towel. He is laying on his stomach, long, lanky limbs and dark hippie hair splayed in every direction, reading one of the books I lent him. *Young Men and Fire*, by Norman Maclean. Another is lying next to him on the bed, *Desert Solitaire*, by Ed Abbey.

"Did you know that if you ever get hired on as permanent, the Forest Service forces you to sign a paper that says you promise not to write about any of the things that happen in the workplace?"

"That's nice." I say. "That's why I will never take a permanent position with these clowns," I say. Mike laughs out loud at this. Mike was a permanent somewhere else but he gave it up just to join our still in-training hot shot crew. "I've never signed that paper, not even once," I add.

“That’s good. I wonder how these guys did it back then.”

“Abbey and Maclean?”

“Yeah. They wrote it all down.”

“They probably weren’t dumb enough to sign any stupid papers either.”

“Yeah, they were probably never permanent. I signed it. They made me.”

“Just tell your dirty little secrets to me, Mikey,” I pat him on the back. “I’ll give you a cool pseudonym, I swear.”

“Yes! Like MacGyver? Or Chuck Norris? Or maybe Steel Balls?” I roll my eyes at him.

“Of course,” I say. Mike is a weird guy. Nice, but weird. I don’t question him ever. Just another partially cracked egg in the carton. At least these eggs are organic and cage free, mostly.

I am tired of small spaces, so I am happy to leave the hotel rooms. I wipe my hands off on my pants and look for the stairs. By the time I make it down we’ve been in Challis for maybe an hour. It’s eight o’clock and the sun is gone. I decide to walk into town.

The lobby of the Christmas Tree Inn is cluttered with decoration and oversized furniture. A few small deer head are mounted above the check in desk. The rest of the wood paneled walls are covered with elk, their pitch black eyes quiet and staring. There is no one behind the desk. A fat cheeked squirrel sits on top holding a sign that says “Please Ring Bell for Service!” I

head for the front entrance. The double metal doors are pink and carved in two like a bone-in chicken breast. I grab the handle and yank, snapping the wishbone, greeting the blast of cool air face first. The short, stiff fur of the animals behind me bends, then straightens again. I leave the lobby walking quickly, then I begin to jog.

The outside air is light and christened, blessed and free. It is alive. I run slowly at first, to loosen my joints and warm my muscles. I run and run, waiting for the sensation of freedom, for the click of the cap and the powering down of my camera but it doesn't come. I sprint down a deserted Main Street lined with brick buildings small and cracking with age, right into the heart of down town, still feeling watched. I enter and almost leave it in seconds I am running so fast. Or it is so small. A red light stops me short, its color screaming in a world of whispering greens, blues and browns. There is nothing neutral about it. Nothing about red that permits motion.

I look around but see no one. On the adjacent corner, behind the red light, there is an electric sign in purple. The purple smears from the red, decreasing in temperature and urgency, increasing in attraction. Purple is an androgynous color. It is my favorite. I stare at the color of the neon sign for a while before I notice what it says, "Claire's Used Blues." On the wooden door, just below the purple sign, a brown plaque reads "Bicycles, Books, Internet and Music." The red light changes to green so I cross the empty intersection at an angle, ready to explore.

In the middle of the intersection, where the night sky is clear overhead and a ring of traffic lights are all around me, a mailman approaches.

"Excuse me, Miss," he says, "but you're not from around here are you?"

“No, I’m not. I am just crossing this intersection at an angle because it is empty, besides you.”

“Nothing is ever empty, Miss. You must know this!”

“No, I guess it isn’t,” I say. “You are here now, unfortunately, and so am I. I would like to get to the store behind you, if you don’t mind.”

“Great idea! Fastest internet connection in town, and some great old books,” the mailman says, but doesn’t move. “Especially for women, if you know what I mean.” He nudges me with his elbow. “She might be closed, but she’s always there. Just knock on the door.”

“Who? Claire?”

“Yeah. She practically lives there.”

“All right. I will.”

“I’ve got some maps of the city in here, if you would like one. Tourists are always asking me for directions.” The mailman opens the top of his letter bag, a frumpy burlap sack that is nearly empty and covered with dust, its brass buckles scuffed and dim. He searches about inside the bag with his free hand, the dark brown curls around his forehead falling into his squinting eyes. He is handsome for an older man, but very casual, almost sloppy.

I look over the shoulder of his light blue uniform to see if the store is open but I can’t find the sign. Shuffling my feet awkwardly, waiting, I look down each lane, the four paths

unwinding into each cardinal direction. Strange that no one else is out. Strange that we are standing in the middle of this intersection alone in the night.

“Here we are,” he says. “Now you can find your way. And tell Claire that Paul sent you and she’ll let you in for sure. Give you some discounts, even.”

Paul the mailman winks at me. “Thanks,” I say. “Good to meet you Paul.” I put out my hand and he shakes it loosely “I’m Bear,” I add.

“Wonderful name. Have a great time in Challis.” He moves past me so I continue on to the far corner and Claire’s Used Blues.

The front door is made of wood with only one small window. I cup my hands and peer in, my face to the glass. A yellow light is on. Beneath it, from behind a desk, I can see hands flipping through a magazine. The hands are small, but move quickly. The rest of the shop is in shadows.

I hesitate. She is obviously not open. But a used bookstore in the middle of the mountains is too perfect. I knock.

I hear the sound of a chair scuffing across the floor, shoved back, then footsteps. A woman’s face moves into the open space of the window, looks me over, then disappears. I hear some more shuffling around inside, then the loud and certain clinking of a deadbolt.

The woman opens the door half way and asks, “May I help you?”

“Yes. I am visiting and I just met Paul. He gave me this map and, well, told me to knock on your door if I wanted to buy some books. So I am. I mean I do,” the words rush out of me. They sound pathetic, like I am making excuses, which is true but I am a connoisseur. I want to tell her we should be friends because I love all the things in her shop. “I collect books,” I blurt out again.

As she moves into the outside light, I can see her face. Her hair is short and shaggy blonde and her eyes a turquoise blue like glacier silt in a freshwater lake. They sparkle innocent and inviting. “Well come on in then. Lots of books in here, that’s for sure.”

“I couldn’t find a closed or open sign.”

“No worries. I usually prop the door open with that rock there when I’m open. Or just let people in as I please,” the woman says, pointing to a large purple geode next to the door and flipping a switch on the wall. The overhead lights come on and the room comes to life. It is not a large room, but the ceilings are tall and each purple wall is lined with books.

“Wow! I am in heaven!” I say.

“Wonderful then. And I am Claire, your helpful angel of old things. Have a look around. The back room has some chairs and a table if you want to read. There’s also a computer for internet, but it’s powered down. That counter over there with the boxes is filled with old vinyl and a few tapes. Let me know if you need anything,” Claire says, pointing to each new area as she speaks.

“Thank you,” I say. She smiles and walks back to her desk.

There really are hundreds of books. The shelves are overflowing almost, jam packed. Most are in good shape, but some are missing bindings or covers. I take down a small book, the same color as the indigo walls, and run my hand across its hard cover. It’s clean, dust free, but without a title. I flip through its pages and breathe its stale old air. *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury. It’s an old copy, but not a first edition. The book reminds me of my childhood. It reminds me of surprises endings. I put it back and look for more.

“Is there a certain topic you are interested in?”

“Mmm, maybe animals. Elk.”

“Well, right now I think we are limited to some old hunting manual types. Do you hunt?”

“No. Well, I shot a bird once and then couldn’t touch it, I felt so bad. And I tried to go deer hunting, but the whole time I was hoping that no deer would come at all. So I guess I’m just not cut out for it.”

“Well, you don’t have to be. It is good to know how to survive though, just in case you need to.”

“I agree.”

“So, this is a good book for you then.” Claire reaches high above our heads, standing on her tiptoes, and brings down a dark green book, handing it to me. “*Elk Hunting Secrets*,” I read aloud.

“You can hunt them or just get to know them.”

“Thanks.”

“There are millions of elk in these woods. Sometimes in the city park. Even my front yard in the winter. That’s when the males and females are still in separate herds. But you will read all about it in your book. What else besides elk?”

“What else are these woods full of?” I ask.

“Hunters.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“It’s good, usually. Population control. Not all of the hunters have to be human, either,” Claire’s smile grows. She walks to the front of the store, waving me along behind her.

“These books over here are my personal favorites. Most of them have only been here for a few days. They move quickly. But I can usually find a perfect match for everyone.”

She stops in front of a smaller shelf right next to the cash register and takes another paperback down, much thicker and black with tan writing.

“This is a good book. It’s perfect for you. Filled with tales of the hunt. Or just tails,” she says, then wiggles her backside and growls a little.

I laugh and take the book from her. “*Women Who Run with Wolves*,” I read aloud again. I laugh some more. “Seriously?” I ask. “Is it nonfiction?”

“It is nonfiction. It’s like an essay woven with strands of story. The stories may be true, or they may not be. You can decide.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Are you in love?” she asks me suddenly.

I feel my face warm. I must be red. “Not really,” I say.

“Everyone is in love with something.”

“I guess. Just like Paul said.”

“Paul said that?” she laughs.

“Well, no. But he did say that nothing is ever really empty and that’s kind of the same thing.”

“Hmmm. True. You’re a smart girl,” Claire says, then grabs another book, another paper back. This time she reads it aloud to me. “*Eros the Bittersweet*,” and then she hands it to me. I take it, not sure if I want it.

“Don’t be scared. It’s actually pretty good. Not scary either. A well balanced take on the fickle topic, I must say.”

“All right. I think I believe you,” I say.

“Good. What else?”

“That’s it. Three is my limit. I’m set, or else I will never even have time to look at them, not to mention the space.”

“That’s a good rule. Anything else then? Some music maybe? A bell for your bike?”

“No thanks,” I say. “I don’t have a bike. Oh, can I use your bathroom?”

“I suppose so. But you are gonna have to meet Garcia then.”

A dog begins barking from somewhere in the back. Claire smiles big, “He sure knows his name.”

We begin walking together, to the back of the store. “I put him in the bathroom when customers come. He’s really pretty sweet, but he scares people at first.”

“I love dogs. I’ll be all right,” I say. “Why did you name him Garcia?” I wonder.

“Because ever since he was a puppy he loved the Grateful Dead. I mean he really loves them. Or else he really hates them, it’s hard to say. He howls right along with Jerry.”

We walk all the way to the back of the second room. Claire approaches the wooden door there. "Oh, be quiet now!" she says, then she opens the door. A large head with a huge muzzle, followed by four long legs and a grand sweeping tail appear. Bright blue eyes, maybe brighter than Claire's, stare into mine. The dog barks once, then sits at my feet, still staring. I begin to stick out my hand, to let him sniff me but Claire stops me.

"No need to hun. He can smell you from there. Just sit tight for a sec."

Suddenly Garcia begins to wag his huge tail, knocking it against the frame of the bathroom door, and whine loudly.

"Okay, now pet him please, or he'll really complain."

I reach out my hand slowly and touch his head, then I rub his soft ears, tall and triangular, reaching fast for the ceiling. Garcia moves closer and pushes back against my hand. His coat is a thick grey-black with an undercoat of burnt brown. So much fur. I can feel more layers than I can see. I look up at Claire, "Is he a..."

"We won't keep you now. Go right ahead," Claire says, pointing to the open bathroom door.

"Oh, thanks." I stand up straight and walk through the door, closing it behind me. The room is a cheery bright yellow, but very small. I am surprised Garcia even fits in it. I use the toilet and flush, washing my hands because Claire is listening outside, then turn off the light behind me.

“Thanks again, Claire,” I say, keeping my eyes on Garcia who is watching me back. There is too much wild in his eyes, his presence too intense.

Claire hugs me. “You’re welcome. Have a good trip and come back soon.”

“Bye, Claire.” Our eyes lock. So much beauty. I look down into the eyes of her companion and reach out a hand to him. Garcia pushes his head into me again. “Goodbye beautiful boy,” I say and head for the door.

Outside, the sensation is back. Someone is watching. I tuck my books under my arm and begin jogging again, down Main Street, through an opening in a chain link fence and into a large field. A big building sits in the far back corner, on the opposite side of the yard next to some playground equipment. Probably a school.

Along the edge of the field are trees, semi-domestic trees that look easy to climb. I want to run to them. To take my new old books into them, safe from the surprises and predators below, and read. But I fear being cornered. From the center of the big field, I turn to look for my pursuer.

At the same moment, as if I am in an unknown show with synchronized special effects, lights and choreography, fireworks light up the night sky. I am forced to look up. With each bright blast—sapphire blue, ruby red, canary yellow—I notice more about my surroundings. The setting is going off like a 35 mm, automatic camera, snap shot after snap shot, each flash tells a story: the schoolyard fence curving and pulling away from its frame, eroding from the top down, the large, dark brown school building in the distance with its wide, open face clock and slow moving hands just above tall windows, the grass beneath my feet soft with yellow patches and course, new green blades emerging. And then I see a man standing in the distance. I wish I could make it a romantic story. I wish that beneath these primary colored lights, I turn about on my tip toes, dark locks breezing in the soft mountain wind, and tumble into the arms of a lover. But this is not what happens. With the next flash of red, I see that it is only Matt watching the fireworks too. He sees me watching him and waves. This happens a lot with him

and somewhere, down in my gut, I realize that I knew it was him even before I turned around. The reason I could not feel alone. Could not relax. I sigh and wave back, plopping down in the middle of the field to await an inevitable encounter, basking in the slight rain of ash and light. The climbing trees and my new books will have to wait.

His compact body fills my vision, jogging now, as another blue blossom explodes, crowning his head. "Nice show, huh?" He says a little out of breath.

"Beautiful. Wonder why?"

"Um, well, it's almost July now... an early fourth celebration?"

"I guess. People really get excited for fireworks."

"Hey, they are pretty neat. So why in the hell did you run?" He asks.

"I don't know. Exercise."

"Like hell. You suddenly broke into a full blown sprint when I was about to catch you. I could barely holler before you were gone."

"Just cramped from the drive. What are you doing following me?" There's no way to explain my action, so I point out his.

"I wanted to get out too. I saw you leave and thought some company might be nice. Then you took off, ya freak. Mind if I hang out?"

I am in no place, ever, to say no. "Sure." The simple fireworks slow, reaching the end like a fully popped bag of popcorn. A yellow one explodes, sending fake bits of sunlight streaming down through the darkness. We wait for another, but nothing comes. Momentum vanishes.

"Wanna keep walking?"

"Why not." He reaches out a hand and I take it. He pulls me to my feet and I wonder, maybe even worry what we will talk about. We begin walking, side by side, meandering at first. In this big grassy field there are long divots everywhere, ground boundaries from extracurricular activities. I steer us towards a chameleon sideline that works as a barrier for nearly every sport. Matt seems tempted to walk in front me, out of habit, but overcomes it.

"Were you planning on reading all of those tonight?" Matt asks, pointing to the small pile of books pressed against my chest. I nearly forgot they were there.

"No. Just bought these at the book store. A funny little place, but good books."

"Cool. You must be in heaven then, to get new books."

"They are used."

"Right. New old books, your favorite kind."

"Yeah. I'm excited."

We become quiet. I don't feel like explaining anymore. I stare at my feet. Walking carefully, foot over foot, like a high wire acrobat, I listen to the sound of grass bending. The surface is resilient and still full of spring.

"Wanna walk to the playground?" Matt asks.

Matt is pointing to the far corner, barely discernible and without really any light. But the familiar shapes of swing sets and slides slowly emerge like phantom children, one at a time, beckoning us to play with them.

"Sure," I say. "The swings look good."

We walk with a purpose now. Walking right next to a fellow crewmember is rare. Marching, digging, scraping, and cutting, are all done in single file line. Even walking to breakfast, lunch and dinner is done in single file formation. It takes a great effort to twist and torque our line sideways.

When we get to the small play area, Matt is quickest to grab a swing. Not wanting to take up his space, or vice versa, I take an identical black swing two seats down. He moves slowly, dragging his feet through the sand, while I begin pumping my legs. I climb higher and higher, as if everything's a race, doing every possible opposite to him that I can. I am pumping so fast that my efforts fill the silence.

When I reach half circle height, covering nearly 180 degrees of space in seconds, the metal swing set begins to jump a little. I decide to do the same, moving my elbows to the inside

of the two chains and pointing them forward, beneath my grip. I wait until I am almost at the apex of forward movement and push out of my seat. Soaring through the air for one split second and back on the ground again, playground sand indenting beneath my sneakers.

“Wahoo!” I hear hollers from across the field behind me. I spin around but can’t see too many things clearly. Matt twists about to look too.

A crescent moon is just appearing. I see pale arms waving beneath it, struggling to hold unknown objects to their chests, making them flap like rubber chickens. It’s Cannonball and Jeff. It’s still too dark to see much, but I recognize their shape and voices. There must be clouds shuffling above, slipping in and out of night time polyester pockets.

“What in the hell are those guys doing?” Matt asks. He sounds irritated and doesn’t wave back.

The two boys begin jogging without using their arms, still clutching to their chests.

“Guess we’ll find out,” I say.

As they get closer, I realize that they are each carrying bundles of paper clad rockets, each with a plastic dunce cap. The boys are grinning wide. The smell of gun powder and mischief fills my nose.

“Did you see the show? We’ve got more! Wanna do ‘em!” Cannonball is half skipping, half galloping the final feet.

“Holy shit guys. Did you run into a firework tree and just start picking? What the hell?”  
I’m beginning to wonder if these guys even bring clothing in their bags at all. Where in the hell do they keep this shit?

“Nah! I wish! I brought ‘em from home. Got ‘em in Mexico last time,” Cannonball says.

“You are fucking nuts Ball,” I say.

Matt says nothing still, continuing to swing slowly.

“Which one was your favorite? Which color?” Jeff asks, then walks over to me where I am sitting in the sand, exactly where I landed. He places his pile at his feet, next to my bent knees.

I sigh. “Well, I guess I liked the red shimmery one the most.”

“Awww. That’s my little sisters favorite one too, only blue,” Cannonball says. I am trying to figure out how that is even the same thing when Matt finally speaks up.

“You all bring any M-80’s or just those pretty little flower rockets?”

Cannonball leans over and sets his load down in the sand too. He half turns to show us the cylinder stuck in the back of his pants, beneath his shirt. He reaches back, twisting at the waist, and pulls it out. It’s not that impressive to look at. It’s not even pointy headed like good artillery ought to be, just a leveled off cardboard cylinder.

“Have you ever tried putting one of those in someone’s mailbox?” Matt says, egging them on.

“Sure. That’s old news.” Jeff has done it all. “Adios el boxo de letteros.”

“Have you ever tried lighting it off your body?”

“Shut up Matt, that’s stupid.” I am uncomfortable, sensing a reckless dare. “What in the hell is wrong with you?” I look at him harshly, knowing that these guys will do just about any stupid human trick in the book, if dared. I know it because I see it every year. The same tricks, new people.

“What?” He shrugs at me, his voice cracking a little. “It’s just a question.”

“Naw man. I’m not launching that shit from my body.”

“That’s cool. It’s a huge rush though. You have someone get down on all fours, or lay on their stomach and then you set it on their back and light it.”

“I’ll do it,” Jeff says.

“You might as well be taking it up the ass then, Jeff.” I try homophobia as a deterrent.

“Yeah dude. That’s just weird. What’s the point?” Cannonball says.

“If you’ve ever felt an explosion close to your body, the pressure of the rocket leaving your skin, well, you’d know. It’s just an experience.”

I try again. "So is making love to a man but do you feel the need to experience that too?"

"Whatever." Jeff shakes his head. Matt laughs and Cannonball embraces tradition.

"Let's just blow something up!" he says.

They look around, searching for a hollow object that might break into a million pieces if they could only help it.

"Just forget it. It's almost curfew anyways. It's 9:40, let's go."

I get up and start walking, hoping they will do the same. But I don't hear any steps behind me.

"What about that thing?" Cannonball is so excitable. I turn back to see him pointing at a stationary plastic kiddy horse on top of a big metal spring, probably steel bolted to the ground. "We could stick one in its mouth!" He is jumping up and down now.

The horse's mouth is open wide in a silent whinny, its painted eyes narrow, focused on an imaginary finish line in an imaginary race.

"No way," I say. "Ball, you are not blowing up a toy horse. You are not making some little kid cry."

"Yeah," he sighs, mumbling under his breath.

“Why don’t you use your shirt,” I say.

“What?” Ball says.

“Lame,” Jeff says.

“It’s not lame. Send your shirt up. It’s better than nothing and no one’s going to call the cops on you dumb asses.” I exaggerate my excitement, hoping it might catch on.

“Yeah!” It does. Ball is getting even more worked up and excited. “My shirt will be like an astronaut or an angel!” He reaches over the top of his shoulders and tugs at the t-shirt, pulling it over his head. He is chubby and a little shy, but pushes on. “Right here in the middle of this sand.” He kneels down, white shirt in one hand, red and blue paper explosive in the other.

“I bet it doesn’t even leave the ground,” Jeff says.

“It will.” I am not sure, but I sound it.

“You’ll probably catch the whole town on fire,” Matt says. “I’m surprised you haven’t already.”

“Lighter please.”

Ball is ignoring them both. I love this about him. Once his enthusiasm takes off, no amount of skepticism will stop him or rain on his parade. And he listens to me, since I watch out for him.

Matt is looking at me, waiting for me to look at him, I can feel it. When I do, he rolls his eyes to the metal bar above him. He is still in his swing, a front row seat.

The M-80 is up right in the sand with the T-shirt around it. Jeff helps arrange the shirt the way he thinks it should go for better lift off and more show, sleeve side up. Then he places the light in Cannonball's hand. Ball holds it like an important surgeon, never moving his eyes from the patient, and puts the flame to the fuse. We all take a step backward, Ball scrambling quickly, and puff our bellies up with anticipation.

It blasts off, just like I bluffed, straight into the sky, taking the shirt with it, then igniting. The cotton catches fire and for a single moment it hovers in the air, the flammable gasses holding it suspended in time. For that one moment it does look like an angel. Twenty feet above our heads, winds aloft catch and streak it sideways, then drop it like death straight down and around the neck of the plastic toy horse. The horse doesn't catch fire, but its small eyes get smaller. They close into tiny slits, to keep out the smoke maybe and the center of its head begins to sag a little.

"Ball!" I scream, breaking the paralytic silence. I run over to the horse and begin kicking sand on it, digging my sneakered toes in and flailing my leg forward. Then I bend over and scoop sand up in my hands and throw it. Cannonball, unfrozen, runs up next to me and begins scooping too. The fire finally goes out and the smoke begins to clear. It smells terrible, like burnt plastic and hair. I look at the horse wondering if was really alive and we just killed it. The top half of its head hangs slightly, indented and sagging into its lower half. The eyes now look at one another from opposite sides while the open mouth threatens to swallow the

unnatural mess in one bite. It looks like a cross-eyed crocodile or an inbred moose. Another victim of our reckless humanity.

When I touch my arms they are crunchy, covered in tiny shriveled squiggles of ash. The hairs on my arms are burnt. It doesn't hurt. Cannonball looks at his arms too. We both begin to brush them off on our pants. Ball leans over to pick up what's left of his shirt and Jeff yells at him. "Wait, you dumb ass!"

"Ouch!" Cannonball screams and drops the shirt.

"I told you. Bad enough you wrecked the kids' horse, now you're burning the hell out of yourself."

"Seriously Ball. Look at that guy. The kids are gonna cry their eyes out when they see that monster!" I agree.

"Let's just finish the poor bastard off." Jeff says. "Shove those crackers down its throat and blow the whole thing up."

Cannonball looks to me for approval. My face is blank. He says, "But all we got left are candles and rockets."

"That'll work," Jeff says.

I nod in agreement, but I don't know why. I just want the thing, with its melted head and crooked eyes, to disappear. The guys stuff a few rockets down the horse's throat, into its

stomach. Then Cannonball says, "You do it this time, Jeff." Jeff takes one of the rockets into his hands, lights it and forces it into the plastic mouth, into the neck area, past the heart of the horse.

"Run!" he yells.

We all turn and run like children in a game of Gotcha Last. I hear the first explosion and turn to see. The rockets are setting one another off, spinning inside the opaque plastic and bumping off one another, drunk with confinement. Then the roman candles go off. Sparks erupt from the horse's mouth in a steady stream of blue, right before the head blows off, straight into the air.

We all scream, despite lighting the damn things. Several moments pass in silence, then we hear sirens in the background of our laughter. We scream again and take off running.

"How in the hell did that happen?" I hear Ball yell, as we all flee the grounds in opposite directions, like an escape system learned at high school parties, back in the arroyos and deserts, leaping over cactus and desert winds or whatever paths we all divined from.

"Must have been detachable!" I holler.

We leave the smoke in our wake. I don't stop until I reach the far patch of trees as squeeze in between their trunks. Someone is with me.

“That was close,” I say and spin back around so quick I run smack into Matt. He smiles, grabs me around the waist and kisses me. I can’t think. I can’t breathe. I am out of air. He pulls me closer and begins walking us backwards, his hands tight on my back.

Quietly, inside my head, I am panicking. I pull away just in time to see a cop car pass along the side street in front of the school, behind the plastic headless horse still standing there. I pull Matt deeper into the cluster of trees and scream whisper, “What in the hell was that?”

He doesn’t answer. He looks me in the eye, hard and mean, until I look away. I hate this situation. I know it too well. I look back at him and he is staring down at his boots. I hate this. I hate this. I hate this. The police car pulls into the parking lot of the school. I toss my books over the fence behind the trees and then begin to climb it. Matt hesitates for a moment, then follows behind me. We run through the forest and come out much further down the road, close to the hotel, and find the rest of the guys there. Matt won’t look at me. He won’t talk to me either. Things are going to be different for a while, maybe forever. But we aren’t going anywhere, so we both have to get over it. He better get over it.

“I feel sick to my stomach,” Ball says, when we rejoin him. “I feel like one of those bullies from high school picking on the poor little plastic kid that doesn’t fit in.” Ball really is sensitive. You can tell he was once picked on. But the crazed ripple of laughter that follows proves he’s mostly over it.

“Whatever. Let’s get out of here before they catch up to us,” Jeff says.

I look around and Matt is a good ten paces behind, kicking softly at the sidewalk, looking down.

We walk the rest of the way back, Jeff and a half naked Cannonball without his shirt, me with my books and Matt lagging behind.

“What’s wrong with him?” Ball asks me.

“How should I know? Why don’t you go ask him?”

Cannonball gives me a sideways look, squinting one eye at me. “Bearrrrrr,” he says, drawing the word out and up high. “What’d you do to poor old Matty?”

“Nothing Ball! Honest!” I am not saying a word. I feel bad enough already. Did I give the wrong message? Flirt too much? Is it really my fault? I feel like a jerk, but what can I say. “You know how moody he is.”

“Yeah,” Jeff agrees. “He is a moody bitch sometimes. But maybe you should have just let him kiss you.”

“What?” I yell.

“You should have let him kiss you. Then he’d be happy and walking with us right now.”

“Well that’s just great, Jeff. I guess you saw. Great advice, I’ll remember that next time I want to say no. It’s much nicer to always say yes. Perfect.”

“What did I miss?” Cannonball asks, desperately out of the loop. “What in the hell are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing!” I yell again. Then I lower my voice, pretending to be calm, “Jeff was just talking shit, as usual.”

“Welllll,” Ball says. “I guess so.”

I stare hard at Jeff and hope that he will keep his big mouth shut. It’s not likely though.

We are almost in front of the hotel. “Good luck sneaking that shit back in,” I say to Cannonball and Jeff, the few fireworks they still have are not small, but easy to spot. They both take off across the parking lot, Jeff looking back at me and smiling wickedly. The asshole. I watch him dump some of his load on Ball and begin digging in his pockets. He takes out a small shiny object and opens the back door of one of the trucks, the truck that Ball has been riding in. They shuffle and move some things around, then begin re-stuffing.

I open the hotel door and decide to wait. I stand there for what seems like forever, waiting for Matt. When he finally arrives, he mumbles “Thanks,” and walks directly past me and into the stuffed animal hotel lobby.

“You’re welcome,” I say and enter behind him. I catch up to him and we both walk in silence because I can’t think of anything to say. We walk up the stairs and all the way down the hall, to his room where he stops and begins digging in his pocket for the key. At a loss, I say “Goodnight, Matt,” trying to catch his eye. I throw my arms around him, awkwardly mashing

his ear, keeping my face averted because I don't really even want to hug him, but his miserable mood demands it. And I feel guilty. Then I turn and walk quickly down the hall to the safety of my own hotel room. To the safety of Beth.

I enter as fast as I can. The T.V. is on. A deep monotone voice narrates as a whale glides through dark blue waters. I begin to calm down immediately. "Hi Beth," I say, trying to appear natural, but her eyes are closed and she has her earphones in still, sprawled out all across the bed. She doesn't notice me. I see her things at the foot of her bed, her bags neatly piled. I can't help but wonder what's in them. I fight the urge to search, wondering what else is tagging along, ever so silently, in the baggage compartments of our vehicles.

I decide to take a shower and go to bed.

A complimentary wakeup call splits my dreams wide open. I come crawling out and fall into routine. Underwear, sports bra, pants, shirt, belt, socks, boots, all cinched tight. I have no idea what Beth's routine is. She goes into the bathroom for twenty minutes and not once do I hear the shower water. When she comes out, like a human butterfly she is a new creature, clothed, tucked, combed, smoothed and who knows what else.

She is ready to leave before me, since I have to repack all my books too, and I am left alone in the room for a moment. I quickly jam everything back into my bags, use the bathroom and have ten minutes to spare, the black clock radio on the nightstand tells me. I decide to indulge by flopping out across the bed and opening up just one book. (I fight the urge to spread them all out around me). Its paperback isn't as smudged as the rest. I haven't spent much time with this one. On the cover a woman stands next to a marble pillar, her naked body pressed against it. All is illuminated white beneath an invisible moon, contrasting sharp with the black background. The Title is lit up too, *Historical Erotica*. I have my own kind of contraband, I guess.

I don't know which character of which story in the book the woman represents. She looks like a goddess and a statue all at once, maybe Pygmalion's own creation and lover. The Greek and Roman gods are interspersed. I have only read one story so far about Zeus taking both human and animal shape at alternate times and having his way with a reluctant but blissful princess. I have trouble categorizing this story. It seems wrong, but it really is a representation of historical literature. I mean, the Greeks told stories like this all the time.

Stories about Zeus seducing mortal women, assuming the shape of a bull, a swan, a horse or whatever it took. There's something magical about it, when it is a human animal. Magical and less grotesque. Something primitive that reminds me of our world here in the trees, in summertime. Zeus retains both human and god-like qualities, while gaining those of an animal as well. A very well-rounded man.

As I flip through the pages, reading the titles, I wonder if I could get in trouble for this. Guys in the business get busted all the time for magazines, both porn and even popular magazines like "Stuff" or "Maxim." It's never really bothered me. I think it is the pictures they get so mad about, more so than the articles. My book is like a happy compression of articles that allude to pictures. Who would ever even notice?

One title catches my eye, "Plague Lovers." I can't escape the image of half rotted bodies copulating, shaking green limbs free on the dirt floor of a shack. By candlelight. I wonder what could possibly be sexy about plague lovers.

"Bear!" a loud voice and knocking. It sounds like Eric. "We're not doing pushups again, because of you! Let's go!"

It's Eric, I recognize his deep voice. Eric is different, an emotional head trip. One moment he is calm, too calm and too quiet. The next, he is shouting at the top of his lungs mad about the world being against him and if only he had his sword or rapier he would fuck shit up. He would finally get respect. Eric recently grew out of dungeons and dragons, graduating into Arthurian sword play. He likes to dress up in medieval outfits, tights and all, and attend

meetings where other people do the same. He is a master, he says. Other's are slaves and peasants. It is very ironic that Eric is outside my door right now, knocking. Ironic, but not attractive.

Eric is also the only black person on our crew. He is the tallest and probably the strongest. None of this matters because he has no clue. He is lost in an internal, emotional battle that keeps him occupied, until the outside world forces its way in. Then he explodes. He is actually likeable, but I don't think I trust him. I don't know much about his background, but I do know he's a native of California. This, to me, is always a warning sign. Californian's are nuts.

"Bear!" he yells again.

"Coming!" I begin to laugh at my own pun, its sexual connotations and how it is always so far from the truth. I jam the book to the bottom of my back pack, beneath all the others, zip it and swing both bags on my back. I fling the door open and present Eric with a large, innocent grin.

"Ready buddy?" I ask.

"Tom sent me up here to get you. He said one of us better get up here and get you or else we'd all be paying for sure. I don't think I could do another push up if they made me. Let's go already."

"Are you sore Eric?" I reach up and poke him in his right breast, next to his armpit where my body hurts too. "Right here?"

“No!” He over-reacts because he is like that, grabs my hand, and jumps back as if I’ve wounded him. Then changes his mind. “Hmmm, that kind of feels good.” He smacks his lips at me and smiles, trying to seem sexy.

I pull my hand back quick and call him a weirdo. “You know you like it!” He calls after me, since I am already walking away quickly. It’s not really scary or anything, just weird. A lack of healthy social skills, maybe. I wonder about his family. They could be completely normal, I’ve seen it happen before. But not likely.

He reappears at my side, looking like he might ask to help with my bags. “I’ve got it Eric. Thanks.” I speak up before he can.

“I’ll get the door.” He runs ahead and opens the door to the stair well. He does this again and again until we are finally outside in the sunshine.

“Thanks,” I tell him one last time. He’s not too bad. I head towards my truck and consider another long day of driving ahead of us. Scottie tosses me the keys. “Your turn Bear.” My heart accelerates. My feelings for the day ahead have already changed.

We've been driving for a few hours now and I am doing well, but the road is really starting to wind. A river is down below us, mostly running parallel with the road, stretched out like a giant blue body bag ready to catch us if I mess up. It's the "River of no Return." Really, it is. This is what it's called and it actually does exist. You can look it up in Rand McNally, like Amy did, where it is even named as part of the wilderness title. It starts out as the Salmon River, but in this part of the forest, it is more forbidding. Amy is my co-pilot and I am driving and as soon as the jokes about the imminent, female guided doom of our truck die down once and for all, I might begin to enjoy the view. And as soon as the sheer drop directly to my right disappears. Then maybe I'll relax.

I am not normally this nervous driving, but this is only my fourth time driving a stick shift. Amy's just learning too, so the jokes hit the occasional exposed, insecure nerve. And the jokes never stop. It's not so hard, in the middle of nowhere without traffic, but our truck is big, the road little and the cliffs tall and steep. The last time Amy and I both sat in the front, the truck nearly reversed itself back down the hill.

It's funny now, but it scared the shit out of us then. It must have been Amy's first big hill in the rig and halfway up it, we began to slow down and the engine began to whine, more like scream in protest.

"Oh shit. Oh shit. What's wrong. What do I do?" she said.

“Um, I don’t know. I don’t know.” I looked around the truck. Scottie was nowhere in sight that day, it was Ball and Jeff with us and both were passed out in the back seat. “Um. Um.” My mind was completely blank. I panicked.

Then the radio came to life. “Down shift Amy!”

“Down shift!” I repeated, as if it was my idea and not the patronizing voice of Captain John. I looked at the stick. It was in fourth gear. “Try third.” As if I really knew. It makes sense now, after Tom took the time to explain it to both of us—the difference between a manual transmission and an automatic and the advantages of each—but it seemed a random solution at the time.

Amy down shifted us with a lurch. At last the engine quieted to a normal grumble. “Jesus Christ,” she said, breathing hard. The boys in the back woke up with the lurch.

“You did it.” I said to her, reassuring both of us. “We’re fine.”

“Am I dead yet?” Ball asked through one open eye, head still slumped against the window pushing two soft, fleshy rolls out beneath his chin.

“Yes.” We both answered.

“Just checking,” he said, and went back to sleep.

“We’re in hell, Ball. I knew it,” Jeff said. He allowed his eyes to flutter shut again. But this all happened before Tom talked with us. He took it upon himself to teach us when no one

else would. They would only yell. Now I know that when the engine starts to whine and the RPM needle falls between the two and the three, just like clockwork, clutch goes in, stick goes down and clink, you're in gear. I had no problem with the uphill for some reason. Going slower up a hill seemed like a natural time to shift gears, in order to get more. It was downshifting to pass other cars that didn't make sense to me.

Around the next corner the road crosses a small suspended bridge. There is a sign that says "Salmon River" here. The Salmon seems to be following us all across Idaho, I swear we left it in some other mountain range, but everything is connected here. The bridge doesn't sway at all when we cross it and the road peels off, leaving the water and cliffs behind like a discarded bumper sticker back, and dives off into the brush. The canopy overhead quickly becomes dense and the trees are so healthy they soak up most of the sunshine. Our caravan slows, turns to the left and continues at a much slower pace. The new road is all dirt, only wide enough for one vehicle at a time. I enjoy crawling at this speed. Second gear is a good gear to maintain control.

Finally the trucks bump their way into a large, circular clearing. I pick a spot to back into—we must always park with our backs to the wall—and reverse it smoothly. There is no panic in the air so my gears switch on cue. At last, I push the clutch in, put my foot on the break, and move the stick into neutral. With my clutch foot, I push in the emergency break and turn the key to the off position. No mistakes. I know there will be fewer comments next time, less jokes. I smile imagining it.

"Not bad," the boys offer me under their breath.

Outside the truck there is a light breeze. We are here just in time for lunch but it will probably be a while before this happens. “Gear up!” Brian shouts above the slamming of doors, then tags along with the rest of the gang to meet with other forest leaders waiting for us. Hurry up and wait. I wish we could write this on our trucks somewhere, or maybe a collective crew tattoo, but it is an unspoken. That is, everyone talks about it, but no one is allowed to point it out. Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait.

For me this means time to grab my pack, as well as prepare the saw and, of course, to pee somewhere before the captains and commanders return. With stick shift driving behind me and chainsaw running ahead, I am happy to hide in the bushes.

I look around for any medium size tree close to a small group of thick bushes. One plant to hold onto, the others to hide me. I scramble behind some bushes I don’t recognize. They are covered in tiny white flowers. Things are still growing out here, which is good for cover. I yank my pants down and take hold of the pine. This is a strategy I’ve adopted over the years. It helps save energy and keeps me from rolling down steep hills, head over heels, with my back side flashing the world below.

When I’m done I pick one of the little white flowers and put it behind my ear. I hesitate and then pick another one, holding this one to my nose and smelling it. It smells like honey and sunshine. I breathe it deep and take it to put on the seat of Tom’s chair. He’ll know it’s me, but I don’t mind. Maybe he’ll wear it behind his ear too. He’s good about these things.

When I get back I spot Tom arranging his gear, bent over. He turns around as if sensing me. "There you are," he says. "Cute." He nods at my flower.

"They haven't killed the hippy in me yet, I guess," I say. "How about you?"

"Never," he smiles big. His green eyes are in a sunspot, a rare break in the canopy. Small flecks of yellow stand out. I force my hand up and push the other flower behind his ear, into his brown wavy hair. My heart beats faster and I cannot look anymore. I look at his chest instead.

"There. Coupla' hippies in the forest, ready for Woodstock."

"Thanks. I feel better already."

"Anytime." I stagger off, looking back over my shoulder at him one last time. The pocket of his pants seems flat and empty. Of course it is. Why would he carry the gun now? I have a quick vision, a flash of the pictures from Kent State and the protesters sticking flowers down the barrel of soldier's guns. Automatic rifles make great long stem vases. My small white flower would fit perfect, with its abbreviated stem, into Tom's pistol.

I hurry now. The only way I can keep the flower behind my ear is if I am prompt, punctual and perfect with my assignments. If not then they'll have me picking flowers with my teeth in between pushups. I run to my truck and toss gear around. I am ready in five minutes, right as Brian returns with John and Mark trailing behind him like baby ducklings. "Over here!" Brian hollers and waves everyone in.

The whole crew assembles around him. Brian clears his throat and speaks, “We’re gonna widen this road here, all right. Trim all the hanging branches so it’s wide enough for our trucks to drive up.” He points to the two-track, dirt path with his hand. He continues to do this for a while, even after the subject changes.

“Bear.” He looks right at me and lets his arm drop. “You take the saw. We only need one. We’re not running it unless a fire breaks out on top of us or maybe cleaning up some at the top. Or that fire way out there in the canyon kicks up and spits over the ridge, into our faces. But that’s not supposed to happen for a few days, maybe a week. For now, we’ll be limbing these trees with bow saws and long poles. Be completely fire ready. Everybody, grab yourself a handsaw saw or two.”

“Can we check out those cabins later?” Scottie speaks up. He’s all about pushing his luck this trip.

“Maybe. If we have time.” Brian says. We all look at one another, stifling smiles because this is the kind of assignment where you have too much free time, where everyone rushes you to get the job done so you can sit around and wait for hours for the next task to occur in exactly the same manner. Time is on our side, unless you consider the tedious boredom that will attack a prone fire fighter’s brain and body when left idle too long in the middle of the season, and make it unpredictable.

“After the road is safe to drive, we’ll clear up the ridge at the top, to keep the fire from burning up the cabins down the backside of this mountain. We gotta protect them. That is our biggest goal, ‘ol G.I. Jane the Ranger just told me.”

“Are you sure we need a saw Brian?” Tom asks. He is protecting me, I know it. He knows lead sawyer is stressful for me and I might just stop breathing.

“Of course we need a damn saw, we’re a fire crew aren’t we? What kind of Hot Shot crew doesn’t keep a saw?”

No one says a word. The fact that we are working along a road, a natural fuel break, with a route for the trucks to reach us doesn’t seem to matter. The saws could be brought up at a few moments notice and we could skip hauling them around by shoulder. But the saw, especially for Brian, an old logger, represents the greatest life line. Without it we risk the worst possible fate: being unprepared for a situation. This is unacceptable.

“All right, any more really good questions?” Brian is sarcastic, but serious as always. “Then let’s get going.”

I turn and head straight for the saw compartment on the side of the truck. I will carry the damn saw, of course. Just me in my special training. But I know Tom is going to help, protecting me and probably doing all my swamping. Unless they break us into squads, then we’ll be forced separate.

It seems an unspoken pact that I not let anyone help me carry it. I begin passing out sags, metal containers filled with fuel. Some get gas some get oil, but everyone has to help carry these containers. There are just too many.

“Bear, just grab two of each for now,” Brian shouts over the top of red helmets rushing about. “We’ll get the rest later.”

Finally a small piece of logic.

“You can carry ‘em, can’t you?” He is already turned and walking away from me. Yeah, you dumb bastard, I suppose I can carry just about anything and everything until I tip over and stop moving forever.

I sigh and stuff a couple of sags in my pack, then attach two to the outside with a caribeaner clip. I set it all on the lowered door of the saw bin, zip it up and then climb into it. I feel like a hobo, metal objects clanging all around my back.

I adjust the leather pad that is slipped onto the strap of my backpack, the one the guys call a “pussy pad.” Everyone uses them, as long as we’re hiking around in our gear. This is my first time using it and it is another small blessing. The big teeth used to anchor into a tree, the metal dogs around the base of the saw, won’t have such an open shot at my scapula.

I fasten all the buckles—waist and chest—then swing the saw up onto my shoulder.

“Chaps lady. Don’t forget the Kevlar,” Scottie walks past and whispers into my ear.

Dammit. I grab my own special pair with all the clips and buckles adjusted to my waist and legs, the 34's, out of the compartment and roll them up. "Scottie!" I whisper loudly, trying not to draw attention. "Will you stuff 'em into my pack?"

"Of course." He winks at me. "Thought you'd never ask."

I sigh, but can't help smiling at the connotations.

Finally we are all ready. John walks past and hands me a small hand saw, as if my left arm were too lifeless, my hand too empty swinging at my side.

We begin to walk. I don't plan on helping much. One legacy a sawyer gets is the ability to store up energy when their machine is not needed. There are times when a sawyer might do absolutely nothing at all besides bump along with the rest of the crew. Other times it is absolutely, hands down, the hardest job on the face of this earth. And the most dangerous.

As I am hobo-clanking along, my clips and attachments talking back, I notice a new woman bringing up the very rear of our pack. She has a bright yellow, probably never used, Nomex shirt on, for the spirit of it I guess, and a camera strapped around her neck.

Jesus, these people will drive forever for some pictures. There is a man to her left, walking with a clipboard. He is also wearing a fire resistant shirt, looking lost within its starched and protective exterior. In fact, he is swimming in it. It's way too big for his small frame. I wonder who set him up for failure with that oversized yellow nightmare.

I walk back to the clipboard man in his oozing sea of mustard. "Hi, how are you?"

“Lovely,” he says and looks at me from behind the flat piece of wood. “And yourself?”

“Great,” I say. “I was wondering if you might like to borrow one of our Nomex shirts. Or do you just like yours that way?”

“Yes! Thank you! I mean, I would love one that would fit, if you can spare it.”

He sounds British.

“We have lots of extras if you want.”

“Sure. These people here don’t take much concern with my appearance, the ranger lady and her friends.”

“Yeah. They’re back in the truck, I’ll go and get one,” I say and quickly walk back. I open the back door and pull out a smaller yellow mess, clean but dirt and grease stained, from behind the back seat. We keep a few stuffed here just in case. There are plenty to go around. The government will just send more if we ask.

I walk back and hand him the shirt.

“Thank you, truly,” he says.

“Yep.” I smile and turn away to give him some space to change. Everyone wears undershirts beneath the coarse yellowness, but undressing is an awkward thing to do in front of strangers.

“I’m Jack, by the way,” the man says, amidst the shuffle of fabric. “And this is Sandy.” I turn back and give them my legal name.

“I’m Karen. Everyone calls me Bear though,” then offer them my left hand. Their arms stutter step, both of them (they are obviously right handed, but I am saw consumed), trying to adjust to the idea of shaking wrong handed. They nod at my saw and laugh a little, nervously. Maybe they are feeling a little under burdened next to me.

I take a few steps and Sandy moves with me while Jack tucks in his shirt tails. Sandy acts interested.

“So Karen, is this just the most exciting job you’ve ever had?” Sandy is not from England. I’m guessing California, by the long hair, straight posture and stylishly casual long pants. Probably organic cotton.

“Sure.”

“You must be very tough, carrying that saw around with all these men every day.”

“Yeah. I guess. I’m in training and I like to travel. It’s perfect for traveling.”

“Me too! Isn’t it wonderful? It’s amazing that you are out here right now, at the exact moment that we are. What are the chances?”

I have no idea, but what are the chances that we are not, since we are? I feel like asking but don’t.

“Jack and I are lucky to be here. It’s one of the most amazing places on the planet.”

At this final comment I look into her face, searching. She seems to honestly think this, her long dark hair swinging from a ponytail as we all begin walking, my right arm curled up around my saw.

“Really?” I ask.

“Of course. We wouldn’t be here working on Jack’s book if it wasn’t.”

“That’s cool. I guess it needs protection then, huh.”

“Yes. It really does. Did you know that there are wolves here now?”

“No.”

“And grizzly bears, black bears, coyote, cougar, lynx, wolverine, otter, mountain goats...”

At this point Jack catches up to us and takes the camera from Sandy. Then he begins half circling, side step shuffling around us, snapping different angles of our conversation. This additional camera freezes mine, then magnifies the intensity like a beam of light cast through two lenses. I am so self conscious that I fight the urge to laugh out loud.

“...bighorn sheep, moose, bison, caribou, elk...”

I wonder what Jack will do with these pictures. Where will they end up? Who will see them? He never even asked permission.

“...various species of deer, eagles, hawks, falcons, swans, ducks—crane ducks mostly—frogs, salmon, trout and probably so much more! I just can never remember them all.”

“That was pretty good,” I say and add, “So what’s Jack’s book about? All those animals?” I am trying to look into her face again, to lose the double lens line up, but of course I can barely see her through all the refraction. I return my eyes to my boots and bite my lower lip. Don’t laugh. Don’t laugh. These people are dead serious. Don’t laugh.

“Well, it’s about a lot of things. The animals, yes, and the vastness of the northern Rockies,” Sandy is a pretty smooth talker. I wonder if she is Jack’s spokesperson. Or maybe she is the distraction to dangle out while he snaps natural shots. I wonder if this works for the grizzly bears too.

I turn to Jack, boldly entering the second lens, ditching the distraction and finally swallowing my nervous flutter of laughter. “Why did you pick this place, Jack?”

He puts the camera down flat upon his chest, its cap dangling loose beneath it. The dark eye is no longer gazing into my face, its lens angled slightly upward.

“I track the wolves, Karen. Experience their progress and capture their interactions. Mostly, I want to capture this place in all of its glorious essence, so that people will understand that we must preserve it.”

“Hmmm... where are we exactly, again?”

“The Frank Church Wilderness of No Return, silly! It is just a part of the Great Northern Rocky Mountain Range, which stretches for hundreds of miles here.” Jack is very excited to talk now. “Wanna hear more?”

“Please.” We are walking still, but very slow. It’s hard to walk fast and speak passionately. The crew is busy limbing all around us.

“Well my idea grew from my own frustrations back home with Europe. Let me tell you, the U.S. is lucky to still have such places as this. Things are different at home. We’ve lost most of our natural heritage, Karen, it’s terrible, and I don’t want that to happen here.”

“Bear! Bump that saw up. Keep up!” Captain Mark hollers at me from the front of the pack, his pale face reddening from the effort. I have fallen to the very back.

“Sorry, got to keep up.”

Bump, bump, bump. Hump, hump, hump. Me and my gear. I take longer strides. Mark is probably sore about the pictures. And all the small talk. The unspoken rule goes if I get my picture in some sort of publication I have to buy two cases of beer for the crew. It’s even worse if you get yourself on T.V. Then it’s a whole keg for the crew. As laboring, callused tough guys, we are supposed to keep our distance from the media. We are supposed to keep all of our secrets, secret. There’s a lot of stuff the public just wouldn’t understand.

We reach the part in the road where it funnels down to a mere footpath, wildly overgrown in the crown. Men begin sawing like crazy, cutting at trees all around us, high above

my head, with saws mounted on poles. Beth and Amy too. I'm at a standstill, in the middle of the mass, and the hand saw rhythms unite, as they so often do. The loud friction, teeth digging in and tearing, is similar to a washboard made of wood sound. I begin tapping my hand on my thigh, keeping with the beat. You never get this kind of music with the gas saw, a strong second alto drowning out all other ranges, whining off key.

"That's neat," Sandy smiles at me.

Jack nods. "Maybe Sandy can tell you some more about everything," he says and then shuffles off to mingle with the rest of the crew, snapping more pictures. I can see Mark, eyes narrowed, arms resting on the top of a comby— a boss's combination tool good for leaning on and, if the occasion demands it, scooping and tossing dirt— watching Jack from the front of the pack. He won't say anything to him, unless he's approached. Then he might just let him know what he thinks of camera toting reporters, with their empty arms and soft hands. Respect comes through weight. Through scars and thick layers of callus build up, and these two have neither.

Sandy is still standing next to me. "Have you ever heard of The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative?"

"Nope."

"They call it Y2Y. It was founded in 1997 in Canada as a non-profit organization dedicated to conserving this place, the Frank Church Wilderness and clear up into the mountains of Canada. It's one of the world's last great wilderness corridors."

“Cool,” I say as I heave the saw down from my shoulder and set it beneath a tree. I really would like to know more, but I’m never going to hear the end of it if I don’t shake these people, or at least look like I’m trying too. I take the leather cover off of my hand saw and look for a place to integrate. Sandy is following me like a talking shadow.

She holds out her hand and offers to take the leather cover for me.

“Thanks,” I say a little surprised and a little self conscious of my new helper. It’s so much easier not to draw attention to yourself out here but somehow, I always do.

“Over the years, this wild land has become controversially divided by us, of course, humans. There’s about 2,000-miles of land out here with at least 17 clearly defined different ecosystems.”

I shift around to the side of a lodge pole pine and begin sawing. Sandy continues, “It is separated into dozens of state and national parks and crisscrossed by logging roads and human development. These little human divisions are at risk of becoming isolated islands of habitat.”

I am still cutting, the teeth of this saw none too sharp. “You know a lot about this, don’t you?” I ask rhetorically through the vibrations. She nods.

“What you girls talking about?” Matt appears, stepping to the other side of my pine. He has not said a word to me since the playground incident. I can only stare at him and wonder.

“Y2Y,” Sandy says.

“And Jack’s book,” I add. There is only a tiny trace of sarcasm in my voice. I can’t help it. These two are out of place and everyone feels it but them.

“Sandy Johnson,” Sandy says and sticks out her hand to Matt.

“Matt Brown,” he replies, taking her hand. They shake hands, polite and enthusiastic. The energy around me changes as my burden of reporter steward is shared. And maybe it’s my imagination, but I think I see a flicker of light in Matt’s bright blue eyes, like a small surge of energy.

“I’m just filling Karen in on our project. Do you know much about this area Matt?”

Whether she knows it or not, Sandy leans into him with her questions. I’ve seen it before. New women are predictable in this environment. Too much testosterone. It literally pulls them in, coaxing a sway into their backs, they toss back their heads giddy with laughter. Even the most educated woman could find herself swooning into the arms of a backwoods, lean bodied firefighter, in the midst of the action. The women have the power, on the surface, and all the attention. But the men ultimately, through strength in numbers, hormones and habit, move mountains.

Sandy bats her eyes a few times and puts one arm on the tree to support her subconscious investment.

“We need to preserve this place, right? And stop the fire? We’ll get it done,” Matt is gushing with confidence and a new charm. God, I am going to puke. I begin sawing faster until

the branch gives and I toss it to the side of the road. I shift over to an adjacent tree. Free, but irritated, feeling that territorial thing, maybe, with a new female, I refrain from biting her.

We make it to the top of the ridge and the end of the road by late afternoon. Here we break for lunch. The local forest people are handing out white paper sacks stuffed with food—6,000 calories and climbing—to meet the caloric requirement for fire fighters. Meat pouch sandwiches with double layers of cheese are smeared with butter and packets of mayonnaise and even peanut butter packets are tossed in too. Anything to up the calories. I sit by myself under a fat pine tree and see Jack walking towards me. I check the camera around his neck and see the cap on tight. I relax a little and smile at him.

“Mind if I join you?” he asks.

“Of course not.”

Jack sits next to me and begins rummaging through the bag.

“They gave you a lunch too?” I ask.

“Yeah. They said there were extras. Nice of them. Although I don’t know what Sandy will eat, with all this meat and cheese everywhere.” I nod as Jack continues. “I can’t believe some of this stuff. Do you actually eat it all?”

“Yeah. Usually. Our bodies need it. Is Sandy a vegetarian?”

“No, she’s a vegan.”

“Wow. That’s tough out here,” I say.

“Yeah, but she manages somehow.”

“I bet. Yummy peanut butter packets.”

Jack laughs at this. “What are you reading?” He motions towards the small book at my side, biting into his ham sandwich. It’s my Coleridge collection.

He strikes up a conversation about poetry, his eyes glistening. “You are a poet! Maybe you could write a poem about this place and we can put it in the book!”

“No, no, I’m not a poet. I just write a lot of stuff down.”

Tom joins us with a book in his hands that I let him borrow. He taps it once upon his thigh as he clearly looks the new guy over. “Can I check out a new one, boss?” He stretches his hand out to me with the book in it.

I look at him funny. “Right now?”

“If you can. This assignments looking slow. You might get real popular on this trip.” He smiles at me, then he looks at Jack.

“All right. I’ll be back,” I say to Jack. Tom lingers behind me, still looking at Jack.

“Having fun sir?” He asks him.

Jack takes another bite out of his sandwich, ignoring any tension. “Yes, yes, thanks. Call me Jack,” he says through his full mouth of food.

Tom says nothing, only nods and follows me.

I give Tom another book in place of the old one. This time a novel called *Enduring Love*. He raises his eyebrows at me. “You think I’m ready for a love story? “

“It’s not your typical love story, but yeah. I think you’re ready.”

“Thanks coach.”

I beam as Tom walks off reading the back of the book. If he is curious enough to read and walk, I think he’ll like the book. Maybe he’ll even understand it.

I walk back over to my lunch and Jack. He is packing up his stuff already. “This afternoon we’re heading out to the edge of the canyon where the wolves were actually released. There’s a small plaque on the ground. Wish you could come.”

“Yeah, me too. Take some great pictures.”

“Okay. Promise.” He holds out his hand for me to shake, catching my eyes and holding them. His eyes are a warm brown, with flecks of silver, the same as his hair but lighter. I feel a small flutter in my stomach when he releases my hand and walks away.

I begin picking up my things. Five minutes ‘til lunch is over. Always five minutes.

“Meet up at the trucks!” Captain John hollers. A traditional place for orders to take place. It’s getting late, nearly four I guess, but the daylight is still strong. We’ll work until seven probably.

The rest of the day moves slow, though we are kept busy. Mostly widening the overlook at the top, chopping out bushes and small trees with pulaskis.

“Bear! Buck up this log over here!” Brian hollers to me, and it begins. The saw comes out. They cannot handle one whole day without it. The log is a medium size Douglas fir. From the punky looks of it, it’s been on the ground for a long time. This is the stuff that catches, I mean really lights up in a hurry when the embers start flying. It’s also the stuff that dulls up and bogs down the chainsaw too. I rev up and work through it slowly.

These shouts sound throughout the afternoon until finally, the last holler, “Bring it in!” and our shift ends. In order to maintain fire readiness, we must clean, file and fuel up each tool. This is how we spend the last forty-five minutes of most days, or at least most shifts, day and night. I take my saw apart and clean it, then put it back together and file its teeth and the occasional off raker, moving the small round piece of metal at a perfect 15 degree angle towards the sky. I feel a little bit like a dentist each time I do this. Dentist and sculptor because I must make the metal teeth just so or the saw will pull in odd directions, creating lopsided smiles. I top off my gas and oil, wipe it all down with a rag and replace it in the saw compartment of the truck. We all climb in the trucks and head back down the hill.

The good people of the Nez Perce National Forest have set up a small fire camp for us. Some tables and a small tent with pictures of smiling pigs on it. This is the catering business. I also see two portable toilets set up, adjacent, and a small console of plastic sinks for washing. Some wash stations have mirrors just to remind you that you are a human being, a very dirty human being each day becoming more primitive, devolving into the wild place around you, accumulating more dirt and sweat. These sinks here do not have mirrors. We have no reminder of our humanity and it's probably for the best.

We hit the wash stand, trickling through much faster than the water can be pumped from the tanks with the pedal at our feet, then stumble with our great big appetites into the chow line.

Normally I am right at the front because the sawyers get to eat first. But this is not formal and there isn't much chance of misplacing a body or getting smaller portions, so we don't have to count off. I nudge Eric, who is in front of me, in the ribs. "Think we'll be having some pork tonight?"

"I'd bet my pig plate on it," he says.

Even the plastic plates have smiling pigs on them. And we do eat pork. The main course is a pile of pork chops with peas and carrots and mashed potatoes on every side. A steaming brown blanket of pork gravy covers everything. This is what we have all been dreaming of since lunch time. Our next meal. And we are really lucky to have a hot one. Some trips you eat

military rations (MRE's) for days before anyone gets around to thinking about ordering food for you.

The whole plate goes down quick and the smiling pig face is back. We shuffle off to the garbage cans and the two blue rooms. These plastic toilet houses are clean and reek of fake powdered pine. The scent is so strong I gag when I open the door, my eyes bulging. There is just nothing nice about these *shitters*, as we call them. Even when they are clean, they reek of anticipation. The pine powder is just waiting to absorb and eventually, be absorbed itself.

Inside there is plenty of toilet paper stacked, roll upon roll, like unopened Christmas presents. A no flush finish and we are back at the foot pump plastic sinks, liquid soap and finally, to the dirt where we will put our tents up. The weather is sporadic in this deep wilderness and the threat of being swept over by a fire front is far off. We don't have to be as mobile, so we become a little bit permanent. A little bit at home in our canvas and webbing. We put our tents up with great care, considering the need to remain as a group but the strong desire for privacy. This is it. The most we will ever be alone for hours at a time is right here, inside our floppy tents. This is home.

I use a comby tool to scrape the ground clear. I dislodge rocks and stomp on the area to make it level. Then I dump the whole mess of canvas out in a heap. Three crooked, roughed up stakes clink out and fall at my feet, beside the fly and tent bag. These government issued tents are never in great shape. Finding a bag full of good tent stakes is like finding a bag of platinum. The cheap aluminum bends if hit hard and the only way to get them into the ground is to hit them really hard with rocks or shovels. So they are warped and bent in over with scoliosis. This

is what we have to work with. No one complains though. We are happy to have our temporary homes, crooked stakes or not.

If it is really windy, we use our government issued parachute cord to tie the tent down. P-cord is like duct tape, it is good for just about anything in the field, so we keep wads of it in our packs. And chunks of folded duct tape too. The tents appear around me like the pictures in a children's popup book. My tent finally joins the village. I even clear a space in front of the zipper door as my front porch, to try and keep the needle cast and small rocks out. Then I stuff my Thermarest in and slap my sleeping bag on top of it. I shove my red bag of clothes to the foot of the tent and my back pack of books near the top, by my head.

It must be almost eight as the sun slips completely below the mountain. I put my headlamp on to finish up details. We'll be up at 6:00 am, so nine is the perfect bedtime. I go back to the plastic village, pee, brush my teeth and wash my face, all by light of my headlamp, since the moon is still not visible.

Back at my tent I sit down with my legs still hanging out. I begin unlacing my boots. Jack walks past and says goodnight, then heads toward his own camp.

"You wanna see those cabins?" A loud whisper from above and Tom is suddenly at my side, looking out from behind a dim headlamp. His features look gray and washed out beneath the light on his forehead. He bends down next to me.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

“The cabins. You wanna see them? There is definitely more going on than what you know. I mean, why in the hell are we here? All this way, all this money for a couple of shacks? Let’s go see them.”

“Are you nuts? They’ll hear us.”

“Nah, they won’t. Come on.”

I stare back at him for a moment, keeping my head slightly turned to avoid blinding him with my own light.

“Come on. I’ll knock on your tent in an hour, so don’t fall asleep reading.”

“All right. How far are they?” I turn my headlamp off, to look directly into his face.

“Not far.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“They’re not!”

“Ok, ok. I’m in.”

“Good. See you soon.”

I finish taking my boots off, trying not to be excited. Trying to think level headed. Should I go alone with him? It doesn’t matter if I should, I will.

I switch my headlamp back on and sift through my bag of books. The top three are my new old books, the ones from Claire. But I feel indecisive, maybe nostalgic, so I dig a little deeper, feeling the fibers of the few small hardbacks and the slick gloss of the processed paper. I know them all by heart, in the dark. The smaller editions like Coleridge's *Collection*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Lewis's *Screw tape Letters*, Turner's *Abstract Wild*, and Marge Percey's *The Moon is Always Female*. I use my head lamp to examine the colorful covers. A Halloween collection of Poe, some Roman philosopher named Lecretius and his *Nature of the Universe*, Sartre's *No Exit*, two plays by Albee, *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*, a weird book on the Bermuda Triangle, supposedly nonfiction, Kerouac's *On the Road*, a collection of Martin Luther King's speeches, Burroughs's *Queer*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, by Katherine Patterson, the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Kundera and a great book that I think I carry around just for the shock value called *The Natural Superiority of Women*, by Ashley Montagu. And these are just the small books, some hardbacks, but mostly soft. All timeless.

The big books are more popular with the boys. Many of them are out, but I still have *The Collected Short Stories of Louis L'amour*, *The Archaic Revival* by Terrence McKenna, a nonfiction book about a Spanish nun called *The Lieutenant Nun*, one the Forest Service makes us study (which is kind of scary if you think about it) about Genghis Khan's war strategies by Hartog and a strange account of a bisexual Thelma and Louise, without Louise, called *Flaming Iguanas*. Oh, and the *Erotica* book, of course. I have to keep handing out books or there won't be enough room for all of them. As it is, I am overflowing my big back pack. I have not finished a single one of these books straight through except for *Queer*, because it's short and I was so shocked by the violence and sex that I guess I pushed my way through it, nauseas the whole

time. I think Burroughs should have called it Queasy instead of Queer, but I guess he was not trying to be subtle. The sacrifices we must make for knowledge and experience. I have started many of these books and become distracted. But I keep collecting, starting more. Every time I travel to a new town, I find a used book store like the one in Challis. Mountain towns are really good about having used bookstores. I buy more old editions of interesting looking stuff, maybe classics and maybe new stuff that offers luminous discoveries. Or empty, bottomless bound junk. Either way, my collection keeps growing because I keep moving and the size of my backpack grows with it.

I return to the top of the pile, convinced now that I have revisited all my options, that it is time to move on to something new. I grab the women and wolves book, thinking about what Sandy told me earlier, about the wolves running wild here. Real wolves. It's strange to think about them in our civilized country. Like they should be someplace more exotic and wild. But I am glad they are here. I adjust my headlamp to a lower setting, cutting back on light refraction from the page and blur around the small black letters. I flip to the introduction titled "Singing over the Bones." I read the first line: *Wildlife and the wild woman are both endangered species.*

I read it again. And then again. I like it. I like the idea. Where have all the wild women gone? They've been driven underground, in favor of proper behavior. Or masculine behavior. What am I? Out here in this field of men, quite literally, full of angst and pressure to be just like them, or better. To be just as strong, maybe stronger. To be more beautiful. More wise. More

graceful. More clever. To be above. To be unattainable. Who is it, exactly, that I am trying to be?

I sigh. I am on the run, just like the hunted wolf. Like the wild woman. I have to pee again, because of the tea with dinner maybe. I get out of my tent and make a run back to the plastic blue rooms. Feeling the liquid leave, listening to the splash below, I can't help thinking of all the different scents gathered there, masked over and how unnatural the whole thing is building up beneath the ground, void of decomposing elements like sunlight and fresh air. I am seized with the urge to run away, to run outside and mark my territory, maybe by Matt's tent or by Tom's or each and every one of them. They are like my pack and we should be careful accepting outsiders. And what if this worked? If a person could urinate upon the doorstep of her lover for days in a row and intoxicate him. Claim him. Own him. But people would frown. Unless you peed on their doorstep too. Every doorstep. My pheromones are strong. This just might work.

The plastic door slams fast behind me. Above the slow trickle of the sink I hear whispering. It's coming from up the hill. A man's voice and then a woman. It sounds like Matt. And then Sandy. They must notice me because they get quiet. I can see their silhouettes now. They are crouched really close together before they crawl behind some bushes further up the hill. They move on all fours into the shadows, until I can see only trees again. Are they foraging? Are they mating? Or just keeping one another warm tonight? I wonder what she did to him. I wonder what he sees in her. I return to my tent, still having animal urges. Animal thoughts. Next time I have to pee I am going right outside the tents.

My bed is comfortable but I am restless with anticipation. I keep hallucinating. I hear things that sound like footsteps. Then scratching. Dragging across nylon. "Tom?" I whisper.

The scratching gets louder, long raking motions across the roof of my tent. I sit up and crawl to my door. "Tom!" I demand. The zipper of my front door moves slowly and one bright green eye peers in at me.

"Shhh," he says.

I close my book, long claws snagging at my thumbs, and switch off my headlamp. I unzip my tent wide enough to crawl out. Tom is holding a small white branch in one hand and nothing in the other. He doesn't help me but takes a few steps back to make room for me. I pick up my boots, with my socks stuffed inside and he begins walking. I stand still for a moment, shoeless, until he gestures for me to follow. I tip toe through the needle cast and dirt, barefoot in the dark, watching his shape move ahead of me. We walk past the potties, past the makeshift kitchen and still further on. I am able to move quickly, light and strong, upon the balls of my feet, a boot in each hand to balance but careful not to let them swing like leather helicopter rotors. We reach a tiny break in the trees and he slows, turning to face me.

I sit down quickly. "What's this?" I ask.

"A game trail that should get us pretty far along the ridge."

I dust the bottoms of my feet off, finding some sticky clumps of pine needles fused with sap. I scoop up dirt and scour the bottoms of my feet with it, then put my socks on. I am really

quick at lacing my boots, even in the dark. When I look back at Tom the moon is behind him. It is only half full, but brightens the mood. This time he puts a hand out to help me up. He looks at me, placing moonlight in my eyes, then turns and disappears down the trail.

Walking at a good pace alone back here with my thoughts, I wonder why I am doing it. I am following him of course. I can't see him, just the branches as they lash back, swallowing him whole. There are too many questions that I will never get the courage to ask. Or maybe I will. Nighttime hours are long with no one else around.

The night is rushing past, rustling with our bodies. I finally snag upon the back of his shadow. He doesn't slow or miss a beat, as we fall into sync. "Are you sure we are going the right way?" I ask.

"I could see this trail from the lookout today. It should take us along the backside of the canyon, to an open space Jack pointed out earlier."

"Jack? When did you talk to him?"

"We talked. He seems all right."

"Yeah. More than all right. Actually interesting."

"Maybe."

"What do you think about Sandy?" I ask him. My legs are pumping quickly to match his long strides.

"She's all right, maybe. But she's from Tahoe, the California side, so I wouldn't trust her."

“I knew it!” I whisper shout.

“Yeah. They’re easy to spot.”

We continue walking for a long time. I glance around every few minutes, disturbing my thoughts to memorize the dark landscape, the pattern of stars and the direction of the moon from where we are. I don’t want to get lost here. No one would know where to look.

The game trail fades out close to a drainage ditch.

“Let’s follow this up a little ways,” Tom says. “I think we’re too far down.”

I have the small Coleridge book stuffed into the pocket of my sweatshirt, its familiar rectangular shape bounces off my stomach, swaying with my hips and back. My head lamp is off now and thanks to the moon, everything is yellow. I follow the rivers of light between islands of shadow.

We walk like this, at an upward angle for a while. Then without warning, Tom leaps up from the sand and rock and heads straight through scruffy brush and juniper trees, back downhill. I follow as close as I can, but his strides are long and the branches fly back at me. When I finally break into the clearing, Tom is already in the middle of it.

He laughs out loud and begins spinning in circles, jumping. “Ah ha! I found it! I told you I would.”

He looks back at me, proudly. "I never doubted," I say. I follow him into the center and smile. "Let's check it out, silly."

"Yeah."

There are three cabins here. Well, two and a half since one of them is missing a roof and door. "Are they open?"

We try the door of the closest cabin, brown and green with lichen and dried moss. Tom turns the handle and the door swings open. It is pitch dark inside so we switch on our headlamps. The walls are still strong, the rocks tight and sealed close with sturdy craft and perfect angles. The small windows are covered from the inside by thin ply wood nailed to the window frames. A much less sturdy table and two chairs stand in the middle of the room with a deck of cards and two blue tin cups on either side.

"Wanna play some poker?" I ask Tom. He is already into the edges of the place, searching out less noticeable corners and creases.

"People have definitely been using this place," he says, as if he were a detective in a made for TV movie, pointing out the obvious. There is one small cot in the corner. As Tom kneels in each crevice of the cabin, I walk over to test the taut cotton bed. I slowly sit down carefully testing it. It holds, creaking just a little.

"Now this is a quality cot. They don't make 'em like this anymore," I say. Tom doesn't look up as he points his head lamp into every nook and cranny, up high and across the low

rafters. The soft sound of tiny feet scurrying in the dark, racing across the wood floor brings his attention back down.

“There are residents after all! We must have interrupted their game,” Tom says, good humored. We catch the tail of a mouse, maybe a small kangaroo rat, as it disappears into the wall.

“And that’s the way it happens. People build things, consume them to their needs, then leave them for the next lower level of evolution.”

“I’d like to think its a few levels below, maybe. At least for some of us,” I say, laughing.

“Definitely not for all of us,” he says. “Come on let’s leave the mice in peace. Let’s check out the rest.”

I hop off the bed and follow.

The door to the second cabin is stuck. The handle won’t turn and the wood is swollen into the frame, pushing into places that give over time.

“I think it’s locked.” Tom turns the handle again and slams his shoulder into it. Nothing.

“Let me try,” I say, taking confidence in the unknown.

Tom steps aside as I twist and turn and yank at the stiff handle.

“I don’t think it’s locked. Just stuck really good,” I say. “How about I jiggle the handle and you slam your shoulder into it again?”

“Of course. I am made of meat, after all,” he smiles at me, I hear it in the dark, and moves closer.

“Whenever you are ready,” I say and continue jiggling the handle, pulling and pushing and twisting. He gathers momentum and hits it hard. Still nothing.

“Where is my chainsaw when I really need it,” I say.

“Yeah, run back and get it Bear, quick.”

“Not a fucking chance in hell.”

He laughs. I laugh too.

“Okay, I will jiggle the handle and lets both hit it hard.”

“Are you sure you can handle both?” He smirks good natured.

“Well, we will see now, won’t we?”

“One, two, three!” I count off, more for the dramatic effect and slam my body in sync with his, hard into the wood.

The door flies open, letting us fall free for just a moment. “In another month I bet this door is impossible, once the monsoons really kick in.”

We enter the room. The atmosphere is stale and musky, with a strange pungency. The wild and foreign aroma tickles our noses. "What is that smell?" I ask

"I don't know," he says.

There is no furniture in here save for two old wooden chairs placed side by side along one rock wall.

"This must be the royal hall. I wonder where the king and queen are off to." I run and sit in one of the chairs, exaggerating the straightness of my back, elongating my neck. "This throne fits me well."

Tom is examining the rocks in the walls, touching them with his hands and sniffing the air deeply. Suddenly I am jealous of mere stone. I am jealous of the elements that fascinate him, pull him close, force him to breathe them and hold his focus. I am jealous of the beam of light coming from his forehead, guiding his gaze and pulling him close. I stand up feeling powerless and without reign. I decide to look at things closely too.

I walk to the closest wall and begin tracing my hand across the rocks. The smell is strongest here and the rocks are cold and smooth as a river rocks, their underbellies lost in darkness. In the corner, close to the ground, the rocks become broken. Their soft edges give way to corners and odd angles. I touch them with both hands, moving faster, retouching them again. They are nearly shattered close to the ground as I kneel down and find the right angle of the floor.

The smell is overpowering, almost like a skunk. I touch the hardwood floor and it catches upon my skin. Pieces of wood point askew like hangnails from the fingers of wood planks. I use the flat palms of my hands to touch it, to cut down on angles and avoid splinters. The smell creeps down my throat, making my eyes water and my head heavy. I close my eyes and breathe the scent deep. My head rolls back, my consciousness slips sideways. I hear the distant panting of wet mouths, pink tongues and bright eyes, yellow and blue. This is the scent of real pheromones. I breathe it so deep I can taste the course fur full of night air, old rain and survival. Of the wild hunt.

A hand touches the middle of my back and Tom is next to me. "Don't breathe it too deep," he says and my eyes flutter back open. Blink wide. The beam of his headlamp scurries across the places I touch in the dark, proving my senses correct. There are deep scratches across the floor, chiseled and worn away rocks low on the wall.

"How do you think they got in?" I ask him, my head clearing just enough to speak. To listen.

"I don't know, but they did. I wonder if they'll come back." Tom isn't scared at all. My breathing slows, matching his and I am filled with miracles. With warm, soft air. With wonder.

We stay crouched on the ground, touching the surfaces and breathing the strong musk in short breaths until Tom's longer arms touch upon a loose plank in the floor. The wood gives and he tumbles forward. The opening in the ground reeks of cycles. Of blood and birth, darkness and death. Of captured moonlight grown stiff without wind to billow shadows into

shape. We both stand, moving away from the smell. There is no doubt in our minds. It is a wolf den.

“I think we should go in,” I say.

“I don’t know...”

The room becomes very quiet and still, as we hover upon the brink of decision. Without another word, I crawl forward and lift the plank from the floor. Then I wiggle the one next to it, held in place with a single nail. I twist it in half circles until it gives then shine my headlamp into the blackness.

“Bear, sometimes the animals get sick and leave behind illness. I’m not sure if it’s a good idea.”

“I don’t smell any illness. It smells natural,” I say and begin to lower myself down, shining my headlamp beneath me. My feet continue down until I am up to my armpits in empty earth. I look at Tom, beneath my beam of light, then disappear inside.

The earth is cool and soft, the dirt fine from inexperience. I lower myself to my knees and move my head, slowly turning my beam of light. The darkness is too deep, making the shadows around the light immeasurable. I reach up and switch off my headlamp.

“Bear, what are you doing?”

“Shhh!”

I feel around with my hands until I find the matted pieces of fur and pine needles. I lie down and curl into it, the smell and warmth of a nest. A heavy world of hibernation moves into my hands, my feet and knees, working into my shoulders and head. My mind becomes heavy. I hear a whimpering sound, small but high pitched, then louder until it mingles with the sound of a distant train, of winds in a canyon and hawks' soaring too high, screeching and diving after prey.

A litter of pups, their pewter eyes the color of unfinished metal, blink up at me. They are nearly blind, fumbling into my scent. Their tiny paws push at me, closer until their heads are beneath my belly. I can hear Claire's voice quieting their whimpers. I can see her eyes, then Garcia's, too blue and too bright in the darkness. Light spreads from them. A large paw moves across my face and the animals curl up inside of me. I touch my stomach, the place of entry, and it is wet. My hand is sticky and warm. I wipe my hand on my pants but the liquid is still there. I wipe them again, over and over, but it is too late, I am saturated. The liquid is pooling all around me, brimming and lapping over me, warm and consoling. I can see the surface right in front of me, just beneath my chin, dark and red. I relax into it and wait for it to cover me, to roll over my head and quiet my mind with the wisdom of wolf dreams. I hear the faint sounds of whimpering again, feel something squirming and nudging me. I feel hands, hairless and strong, and the whimpering too loud.

"Bear, wake up."

Tom is next to me. He is pulling me close, whispering loudly into my ear. "Bear wake up," he says again. "You're dreaming." His hands brush my forehead. The blood is gone. The den empty again.

I open my eyes wide, searching, but Tom herds me quickly towards a hole in the corner where a trace of moonlight trickles in. We scamper up the short embankment on all fours and push our way through the earth until we tumble out into the fresh night air.

The wind picks up. We both stand slowly and walk separately to the remaining wide open cabin, conforming to our prearranged plan. I am too quiet. "What happened to you in there?" Tom asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I think I was dreaming someone else's dreams."

"I thought so. But doesn't that make it your dream now?"

"I guess so. But it was so much stronger than mine. So real."

"Well, maybe you are starting a new dreaming phase."

"Yeah, maybe."

We both become quiet. We rummage around in the last cabin, standing tall on two legs, looking for more clues. For more signs of habitat but it is too wide open and weathered, smooth and crisp from the sun. We lay down in this third one with no roof and four crumbling walls. We curl up in the corner, out of instinct. The clouds are building in the distance. Resting

side by side, we look up at the stars. Tom follows my example this time and relaxes into the earth. My heart begins to beat loudly, echoing off the rock walls, fluttering into the mountain air and bouncing off the canyons. I am waiting for an avalanche to drop out of the sky, hyper conscious of where my body ends and his begins.

I don't know why but I can't touch him. I want to kiss him, but I can't. He resists more than me. If anything is ever going to happen, he will have to initiate it. I am too unsure.

"I have something for you, my sleepy head," he says. He props his head up on his hand, elbow into the soft ground. He reaches for his pants pocket, stuffing his hand into the bottom of it. He pulls out two small objects that clink against one another. Like rocks or shells, maybe bullets. I take in a breath of air too quick.

"What?" He asks.

"What are they?"

"What do you think they are?"

I lean in closer and he closes his hand tight. "Come on. What are you thinking?"

"Really pretty rocks?"

"Ha. Yeah right." He opens his hand slowly, watching me in the low light. He turns his headlamp back on and shines it into his hand. In his palm rest two big teeth cleaned to a shine. They are an off white, with deep casts of orange in the cracks.

I look into his face. He stays focused on the teeth, keeping the beam from my eyes.

“Did you just...”

He nods. “These are new.”

“Are they from...”

“Nevada. Yeah.”

I open my hand slowly and flinch a little when he drops them in.

Tom laughs, “They won’t bite you, Bear.”

“I know. It’s just strange. I remember the impact really well.” I begin turning them about, touching the entire surface of both teeth. They are as soft as flower petals. As smooth as water.

“They are made out of ivory. Elk have ivory incisors.”

“So that’s why people collect them.”

“Yep.”

“Why are you giving them to me,” I ask, looking back into his face.

He looks up at me this time, only moving his eyes, then shrugs. “You need them.”

I do? I have the urge to smell them. To taste them, tracing their smoothness with my tongue. To eat them.

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome.”

Tom switches off his head lamp and we lay still again for a while.

I want to ask him about that moment. About pointing the gun and shooting. About the emotion. About why he even has a gun to begin with, but I don’t. Maybe the gun is just for protection, out here in the woods, late at night. And killing animals is easy if you are used to hunting. I can’t imagine it. I put my head back down and focus upon the stars. Out in the distance, above the tree line there is a faint glow. The red hot embers of a night time fire, creeping slowly beneath higher humidity. We lay there for a while until my eyes close and I can no longer tell if I am dreaming or watching the stars. In my mind I am running amongst them, moving fast and breathing hard. I smell everything, deep and eternal, like I have always known them. I see colorful trails where the tops of the trees meet the sky and the world smells fresh and full of life.

“Bear,” Tom reaches out and brushes my neck with his hand. Half of my body cascades into tingling goose flesh. The half he touches, the other half still quiet. “We better head back before you pass out for good. It’s too far for me to carry you.”

I open my eyes wide and the sky is in focus. The clouds are drifting above us, covering and then revealing light. My other side longs to tingle too.

“I wonder if it’s gonna rain,” I ask.

“Maybe later.” Tom is already up and holds out his hand to me. I take it. He pulls me to my feet, so close to him that I am afraid to blink. He is looking at me and I am looking at his chest, watching it rise and fall. I am not sure if he wants to kiss me or eat me until he lets go of my hand and turns to leave, knowing I will follow.

The walk back is a blur of heartbeats and footfalls. Tree limbs, stars and whispers. We have lost our normal voices, as if others might be listening or we don’t trust ourselves to speak right. We move effortlessly this time, as if we’ve always known the way, gliding above the ground.

Tom is close, just in front of me. He has lost the sense of urgency he carried earlier. He deliberately shortens his strides. “We’re almost there,” he whispers. We climb out of the woods, back onto the dirt road and walk side by side the rest of the way. In the small village of tents all is silent. Nothing is different, it seems. We walk to my tent first. I want him to come in. To stay with me. To lie next to me like before. He bends over to unzip my tent.

“Good night, Bear.” He looks at the opening of my tent, not at me.

“Night.” I crawl in, brushing his pant legs. He touches the top of my head, bristling my hair lightly and is gone. I twist in the doorway to find him, but find only the night. I loosen the

laces of my boots and slide each foot out, still staring into the darkness as if at any moment I might reconstruct his shape out of thin air.

I zip up my tent so fast a blast of air hits me in the face. Back in the bag I zip it up too, trying to contain my confusion. To control my wild, racing thoughts and dreams. I feel drowsy and hot. Lustful and hungry. My head is too heavy on the ground and I'm sweating. It begins again. The running. The panting. The night flashing past me in black and white, then long ribbons of scented color. I am too close to the ground. The smell of wet earth and mold fills my head. Quick short breaths echo around me. The smell becomes stronger, a deep musk like up rooted plants, wild mushrooms and trees decomposing into the earth. Moonlight, sweat and stale blood streak my face, running into my mouth until I am nearly drunk with it, my pulse racing faster and faster. The stars are lost to me as the ground moves in, blanketing my vision. The smell and the taste of this world makes me spin, my hips and back bone twitching, I roll into darkness and dirt. Everything becomes still as I am swallowed whole. I open my mouth and it quickly fills with dirt.

I chew softly, sucking the elements from the earth, until the space around me becomes grey, light prying at my eyelids. I gasp for air and the earth is gone. I am staring into brightness. I shake my head, squinting to escape it, but it only gets closer, increases its strength. Suddenly the light begins to bounce, spreading out its rays, swallowing up the remaining peripheral pockets of darkness. The sound of someone else's breath is sharp. New footsteps and a rumbling sound like a parachute opening in the wind. My eyes open and the apex of my tent is shaking.

“Time to get up!” A voice calls. The footsteps move away, past my head until they stop. It’s John doing wake up calls. He shakes the next tent in line and hollers, “Up and at ‘em lazy bones!”

I listen to him pick his way through the community, selecting new phrases for each unwelcoming doorstep. The grumble of heavy headed, reluctant men and shuffling gear fills the day. Peace of mind is a hard thing to let go of, but I know the routine. We all do.

My eyes are dry and painful, as if they’ve been open too long. They are sensitive to the air around me. The light feels unnatural. A dull pain sits inside my head, just behind my consciousness, kicking down into my neck. I don’t feel like I slept at all. Or maybe I slept too much, I can’t tell. I am not drowsy but my dream state is difficult to shake. I imagine a storm cloud encircling me, the bright lights coming and going like flashes of lightning, rolling thunder reassuring me that everything is on time. Everything is natural. A call and response.

The day is the same as any other, despite the night. It must be. I must be the same too. Form to my environment. I sit up and begin gathering my things, deep breathing and footsteps echoing in my head.

Outside the sky looks like rain, but you never know. The ground is still dry and our boots kick up dust as we walk to the breakfast station. We are still the only crew here so the wait for food is almost nonexistent. I head to the bathroom first. The smells of human congregation are overpowering and begin to clear my head a little. Pine sol, eggs, and bacon remind me of rituals. The aromas sweep into my sinuses, shattering my brain into segregated awareness. The night is over but my dreams are still too real, their memory loud and breathless.

As I walk I notice the book bouncing off my stomach again, for the first time since I put it there last night. I put my hand into the front pocket of my sweatshirt. The book is still in one piece, its cover bent back and its pages crinkled, with a small clump of fur stuck to its edge. The pages smell like the night, like blood, but there is none. I let the book flip open to its familiar resting place. Coleridge's dream, the land of Kublai Kahn. I realize I am marching to the pentameter of his romanticism, to his dream ridden voice.

*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran*

*Through caverns measureless to man*

*Down to a sunless sea.*

*So twice five miles of fertile ground*

*With walls and towers were girdled round:*

*And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,*

*Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;*

*And here were forests ancient as the hills,*

*Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

Iambic pentameter, maybe. When I look up I am at the bathroom, my mind and body filled with language and rhythm. I try to clear my head but the words and cadence cling. I recite the lines over and over. I can't stop. The elements follow me in and out of the room, with time and purpose. I let the door slam behind me.

Breakfast is bacon and omelets with pieces of pork inside. Definitely a pattern developing. This morning in the chow line there is a new lady with a huge sore on her face. She is talking about it as we pick up our plates, pointing at it with the plastic serving tongs in her right hand in between scoops. She is animated. Apparently it is some kind of spider bite. All the servers are telling her she should have it checked out, maybe. She is not convinced, so they keep talking about it. It just happened last night, while she was sleeping, so she has no way of knowing who her enemy is. She hates to drive all the way back into Salmon, just for a measly bump.

We move through the line, mesmerized by the show. We watch the sore on her face and the serving spoon as they dance opposite one another. We take our food and sit on the ground next to a batch of baby pines. Everyone is silent.

“That was sick,” Ball breaks in.

We all nod and agree, pushing pink sore colored pork around on our plates. Some people just don't get it. I attempt some bites, finding my hunger increasing with each. I manage to eat almost everything, watching the smiling pig face slowly reappear on my plate, then pitch it into the trash and grab a sack lunch. I can already smell the deli meat from inside and it doesn't strike me as turkey. I run back to my tent, toss the Coleridge book inside and head for the trucks. I don't want it resting against me anymore, controlling my motions.

We all climb in. I slide into the back seat as quiet as possible, wrenching clear from the night while avoiding the responsibilities of the front seat. I haven't seen Tom yet, which isn't really strange because he is all over the place, sometimes skipping breakfast and eating things from home. Some days he's up on his own, finished eating before I can even drag myself to attention. But today it seems odd that he is missing. I can anticipate his presence and it is nowhere near.

My head is slowly clearing its density, shaking free of the night. I watch pieces of sky emerge through the trees as we amble along, back to the top of the hill where the view of the burning canyon awaits. The blue backs off as the wind picks up. There is nothing left of the tranquil night sky with its candescent light or the sky from my dreams, dark and glowing. This is a new day with new weather patterns.

Matt is in the back seat across from me. Ball and Jeff in the front. No one seems aware of my presence. They are talking about history. About war and methods of torture. I reach

into my pants pocket and take the elk teeth out. They hardly weigh an ounce without moonlight. They even look smaller. The white ivory shines just as I twist them, examining the orange and brown stains. There aren't many. The teeth are in almost perfect shape. The elk we hit must have been a young man from a good bloodline. Its helpless body is fresh in my mind's eye. I wonder how much that body knew of its life. Of its purpose. If it had ever been in love, in its own way or produced offspring. If any young elk were ever born to carry on his good genes, strong teeth and paternal name. Or would his children take his mothers surname, since they might never know him?

I wouldn't mind being an elk. Maybe someplace more secluded though like Canada, where they only have three roads in the entire country and half of the time they are used for large animal migration anyways. I hold the elk teeth to my lips, watching out the window. The teeth are cool, refreshing against my callused skin. So perfect. I hold them next to my own teeth to feel the difference. Why don't humans have teeth made of ivory? Then we might harvest our own teeth, or the teeth of our dead. If I think about it, there really is nothing useful about the human body. We are soft shellfish without a shell. Endoskeletons without a skeleton. Too much pulpy flesh. We really are inferior in the food chain. My teeth and hands feel almost clumsy.

I think of all the different devices invented to cut and tear, like these teeth might. To grind and consume. Not one of them is as simple and efficient. As perfect and concise, existing on so many levels without ever knowing it. Or as coveted. These teeth will cut, tear, chew, pin back a giant tongue and eventually, decorate humanity. Or be ground into potions of

unbalanced endeavors to tame and harness the bittersweet wiles of Eros. Silly humans. I smile and put the teeth back into my pocket.

As I push my hand deep into my pocket, I notice Matt watching me. I wonder where my special sense has gone. Where my internal camera is and why I am not sensing it?

“What are you thinking about?” he notices me noticing him. I hate this line of questioning.

“Me?” I laugh, stalling for time and a made up reality. “I was just thinking about the weather, you know. Will it rain? And wondering where you and Sandy ran off to last night.”

I reach across the empty space between us and poke him light heartedly in the ribs. Matt is ticklish. And I can do nothing but point my finger at somebody else and hope to divert the attention.

“Stop it,” he feigns annoyance. “We were just talking.” He is uncomfortable and failing to hide it. He relaxes his posture, hoping his voice will follow. It is impossible for some people to match their insides with their outsides. The other way around, too.

“She seems nice,” I say.

“She is nice. That’s all.” Matt’s eyes lighten and he looks away. We can sense the end of the drive approaching from muscle memory and the internal space created with each external branch cut the previous day. The space is nearly up.

The truck slows to a stop. Jeff, sitting shotgun, jumps out and runs behind us to guide the driver. Cannonball acts like he doesn't need it, but it is the rules. Just one of hundreds.

"Definitely going to rain today!" Ball declares while he is waiting, sticking his head out the window, exaggerating, staring straight into the sky, he squints with one eye.

He backs perfectly the first time so we all jump out quickly. I grab my gear from the side bin but avoid the saw, since I haven't heard the day's assignment yet. I can't imagine why we would need it. So far, it looks to me like we will be doing a lot of waiting.

This waiting thing has taken me a long time to get the hang of. In fact, I still don't entirely grasp the mentality, I only respond correctly by following exact orders. It's the hurry up and wait that throws me off. We will scramble to get everything ready, in a near state of panic, only to be told to stay in our seats for the rest of the day. I understand the need for conditioning. The need to train every time as if our lives might be on the line, because someday, they might. But many times it is just irrational. It is just a game meant to keep the workers busy and at work, while the bosses wander about poking sticks at the fire or making new social connections as they please. Occasionally, thanks to upward mobility training, a grunt will go with them. I have gone a few times and the amount of old, crusty stories and bull shit slung quickly piles up, swaying in the breeze like a fermenting Tower of Babel. They can almost build themselves back up to their days of glory and celestial youth.

We gather in squads. The crew must hold the fire today. One squad will stretch out along the road with a 15 foot spacing per person, while the other squad will be gridding the

woods just beyond the road, looking for embers. We receive our orders and avoid looking into one another's faces. It is simple motion. A strategy employed to keep us awake and on task. The fire is still at least a half mile away. The threat or chance of something up here catching is minimal.

My squad is gridding. I am actually glad. The only thing worse than wandering around looking for something that doesn't exist and probably never will, is standing in one place all day, staring out at a plume of smoke and an endless sky, wanting one to swallow up the other, knowing that even if it did, you wouldn't be standing there long enough to see the complete transition. The chemical exchange of energies. You will only stand there, still, as long as everything remains the same. Like a sentry ordered to stare deep into a painting and watch for any sign of change. Signs of attack. Eventually you will create them yourself, your tired and hopeful eyes perceiving what is not really there, intruding abstractly with your own paint.

"Bear, you make sure that saw is ready. Just in case." The words are loud and clear. John is always loud and clear in my head. I make eye contact and nod. The wind is picking up on our overlook. The saw is still ready to go from rehabbing it the night before. I take my place in the line that is about to spread out, about 10 feet apart, and glide across the back side of the overlook, scanning for any sparks or embers that might have made their way across the fuel break, carried by the new winds aloft, down into the dry leaves and pine needles below. It is amazing how the elements work together for change. And now we are standing here looking to squash it out to save a few piles of old rock and wood. And the wolf den. I wonder if anyone

knows about them. If they ever noticed. Something tells me that Jack and Sandy are very aware.

My hand involuntarily touches the teeth in my pocket again. They remind me of the food chain and the invincibility of nature. How quickly things can change at times. Our line fans out and begins creeping. This is the day ahead of me. Creeping over rocks and stones, flipping them, kicking through brush, imploring all tangible creation with my every sense. These are the moments that I try to find inspiration. I try to compare details, make connections between unlikely subjects. This is the time that I must be thoughtful. I am fortunate to have this mind set. To imagine what I might write about later. Many of the men here refuse to internalize. They refuse to view their landscape as anything but forced. A job filled with many disconnected and endless tasks. Or, more than likely, the associations refuse them entry.

Gridding for heat or watching for new smokes has many levels of intensity. There is the actual act of combing the perimeter of the fire, searching out of bounds for any stray combustion, which is what we are doing today, half a mile away. But there is also gridding the fire for heat and smoke after you put the fire out. This is the most tedious of all, since you are usually exhausted from the labor spent extinguishing it and convinced that there cannot possibly be anything left that you can do, but you do it anyways. And the process is highly interactive, often taking place at a snail's pace, in an animal's position. On all fours, spaced at five feet, the crawling and touching begins. Gloves off, knees bent, searching every square inch, deep in the aftermath of mud and wet, black soot. In a desert fire, you must crawl right through the needled plants, as if they were not covered with thousands of tiny torture devices,

and keep right on moving, clothes and skin snagging. It's the hands and face that get torn the most, sometimes even the skin of your scalp. I've had my hair tangled and caught up like kite string, me being the kite, in a Manzanita, my helmet knocked off, and when I reached to free it, stabbed in the palm of my hand by a blackened poker that used to be a limb. The plant came away with many strands of my DNA. Hair, blood, and the first few layers of skin. When I was finally free, I dared to look back over my shoulder, back at my captor. The branch looked like a voodoo doll with bright red blood rich from the shock of too much oxygen dripping down and a nest of black curls to tell me which way the faint wind was blowing. A skinny burnt Barbie jutting up from the charred earth, planted and given new roots. A creepy sort of wind sock.

But today's gridding is more like a stroll in the park. A nature walk in comparison. Scottie is at the top, closest to the dirt road and the rest of us cascade off of him. We begin our slow stroll, sifting through the top layer of forest floor with our eyes only, then moving up the length of tree stands and into their jostling crowns. There isn't any smoke but we are urged to seek it. To practice it. To worship it.

Matt is two spaces above me, just below Scottie. He can't help himself, his kinesthetic nature forces him to touch the trees and bushes. To kick rocks out of the way. He must interact, his blue eyes shining bright even from twenty feet away, the sun catching them between each break in the canopy. I see his shoulders tense suddenly as his face turns uphill. Two new people are standing at the top, talking with John, Brian and Mark. It's Jack and Sandy, both dressed in yellow Nomex again. They speak directly with Brian, talking aside, staring off at

the distant smoke. I can only hear the rise and fall of vocal intonations and see the motion of body language. Matt is listening, though his body seems to be fighting the urge to join them.

I sigh and look back at the unsung path in front of me, fighting my own physical desire to run Sandy off. That territorial urge again. At least she's with Jack. He will keep the balance. At the end of the conversation Sandy sticks her hand out and Brian shakes it. Jack does the same. Then, for some strange reason, the two part ways. Jack turns and disappears and Sandy approaches Scottie, our floating fulcrum. He points down to the end of the line and Sandy nods. Atta boy. I don't know what she thinks she's doing, coming out here into the battle zone, but she needs to be sent to the back of the line. To the bottom of the hill. Getting bumped off your gridding spot by someone is irritating. Especially if that someone doesn't even belong.

Sandy seems to take it well. She smiles and nods, beginning her walk down the line. She says hello to Matt, then continues down to Ball, who is the next person in line just above me. I can hear her now. "Brian wants you to bump to the bottom. He says you'll understand." Cannonball's mouth opens, almost as wide as his eyes, then slowly closes.

"All right." He turns and heads down the hill.

"What?" I yell. But Ball just walks right down the line, passing in front of me. "Ball, that's ridiculous," I add.

"What does it matter? Who cares where I stand and stare at the ground, there's no damn fire anyways!"

I watch him walk. He is quite possibly the only one on this crew that would not have told that woman exactly where she should go, in more ways than one. She just got lucky. And she got her spot. Right between Matt and I. What do I care? I look up at her. She is smiling at me. "You shouldn't have done that," I say.

She shrugs. "Just following orders."

Brian and Mark head off, leaving John up above us not watching anything but the grass beneath his boots grow. And the whole thing doesn't really matter at all but it annoys the shit out of me. I begin thinking in curse words. I'm sure they'll be flying out my mouth soon enough too.

I force myself to smile at my thoughts and settle in for a long day. What the hell.

We continue walking until I become too curious to keep quiet. "Where'd Jack go?" I ask her.

"He's headed back to Salmon. Our fourteen day permit is about up and we need to renew it. He's expecting some resistance." Sandy is scanning the ground for smokes while she talks. "Oh, and he really wants to develop some of the film. We have a dark room in the trailer there."

"So he just left you?"

"I told him I wanted to stay." Great. I let out a dramatic sigh. I can't help it. Who knows how long she'll be tagging along.

“Why are you working with us?” I ask.

I see Matt’s head turn, just past Sandy’s above me. He is looking at me disapprovingly. His eyes scream at me but I don’t care.

“Well, Jack and I have been talking about making you guys a bigger part of his book. And your boss, Brian, has been nice enough to let me interact a bit. To experience all of this first hand. Fire is very important to this ecosystem, you know. And therefore, so are you.”

“I guess. I guess it’s safe enough for you without real fire around,” I say. I am not taking her flattery, kill me with kindness bait.

“That’s what he says. It’s safe enough this way. Just to experience the energy of such a powerful group and listen to your challenges. To your solutions.” Sandy has got to be full of it. California big time full of it.

“Neat,” my voice loses a battle with sarcasm. I look dead ahead again. We have already covered fifty yards or so. Sandy begins talking with Matt. Pleasantries. I have the urge to tease them. To make fun of them in front of everyone for sneaking off together. No one knows but me I am pretty sure. This is lethal information that could cause a lot of unrest. Not for me though. But something else is bothering me. I can feel it eating at me, demanding more attention than gossip or humiliation. Why does Sandy always call their book Jack’s book? Why isn’t she taking any credit for the stupid thing?

“Hey Sandy,” I interrupt them. “Why do you always refer to your project as Jack’s book and not ‘our’ book? I mean, you are obviously out here researching with him, right?”

She smiles at me, of course. “Because it is his book. I am just another element of it, along for the ride. The experience and knowledge.”

All right, sure. Passive, California hippie shit again. I can’t stomach pacifism. I don’t buy it. It is not inherently human. Unless you take yourself to the middle of the Himalayas, lock yourself deep inside a dark temple—where the only sounds around you are the movement of water and the echoes of same sexed chanting—and throw away the key, you will never be a pacifist. So just give up the act.

“I’m sure I’ll be all over the acknowledgements. You probably will too. Jack is almost finished with the book you lent him. He loves it. I’m sure he’ll be back for more.”

What does she mean back for more? She says it like I am dinner with many more helpings to go around.

“Good. He’s a nice guy.”

Sandy only nods. We all walk in silence for a long while. “I have a book I think you will like.” Sandy breaks the silence.

“Oh yeah? I have a lot of books already.”

“I know. But you need to read this one.”

For some reason I do not argue. "Okay." I look up at her, she smiles at me again but it seems somehow different. Maybe genuine, for the first time. Or I am seeing things different. I think my smile back reflects hers a little.

"It's about the wolves," she says.

"Yeah," I say. My hand reaches down to the teeth in my pocket again. Through the rough layers of work clothes, gray leather and green felt, the ivory teeth are still smooth and soft. I already know what the book is about.

The morning drags past. At lunch time they order us to hold still until told otherwise. Sandy finds me hiding in one of the trucks with my book. She opens the door across from me and hops in the back seat beside me. She places a new book on top of mine, directly in my lap.

"Arctic Wild," I pick it up and study the cover. A family living with wolves. Great.

"It's about a family living with wolves in the early 1900's. Before it was the cool thing to do."

"Oh." That's a little better.

"What are you reading?" Sandy leans in close. I move her book to let her read the book beneath.

"I read a different book every day, really. I just grabbed this one," I say. I don't know why I am trying to make light of this book. It is anything but weightless.

*"Women Who Run With the Wolves,"* she reads aloud. "An excellent choice."

"You've read it?" I turn to look her in the eyes. I notice them for the first time. They are a light brown with a hint of yellow. Not unlike mine, but darker.

She nods. "I've read it. I'm glad you're reading it. You should let me know how it makes you feel. I am curious."

"Well so far it has just felt like a collection of beautiful words. But honestly, since I've been here, it's felt a little different."

"Really?" she says, but her face is not shocked.

"Well, yeah. Maybe it's just very close to reality now."

"I can see that. You are moving in a pack as a lone woman. And the real wolves have been all over these mountains by now."

"Yeah, something like that."

"I believe it's just a matter of time before people start targeting these animals."

"What? They just barely brought them back, right?"

“It was still controversial though. I’m sure you can imagine, without too much effort, why land owners wouldn’t want them in the area. They have a vast domain, you know, over a hundred square miles. And winters here can get very cold and very hungry.”

“So the ranchers will shoot them.”

“Soon. They are testing their boundaries right now, probably as we speak. Very soon.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, but the wolves are smart. And they have guardians.”

I stare at her for a moment, wanting to ask more. Her eyes sparkle, complimenting her half smile, half smirk. Suddenly she is very beautiful to me, ancient, wise and full of mischief. She is a part of something larger. I decide not to ask, only smile back, hoping my eyes twinkle half as much as hers. Hoping she understands that I do.

Sandy opens the back door to leave.

“Wait!” I say, with too much urgency. “I have a book I want you to borrow.”

“All right.”

“But I don’t have my bag of books with me, here. Can I give it to you tonight?”

“Yeah, I’ll come around.”

We are both smiling. She pats my knee, her hand lingering just a moment, then hops out the door. I am left to myself and my thoughts. To bask in the connection just made, so rarely any here with women. I can't help but feel guilty about the way I have been behaving. I haven't been welcoming. But I didn't know her and what else is there to do in such moments but defend one's self and ones pack? Defend one's role as dominant female within the pack. Sandy feels like goodness. Our roles are safe. I know for a fact she could never run a chainsaw. Our wild women archetypes are similar, but different. Our connection must be a good one.

Standing in the middle of a commune of canvas, I am struck by the ability of each sleeping area to exude unique character. It's all about placement in relation to the pack. In the center or on the fringe, head end pointed in or head end pointed out, angles, tautness or sagginess, windows and doors zipped all the way open or closed, some with personal belongings hanging out, some with nothing out of place at all. For some, the decoration is incidental, like the face of a child after a meal, covered with colorful food that chance willed each and every direction but inside the mouth. For others, just as in their everyday life, their sleeping space is an expression of themselves. They are acutely aware of each adornment. Of each position. Everything is premeditated.

I am staring at Tom's tent, wondering which of these two groups he belongs to. Or if he weaves in and out of both, in a similar way that I do. I think he must be like me, or why else would I be so drawn to him. So compelled. So unable to resist any and everything he tells me. His tent is on the edge of camp, with every door and window shut. I have a very strong urge to go and unzip them all. To crawl in and breathe his air.

I look down at my own tent in front of me. There is nothing interesting about it at all that I can see. Very middle ground and nonchalant. Most of my zippers look halfway to nowhere. The interesting things are all on the inside.

It still hasn't rained like the morning sky promised and for this we are thankful. Rain might mean the end of an assignment and, therefore, the end of overtime, hazard pay and

travel. Also, from the looks of it, not many people are prepared for rain. Some tents have their doors wide open, blowing in the breeze. They obviously have nothing at all to hide. Not in their tents at least.

Earlier today, sometime after lunch, during the peak burn time of the afternoon, the wind picked up and the clouds blew out. The sun stepped in and hasn't let up since. We took turns watching as the small flames grew, ever so slightly from our view, and tiny threads of black began to mix in with the white-grey plume in short bursts. It's looking like the fire might make it to our steep mountaintop after all. The smell of burning now fills the overlook. Still not sharp, but strong.

I unzip my tent flap, crawl in and sit in the doorway. We are done early today. I take off my boots and two layers of socks. This is a must. The sooner the better. I make a conscious decision to leave my tent flap open, as I move the backpack full of books down below my feet. I can't decide which one of us is more like a book end on a shelf and which is more like the books. Since I am horizontal, like the classic space on a shelf, I feel like the row of novels. I breathe softly, feeling my pages turn and settle open to somewhere in my middle. This tent, once again, is the only space out here where we are completely allowed to relax. My backpack is very solid, almost heavy against the arch of my feet. The bag pushes back.

I wonder which book I am going to give Sandy. I lied today, at lunch, when I said I had a book for her. Or, not really because I do. But I did not have one in mind. Not yet. Or at least I didn't think I did. I close my eyes and continue breathing slow. The wind has died down outside, with the descent of the sun. The day is still full of light, but the shadows are

everywhere, long and thin. I feel the books through the bag with the sensitive bottoms of my feet and the curling of my toes. I think I can nearly tell which is which, I have carried them so closely for so long it seems, even my feet know them.

I need to give her a book of genuine good will. Of femininity and strength with some element of wildness. I want a book that will let her know who I am, but not too quickly. A book that is smart and witty, but attainable. Suddenly the decision of which book to lend Sandy seems the most important one of my book toting career. I want to impress, without being flashy. I want to wish her happiness. I am going to need to look at them all again.

I sit up and pull my back pack close. I leave it on the floor in front of me, a bit hunched over because the roof of my small tent is low. I angle the bag towards the door to let more light in and somehow I see it right away. It is not on the top, but I look past the other familiar corners and covers, straight down to a white and red one. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Like most of my books, I have never finished this one. But I have read many pages at many different times. Some were so powerful that I read them again. This is a book of good will. A book of life. A book of balance, between the sweet and bitter. A book of love. I relinquish my hold upon Matt, with the gift of this book, as his solitary crush, and wish her love. Or at least the warmth of companionship. I take the book out and place it with my other one—one mine, one hers—and lay back down. My mind and body resonate with the soft wind and the anticipation of giving.

I hear the footsteps of the rest of the crew returning from dinner. I skipped mine, anxious for quiet time and space in the village. The sack lunches they give us are enough to

feed you all day, if you're idle. The mandatory caloric content will take you a long way if you let it. I ate my last ham sandwich on the drive down and left the rest in the truck. No food in the tents, unless we want to risk bears. Or skunks or ants or raccoons or, who knows, even wolves. But the vehicles are always unlocked when we are in the forest, with the keys in the gas cap. Just in case of emergency evacuation. I will be able to snack later if I need it.

I can't see too many faces, just legs moving around without torsos and hands popping in and out of the picture, too animated to hang loose. On a lazy day, wildland firefighters are left with too much energy. Voices grow loud. The troops will be looking for something to do tonight. Hopefully they will manage to tether themselves to a productive game and everyone will stay out of trouble. I don't want anyone else to find the den. No one else should know. Again, I wonder if I should mention it to Sandy. She must know. She has to.

A set of footsteps stands out from the rest, growing loudest somewhere behind my head. Very deliberate. If I could study only cadence and canter, I would. If there were a school of science called cadentology, I would become its most adept pupil. I love to memorize motion. Motion and sound and energy.

The feet stop at my head. "Anybody home?" Sandy's voice is cheery. I sit up and reach for my bag of books.

"Hey. Just laying here taking up my space."

"Ah yes. This is truly the golden hour. Solitude and the setting sun." Sandy looks up at the sky, towards the treetops dancing gently, bathing their arms in the waning waves of light.

“You can almost feel the fatness of oxygen in the air,” I say. The trees are anxious for chemical exchange during the last moments of sun. Photosynthesis demands focus from the forest around it.

Sandy takes a deep breath, closing her eyes. “I can. You’re right.” She opens them and sits down in front of me. “I’ve come to collect.”

“Of course you have. You’re no fool. You know a good thing when you see it.” I wink at her and reach back in my tent for her book. Without really looking, I find the shape of the book and retrieve it into the last light of day. Its glossy white cover refracts our image, out of focus and hazy. Soft light is everywhere.

“*Eros the Bittersweet*,” she takes the book from me, reading the red lettering aloud. Her hand traces the front, one finger lingering on the patch of green with a white angel in its center. The angel’s wings, like butterflies, are orange with black veins. The bottom wing doubles as a flower, maybe a daffodil or marigold with its petals splayed wide, inviting and offering.

Sandy giggles a little, looks at me thoughtfully, then flips through the pages of the book. She stops somewhere in the middle. She wets her lips and begins to read:

“When ice gleams in the open air, children grab.” She stops for a moment, holding the book with one hand, leaning sideways against the other.

“Ice-crystal in the hands is, at first a pleasure quite novel. But there comes a point, you can’t put the melting mass down.” Her fingers dig softly into the earth, catching at small tufts of grass. She leans closer to the ground. I have seen her like this before. I know I have.

“You can’t keep holding it.” Her hand closes around a fist full of earth.

“Desire is like that. Pulling the lover to act and not to act, again and again, pulling.” She is so close to me now that I can almost smell her. A soft sound emits from her chest, not unlike purring. Growling. Or maybe it’s coming from me.

She closes here eyes and sits back on her heels. A big smile grows upon her lips. “Ice Pleasure,” she opens her eyes again and they are glistening, brown and yellow. She suddenly leans over, into the door of my tent and hugs me. “Great timing,” she says and I know the soft sounds are coming from her. I can feel her vibrations.

I don’t understand the details, but I understand timing. Beat and tempo.

“See you in the morning,” Sandy says, standing up. She takes a few steps back so I can see her face again. So she can see mine and then walks away.

“See you,” I say. I watch her go, sure footed, graceful and happy. I touch my chest. My stomach and arms. The vibrations are still with me. I shake my head a little, letting my hair down. I have a powerful urge to chase her down and hold her longer. To move around on all fours with her and dig in the dirt. To feel those vibrations again. I rub my face, my eyes and take a drink of water. The light is just enough to read by. I twist back into my tent.

I don’t know if books can change your life. Maybe. I know a lot of people who want to write them. That might change your life. But giving a favorite book away to a near stranger is

an experience. It is a gut wrenching sacrifice and although I did not mention that she could keep it, I know she will. It will simply work out like this. And I will keep her book too.

As if in response, the unread pages at my side flutter open in the breeze. Maybe they have been blowing like this all along, but I just notice. I lie back upon the earth, upon my sleeping pad and nylon and pick up my gift. The words sift over me like warm grains of sand.

It must be some time in the middle of the night, or at least pretty late when I wake up again. The door to my tent is still open so the air on my skin is cool and new. *The Arctic Wild* is by my side. I remember the story. The beginning. A love affair with the land. Insignificant humans. And more frozen land. And strong allusions to the wolves yet to come.

I hear voices. Not far off but not next to me. I sit up, still wearing my work clothes, but no boots. I can't remember taking off my boots, but they are clearly not on anymore. I see them standing sentry by the door, half moonlight and half shadows.

The voices are male and they are working themselves up, louder and louder. I hear a chorus of commentary, pitching and swaying, then Cannonball's voice is clear, followed by Eric's. The sound of bare skin smacking upon bare skin is clear above the din.

I climb out of my tent, in my socked feet, and scan the area. Laughter is everywhere. Outside our village I can see a small circle of head lamps bobbing and weaving. They move in time with the laughter, choreographed like costume sequins reflecting the night sky. I reach back into my tent and grab my own headlamp. At night these lights are permanent fixtures upon the heads of firefighters. They make trails where there are none.

I decide to slip into my boots without tying them. I have to scrunch my toes with each step to keep the boot from slipping, but this is much easier than digging for my sandals. I keep my headlamp off at first and move by moonlight, walking towards the group. As I get closer I can see light reflecting off white playing cards. It's Cannonball, Eric, Scottie and Matt.

“Hey guys,” I speak up to avoid startling them, but I do anyways. Cannonball, who is obviously hyper and amped on adrenaline from the game, jumps from his knees to his feet and swings his arms around him like a blind man.

“Who goes there?” he hisses and shines his own headlight directly into my face.

“Ug. Thanks Ball,” I say and they all start laughing again like drunken Hyenas. I switch on my head lamp and shine it right back into his face. It’s my only recourse, until we both can stand it no longer and must look away. I close my eyes and rub them, letting the white lines and dots fade. I wonder if they really are getting drunk. If they have the guts too, right out here in the open.

“You just missed it. Eric double peppered. My man!” They slap hands again.

“Dorks.” I walk up behind them, staying on my feet. They deal again, the cards popping into their hands suddenly like magic mushrooms, arranging them by color and variety. I pace around the circle, looking over each shoulder, gauging potential.

“Bear, keep your eyes to yourself!”

“Oh, come on. I barely even remember how to play.” It’s true, I don’t. “And I don’t care who wins, why would I cheat?”

“Yeah. Tom’s not here so you don’t care.”

I feel my face change color, impossible to tell in the dark. It warms until I can barely see, the heat waves distorting the figures around me.

“You are an idiot Eric,” I say.

“Where is that guy, anyways? He’s been hiding this trip. He’s my favorite Pepper partner,” Cannonball says.

“Fine then! See if I ever double pepper again!” Eric jumps to his feet and throws his cards.

“After you E!” Cannonball raises his arms up to soothe in dramatic protest. “I mean he’s my favorite after you, of course. God damn, that’s a given man.”

Eric scowls and begins picking them up again.

“Whatever,” he mumbles. I pick up one of his cards on the ground next to me and he tears them from my hand.

“He’s been wandering around a lot, reading,” Matt says. I look closely at him. He is lying down, leaning back against his elbow looking overly casual and relaxed. Unlike himself. I can feel everyone’s eyes upon me. The tension between us is obvious.

“What have you been doing, Bear?” Scottie asks.

“I fell asleep.”

“Been dreaming about fightin’ fires?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You know what they say, like in the movie *Waking Life*. Did you ever see it?”

“Yes, but they say a hell of a lot.”

“They talk about the man getting you down, stealing away your mind. They say he gets your day time for seven fifty an hour, but he gets your nighttime, your dreams, for free.”

“That’s depressing man,” Ball says. He rubs his eyes, fighting off a yawn. He looks like an overgrown baby when he’s tired.

I sit down next to a big rock and my loose boots kick something over. Something metal. The sound of sloshing liquid is clear. “What the hell is this?” I hold it up in the night.

“Vodka and Gin,” Ball says, giggling a little.

“Both?” I ask.

He nods. “It’s Ginodka.”

“Gross.” I set the container back down against the rock. It’s a sig, like the kind we use to carry saw fuel. A well camouflaged flask. The desire to lose control beckons. To forget about time, slow and creeping. To forget about Tom.

“Yeah. Back home we had two half empty bottles of booze and only one clean sig, so we mixed ‘em. Not too bad, really. You should try it.”

“Don’t make me puke.”

“What? It’s awesome! Seriously. Takes the edge right off the day. Helps get the dirt taste out of your mouth.”

The image from my dream comes flooding back. The rich taste of iron and the grinding of tiny wet pebbles fills my mouth, choking the back of my throat and I am salivating. I gasp a little, shaking my head. Maybe I should have some. I look at each of them, staring at me expectantly. They look possessed. “Are you guys already drunk?” I ask.

“What do you think,” Matt says, looking me in the eye for the first time. I hold his gaze, speechless beneath the deep blue, then drop my eyes to the ground. I pick up the metal container again and shake it. Only half full.

Matt takes another bottle from behind his back and tosses it to me. I catch it in my lap.

“Gatorade makes a good chaser, if you want.”

What the hell. I unscrew both bottle tops and drink deep, feeling the dark mineral taste in my mouth wash away. I drink first from the sour, clear liquid then from the sweet red one. I close my eyes and let my head lull back. I can’t help it. I gasp for air.

“Atta girl,” they all say.

“One more for good measure?” Matt says, “We all did, and then some.” They laugh.

Without time to think, I repeat the action, this time refusing the chaser. I burp and put the bottles down. Immediately I wish I would have eaten a bigger dinner.

“Nice,” they all say, approvingly.

“Hey. Listen you guys, what is that?” Scottie says. We listen. It’s the sound of doors closing, distant and metallic. My stomach growls loudly.

“Shhh, Bear!” Ball stares at me and I giggle.

“Who else is out here? Who is that?” Eric asks. I listen now. A soft, melodic sound like women’s voices.

“Maybe the ranger is back,” I say, leaning against the ground not unlike Matt.

“In the middle of the night?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe that spider face woman too.”

“It sounds like lot of ladies.”

The foreign flutter of femininity moves up the dirt road, approaching our camp. As quick as it came, it begins to fade.

“Let’s go see. Let’s follow them.”

“Are a bunch of drunks good at following someone?” I ask.

“Don’t come then, Bear. Go find Tom,” Eric says again. Of course I am going now.

We walk up the small hill, back to the dirt road and our vehicles. We hide behind them, peeking around the edge of steel and rubber.

“They’re gone,” I say, standing up straight.

“No shit. Maybe they went to the kitchen,” Ball says.

“We would have seen them,” Eric says.

“Maybe,” Matt says.

“Let’s walk up the road,” Matt is assuming off duty squad boss.

Further down the road we can see a forest service vehicle, light green. Behind it is a new pitch black Tacoma. “It’s got to be the Ranger. Maybe she’s meeting her secret lover here to watch the fire,” Ball says.

“The Ranger and the Spider Woman?” Eric asks. “Gross.”

“Or her secret lovers,” I say. My stomach growls again and I giggle even louder as we creep around the side of our own work truck.

“Geeze Bear, you need to eat,” Scottie says.

“Yeah, maybe later. I feel great right now.”

“I bet,” Matt mumbles. We are whispering, creeping around hunched over when I suddenly stand up straight again.

“They’re not even here. Why are we sneaking?”

Everyone stands up straight except Cannonball. “They could be watching us, Bear! And what if they are witches? Spider lady is freaking nuts! Did you see her shirt?” he says.

“What about it?”

“It was full of weird Indian shit. Wolves and dream catchers and the moon, just like Scottie’s stories,” Cannonball says.

“Never mind her shirt. It was her face that freaked me out,” Eric says.

“That kind of shirt is everywhere,” Scottie says.

“Stupid hippie shit,” Matt says.

“Come on! Let’s go.” I step around Matt and pick up the pace. Only I could get away with this.

We take off running on tip toes, further up the road towards the new vehicles. I get to the black truck first. “Nice ride,” I say, running my fingers across the hood. “Barely even dirty.”

“If I had a brand new Tacoma, sure as shit, I’d keep her clean,” Eric says.

“Where in the hell are they?” Ball asks.

We walk to the north side of the road, fire side. Nothing. But the south side has a small trail.

“Listen,” Matt demands. Female laughter. Definite.

“We have to go!” Ball says. I have a strange feeling in my stomach, more than just emptiness and alcohol. Matt steps into the trees, in front of me and I am quick behind him. Everyone follows. The trail is tiny. Not really a trail at all, but a path worn from walking.

The foot path takes us on a loop around the small fire camp, beyond the sleeping and eating areas, and back to the road. From the trees we can see the women in the open road adjusting their back packs and retying shoelaces. Our guess was half right. The ranger, the spider woman, a new lady and Sandy are all there. The new woman is very tall and slender like a reed. Her hair is long too, falling down her back in two loose, yellow braids.

Matt and I crouch behind the same bush. The kind with the white flowers and overwhelming smell. As I watch the women in the road, the bad feeling in my stomach gets worse. Nauseating. My head is faint and hot and I swoon like someone out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, my stomach nearly singing now.

“What is Sandy doing with them?” Matt whispers loudly, shocked. I put my finger to his lips, my face right in front of his. My body becomes heavy, my eyes too dry. I close them and let my head hang back.

“What do we do now,” Cannonball whispers. I lie down in the leaves, forgetting about the noise, full of secrets and bile.

The warmth is fading and I feel sick. I don’t want to go any further. We shouldn’t. The dry pine needles crunch as I curl into them, my breath coming and going too quick.

“What are you doing Bear?” Scottie whispers.

I feel Matt touch my face. My cheeks, my throat, my forehead. His hand is cool and methodical. I can hear myself breathing. Panting almost.

“They’re leaving. What do we do?” Eric says.

“We gotta follow,” Cannonball says.

“Are you sick, Bear?” Scottie asks.

“They just left,” Eric says.

Matt’s hand is still on my forehead. I open my eyes. I can see his dark blue eyes, darker than the sky around him, searching me. I close my eyes again.

“Did anyone bring water?” Matt asks.

“Naw. Not even the booze”

“Run back and get some.”

“Booze?”

“Water!”

I lay still listening to them argue, their voices meshing into one, male and monotone. I wait to hear the sound of footsteps above my breath. Finally they crunch past my head and away. Matt switches hands, one for the other.

“Can you sit up?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

I open my eyes again and look to the trees. I must be hallucinating because colors are raining down on me. Auras are everywhere—purple, red, green— stretching up to the sky, mixing with the moon just above, full and bright. Matt’s face is washed pale beneath it, blue and yellow, like a sunny day at the beach. I watch until the panting returns.

“Don’t try to move Bear. Close your eyes.”

I close my eyes but the spiraling colors remain, with a beam of yellow in the center.

I hear footsteps again. Then voices. “We brought lots of water.”

“I brought lots of water. You idiots did not bring shit.”

“Oh shut up. You would have been lost without us. Scared of the dark.”

A tussle of clothing, bodies and laughter. Roughhousing.

“Give me the water, Eric,” Matt says, not bothering to get to his feet.

They all start laughing. They sit down on the ground around me, giggling like little boys. I open my eyes, weary, and watch Eric give Matt the water. Matt struggles to get his hand under my head and prop me up. They are all wearing face splitting grins, mardis gras masks of violent happiness. I take big gulps of water until I know it’s going to happen. I turn away and vomit into the needle cast. Two, then three times. When I finally stop, I rest upon my side, head on outstretched arm and breathe slowly. Matt begins rubbing my back and I let him.

“Geeze Bear, you’re a lightweight,” more giggling.

“Shut it Ball,” I manage to say, breathy and light, a small giggle returning.

“You guys can leave now. I’ll help her,” Matt says.

“Yeah, I bet you will,” Eric says.

Matt stops rubbing my back. He gets up and whispers something to them.

“All right, all right, all right,” everyone mutters in unison. “Night Bear,” they say, nearly in chorus and footsteps fade again. Matt is still here. He sits back down beside me and puts his hand back on my face.

“Are you gonna make it?”

“Much better,” I say, rolling onto my back. I sit up and crawl on all fours to the nearest tree and lean against it. I push into it for strength and it pushes back, just like my bag of books. Matt hands me the water and I drink, slowly this time, testing. It stays down. I look into the mouth of the bottle, the colors are inside too. I tilt my head back and take a deep pull, swallowing them all.

“So much for the Ginodka,” I say, wiping my mouth.

Matt nods. He crawls closer and leans against the tree next to me. “Strange,” he says. “Maybe it was something you ate.”

I can’t see his face now, next to mine, but his voice trails off, unconvinced. I suddenly feel weightless, a wave of euphoria creeping over me. My toes tingle and my smile grows. My head is still heavy, but much clearer. The tingling spreads, first to my stomach and then down into my thighs. I run my hands over my legs and shiver. “I feel strange,” I say, but Matt doesn’t answer. I turn and find him staring at me, his eyes narrowed, lips parted. I reach a hand out and ruffle his dirty blond hair, giggling lightly, then I hold onto the back of his neck as another wave of euphoria hits. I close my eyes, still holding on tight. When it passes, I bring my face close to his and kiss him lightly on the lips. “You are so sweet,” I whisper softly through a big smile. Then our faces crash into one another, hot air and salty skin and alcohol. I kiss him again and again, hard and deep. I don’t stop until he rolls me down onto the ground, moves on top of me and begins kissing my neck. His hands are strong over the outside of my clothes, his knee

sliding between my legs. I press into him, moving my hips. I drop my head back against the ground and look up at the moon just beyond his body, just above the trees. The swirling colors, the melting auras. The panting becomes louder. I close my eyes and let go.

It's almost noon and I have already been reading for hours. It's a slow day, waiting for destruction. I am in the backseat of the truck again, forcing myself into another world. I've barely looked up from my *Arctic Wild* and I'm finally coming to terms with its melodramatic title. I thought it was generic, relying heavily upon the word *wild* to sell. And *arctic* to make it exotic. But she's right, marketing or no marketing. It's a wild place where dreams merge with reality, if for no other reason than the extreme climate. Maybe not everyone's dreams, but the dreams I have been having lately. The dreams that heavy my head with animal rage and lust. Drive and urge. They keep me restless.

It's amazing to me just how many chapters end with the words, "Good night." The woman in my book says good night to the white frozen world and the wild wolves around her and ends the chapter. Or good night to her husband, whom I already know, thanks to the foreword, she will divorce in ten years time, and sleep comes without complication. The divorce comes later, outside the pages. This woman is not meant to be tied to one man. In this way, she is not like the wolf she studies closely. Or maybe she is, but the time will eventually come to select a new alpha male for her pack. She-wolves can do this, she says. I wonder if she feels a foreshadowing when she writes these words. A mouthful of melted icicle for hotter climates ahead. The anticipation of a fall.

When I woke this morning my world hurt. I opened my eyes to the familiar walls of my tent, lying on my side. I couldn't remember returning to my tent, lost in a haze of exhaustion and night air. There was a small white object on my wadded up sweatshirt pillow next to me. I

thought it was one of my elk teeth, that it must have fallen from my pocket, but my head was so heavy and my eyes blurred. I reached out to pick it up and realized I was naked. The night came back in a hurry, dark and stronger than memory. I touched my bare skin, rubbing the places that ached. I arched my back and felt the muscles in my legs tense. My stomach was silent and empty, my head ringing with a high pitched buzz. I could still feel him on me. I had to wash it away.

I looked at the small object again, but it was somehow different. It was pointed like a pine tree, the tip of it sharp. I suddenly knew what it was. I left that tooth right there without even touching it.

Maybe no one sleeps as much as we would all like to think.

When I left my tent there were no clouds in the sky. Now the sky is filled with castles of white and black marble, the largest just to our north and above the canyon fire. The clouds are moving quickly, towers and islands converging overhead. My windows are down, sitting here in the backseat of our parked truck once again, and I feel the wind pick up. It blows small strands of hair back from my face as I stare into it. I gasp as the first bolt of lightning jumps from cloud to ground. I count to ten, waiting for its cousin. The thunder comes, loud and rolling, echoing off the rivers and canyon walls.

I'm not supposed to want it to rain but I do. I want chaos and confusion to quiet my head. I want water to run all over me, to bathe me, to soak into the ground and run off too fast. I want it to flood and wash us right off this ridge and into the river of No Return. Into the

Salmon where life would be simple. Sink or swim. Drown or survive. Whatever you choose, nothing would be the same. Fear provides perspective. I could really use some perspective right now.

Another bolt of lightning leaps from cloud to cloud. Then another to the earth. The sound of thunder is constant, overlapping in rounds. The rest of the crew is still sitting outside watching, but when the flashes of light crack across the sky like spider webs, my crewmates scramble to their feet and begin loading into the trucks. I roll up my window just as the doors slam shut and the sky shakes so hard that small drops of water begin to fall.

The rain trickles down for a while, then stops. The ground is still dry in places, but the dust has calmed, making the rich torrents of wind almost transparent again. The clouds above us are moving fast, the bulky pile no longer towering but streaming away. We watch the cumulus animal creep off, its tail end still lashing out at the tree tops. I open my door and get out of the truck to feel the clean, crisp air. To smell the wet dirt. Slowly, the rest of the crew does too. We walk to the edge of the canyon to look for any change in circumstance.

There is nothing to see, at first. At least nothing appears different. The distant smoke is still white and grey rising into a hazy plume above. As the wind slows and the branches quiet, a tiny thread of black smoke appears separate from the main fire. It is closer. Everyone begins whispering and pointing, as if they are afraid the smoke might hear and disappear. Or grow too quickly. Tom is suddenly at my elbow. "Something's burning really hot," he says. I blush at the proximity of his body. At the insight of his words.

“And really close,” Eric appears at my other elbow. I don’t know what they know. Or what they don’t. Their faces are silent.

“Hey Captain John, come here!” Cannonball yells from behind me.

John walks over, leaving the other two overhead chatting behind him. Brian and Mark hardly look up when he leaves.

“What’s up guys?” John asks.

“What do you think that is?” Ball points at the black smoke in the canyon. John follows his finger, then removes his sunglasses and squints.

“Shit. We may get to do something today after all, boys.”

“Yes! We’re going to a fire! We’re going to a fire!” Cannonball jumps up and down, his fists in the air. Of course, everyone is listening now. Watching.

“It’s just a single tree,” I say. “Two of us could put it out.”

“That may be, Bear, but a lot of us need something to do,” John says. He turns and waves to Brian and Mark for a meeting of the minds. We are all dog piling down in there, I already know it.

“Are you ready to cut that tree down, Bear,” a voice, warm and comforting, tickles in my ear. The left side of my body floods with goose bumps, my legs quiver and I blink too slowly, trying to compose myself. Tom.

With a deep breath, I turn and face him.

“Yeah. I guess I have to be,” I look into his eyes. He holds my gaze, green everywhere around the red flush of my cheeks.

“You’ll do fine,” he touches my arm, still looking into my eyes. “We’ve all got your back.”

“Thanks,” I say and my smile threatens to swallow my consciousness.

The bosses return to peer over the edge together. We are all restless and anxious for action.

“Looks like we got ourselves a fire, girls,” Mark says.

Brian is quiet. Everyone is watching him, waiting for instruction. I am watching him, waiting. Slowly he turns to find me. “Bear, get the 460 ready. Your gonna bring that tree down.”

“Yes sir,” I look to the ground, retracing my steps back to the truck, but this time I take them much quicker, with controlled strides. If I am not careful, the inner panic I have will spill out all over me and they will know.

I open the side compartment of the truck and take the saw out. It’s ready to go. I take out armloads of sags, both oil and gas mix, and holler at everyone to come and get it. There is no way of knowing just how big the fire may get. To be on the safe side, we have to take at least five of each. Maybe another saw will come down too. Maybe Tom will take it, just in

case. The two saw teams work together, swathing a big fuel break at the front of the crew, the rest—pulaskis, then rhino's then McClouds and shovels—all elbows and assholes, falling into place behind them.

The guys drag their feet some, but come when I call. I pass them out equally, giving Beth and Amy some as well. Over their shoulders I see someone walking up the middle of the dirt road. I squint a little, to make out the slight frame. It's Sandy dressed out in her fire gear, yellow nomex shirt and green pants. Someone has given her a pack, probably with a fire shelter in it. When she sees me she waves excitedly and breaks into a light jog.

"Bear!" she hollers, "Look at me! I'm practically a firefighter!"

I give her a big smile. I'm glad to see her. Somehow, her presence makes everything more human. Less militant.

"You look great! Really hardcore," I tell her as she hugs me, her helmet going crooked. I reach up and fix it for her.

"What's the word up here today?"

"We're going in," I say with mock drama.

"I want to go."

"Better ask a boss," I nod towards John, the only boss not busy, still staring out over the edge.

She smiles big and winks at me, then walks away.

I turn back to my gear, stuff some sags in my pack and sling it over my shoulder. I snap all the straps and toss the saw on my shoulder. Chaps. I reach into the side compartment and grab mine, checking for plastic and wooden wedges and scrench, then fasten the waist belt and begin snapping all the leg straps. Finally, I am prepared for battle.

I look back at John and Sandy just in time to see her jump into the air and hug him. She must be coming too.

The crew lines out. I am second in line, behind Matt, our squadie. The tension is louder than ever as Captain John addresses us. "All right guys, we've decided to just to send just one squad down, just in case something happens up here," he says. Some groans escape, but they are quick to quiet when John raises his arm. "We will alternate, of course. The next time there is an opportunity, Mark's squad will go."

John adjusts his dark sunglasses, the big circular kind that movie stars wore in the 1980's, then continues with his speech. "Mark's squad, you will be holding up here. You will be our look outs. Your role is just as crucial, so let's all talk for a minute." John pauses, rubs his gloveless hands together, looks at the ground for a moment, dramatizing the moment, before he looks at us again and asks, "Who can tell me which watch out situations we are entering by hiking into this fire right now?"

In our fire classes we are made to memorize 10 important fire orders, never to be broken, and 18 situations that shout watch out. I have them memorized, the fire orders

anyways. If you can't repeat them on the spot, then you'll have everyone doing pushups along with you. I run them through my head by using an acronym, FIREORDER: fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first, initiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior, recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts, ensure that instructions are given and understood, obtain current information on fire status, remain in communication with crewmembers, your supervisor, and adjoining forces determine safety zones and escape routes, establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations, and retain control at all times. I could repeat them in my sleep. But the watch out situations, well, there are 18 of them and I can't seem to remember them in order. John looks up and down the row of quiet faces. I quickly avert my eyes, staring at the side of Matt's flushed cheeks, knowing he won't look me in the eye.

Matt's cheek changes from pink to red as I continue to stare. Suddenly his mouth opens, "Number 11, unburned fuel between you and the fire. Number one, fire not scouted and sized up. Number 13 on a hillside where rolling material can ignite fuel below. Number 17, terrain or fuels make escape to safety zones difficult." Matt rattles off the answers loud and clear.

"Thanks Squadie Matt," Captain John says, annoyed. "Anyone else have anything to add?"

"Number 18, you feel like taking a nap near the fire line," Cannonball adds. This is a watch out that everyone remembers because it's funny. On cue, we all giggle.

“Great Cannonball. Now as long as we can all stay awake, since we’ve been working you so damn hard, then we can stay safe,” John says with heavy sarcasm.

“Let’s go,” he says and begins walking at a ridiculously fast pace just short of running, so that Matt, along with the rest of us, have to run to catch up. I glance back over my shoulder and see the second squad peeling off to hold their ground. Tom and his saw stay behind.

We walk for fifteen minutes at most. As we near the fire, the smell of smoke becomes strong. Soon it is the actual smell of burning, deeper than just smoke, that fills our nostrils. Ahead through the trees we can see it, the top of an already dead tree is on fire. This is the kind of tree that is begging to catch on fire, like a lightning rod, its bark as dry as paper, its roots shriveled. The tree is probably dead because it was struck by lightning once before. It happens all the time. Sometimes a lightning strike catches fire in a live tree because it has been weakened by bark beetles. These parasitical beetles burrow tiny tunnels, eating hieroglyphics beneath the skin of the tree. When the bark begins to peel away, small human stick figures, swirling suns and ferocious lions are revealed.

“Eric! You swamp for Bear,” John hollers. There is fire in the top of the tree, but the strike exited low to the ground. Pine needles and shrubs are burning too, maybe a quarter of an acre. It’s not much, but my heart is pounding in my head, blood racing too fast again. We march to the upper corner of the fire and without even breaking stride, I pull the cord of my saw and the monster roars to life. Using my legs, I get really low to the ground and swath a four foot lane around the fire, taking out all bushes and small trees. Eric is behind me grabbing the

debris, quickly checking to make sure it's not smoking, and dragging it far out of our path. If any of the branches are on fire, they go back into the black and already burned area.

As I round the bottom edge of the fire, my arms are already throbbing and the sweat is so complete I can feel little pools filling inside of my gloves, creating leather swamps. My sweat runs into my eyes, beneath my safety sunglasses. The crew is a good ten paces behind me so I have a few moments to pause and wipe my arm across my forehead. I glance back to the top. Our fuel break is not huge, but it is even and clean. Just above me and to the left of us, Beth is standing lookout. She has her eyes focused on the top of the dead tree, watching for any sign of motion. The top fourth of the tree is twisted, engulfed in flame, and tottering precariously. It's hanging onto the rest of the tree by an invisible bond. If the top piece gives, Beth will scream her brains out for everyone to move and with a little luck we will all hear her over the saw.

At the upper right hand of the fire, Sandy is standing with her camera snapping pictures of everything. She zooms in on me and I return my eyes to the saw, back to my work, but not before John has time to get in my face.

"Come on! Move it! Are you already tired? Are you quitting?" he bellows. I don't look at him. It's part of the game. Everyone knows it. I continue cutting, channeling my anger into the machine. This is what he wants. Negative reinforcement is still reinforcement. I try to focus on my breathing, as the 460 whines loudly, its teeth tearing apart everything in its path.

At the top of the fire, I swing past Sandy, ignoring her loud shouts of encouragement and the reflective glass of her camera lens. Sandy is loud. Louder than everything. Her cheerleading nearly makes me laugh, as she shouts, “Go get it Bear!” and “Tear it up, girl!” I smile, nearly forgetting the mounting pain in my lower back. This saw is just too damn heavy.

When I reach the top left side of the fire, the circle is complete. I step away from the line, a few steps back to survey my work. So far, everything looks picture perfect. I reach down to the saw and turn it off.

The one good thing about running a saw is the downtime. If you are good, and depending upon the fuel type, you can finish well ahead of the rest of the crew and take time to catch your breath and massage out the cramps in your limbs, careful not to grimace or show any sign of complaint in your face. In a few moments, John is at my side.

“Are you ready to drop this sucker?” He asks.

I stare up into the top of the tree. The wind picks up a little and the fire swirls more quickly, burning hotter. The top of the tree bounces, threatening to give.

“We have plenty of lookouts for you. And Eric will stand right next to you and hold onto your belt. He’ll pull hard if you need to get out. If the top is coming down,” John says. Eric is carrying the last of the cut brush away from the fire, as John waves him over to us.

I hate this situation. It's a dangerous one, but it doesn't matter. If the main fire dies out before it gets here, thousands of trees can be saved, an endless habitat for hundreds of species, Sandy reminds us. And the wolves.

"I'm ready."

The rest of the crew is finishing, moving to the outside of the fire. I pick up my saw and walk to the center, of the fire, just below the tree, to size it up. John follows me, talking in my ear the whole time about pie cuts and back cuts and angles cut too deep. I reach into the pockets of my chaps and pull out three wedges of different sizes and toss them onto the ground. Eric brings me the pounding axe, something that all swampers carry, and I toss it on the ground next to the wedges. I stare into the tree and walk around it, nearly blind with nervousness. I pick up the axe and tap the tree with it, just hard enough to make a loud thump. The thump is deep enough to cut the tree down. If the thump echoes back hollow, then you know you are looking at a rotten tree that's going to fall apart on you as soon as you start cutting. This tree may be dead, but its grains are still complete. Its body still heavy with the memory of life.

"Everyone needs to be a trees length away, at least!" John turns and shouts at the other crewmembers. Actually, the rule is two tree lengths, but as long as everyone is upslope, away from the sure downward lean in the tree, they are relatively safe. Plus, no one here is going to tell because they all want to watch.

As if anticipating a climactic moment, the wind kicks up again. I look up one last time, then trust my fate to Eric and the other nine people around me. I pull the cord, give it some gas, then begin my face cut.

Everything continues smoothly, despite the violent tremble in my hands, as I set down the saw, pick up the ax and use the flat side of it to hammer the triangular, pie shaped piece of wood out. I pick up the saw again and move to the back side of the tree to make my final cut. I look up again. Nothing has changed. I reposition and Eric holds on one more time.

I begin cutting and in seconds, I feel the tree shake. Somehow, even before Eric can tug at my belt, I can hear Sandy screaming, through my earplugs, above the whine of the saw. I am already running when Eric tugs at my belt. I drop the saw and run faster, just like Sandy tells me. Just like her yellow brown eyes scream, wild and full of motion. Full of urgent secrets. Her gaze nearly lifts me off the ground, through the air and into safety. The men are yelling now too, but it's too late. Eric and I are out of harm's way, without the saw. My saw. I left it. I turn just in time to see the top half of the tree hammer it into the earth. No bounce. No give. Nothing bends. Two tons of wood against 30 lbs of synthetics. I already know who wins. Nature always wins.

"Bear, are you ok?" Matt is at my side, staring into my eyes.

"Let's get some dirt on that open flame!" John hollers. I am still too dazed to speak. I look back at the saw, a small piece of the blade jutting out beneath pale, shattered bark. The rest of the crew jumps in to put it out. The little moisture left over from the rain makes quick

work of it, but not before the plastic and metal, trapped beneath the wood, begin to burn too. Plastic changes shape quickly.

“My saw,” I say, dumbfounded. “Brian is going to kill me.”

“No he won’t. John and I will tell him what happened. Won’t we John?” Matt looks at John, who is looking at his feet.

“Of course. It’s all right Bear. The most important thing is that you’re safe.” John lifts his helmet from his head, wipes the wet strands of brown and grey hair across his bald spot, and sighs. He puts the hat back and walks closer to the scene of disaster, mumbling beneath his breath. “It’s just a piece of equipment. We can replace it.”

“Should we try to get it out, John?”

“Maybe tomorrow. If the rest of the fire is still not here, we will need to check it.”

We gather up our gear and begin our hike out, the wind already slowing enough to let us walk upright. My mind is heavy with exhaustion and the after effects of adrenaline. Without the saw, I should float up the side of this hill. But I am heavy. I am not really mad at myself, because I did everything right. Almost. But I never should have put the saw down. Now, without a saw, I will have to do something else. It feels a little bit like having an award or an honorary medal stripped from your uniform. Torn away without regards to the fabric.

Back at the top, as we all catch our breath, the others circle up for a progress report. Before anyone can say anything I blurt it out. “I lost my saw.”

“You lost your saw?” Brian asks, echoing me.

“The top, a huge widow maker, came down and I ran and it landed on my saw.”

Brian is silent for a moment. Everyone is. Finally he nods, walks over to John, puts his arm around him. “Let’s talk,” he says, and the two walk off together. Well, that wasn’t so bad. Mark tells us to break it down and rehab our tools. I stare out into the canyon for some time, unsure of what to do with myself.

“Try not to worry Bear. I’m glad you dropped that stupid saw,” Tom’s hand is on my shoulder. I look at him and try to smile.

“It probably happened for a reason,” he adds.

“Yeah. Because I wasn’t strong enough or fast enough to carry me and the saw out of there. I ditched it.”

“Well, I’m glad you were smart enough to choose yourself over the saw, that lifeless hunk of scrap metal.” He smiles big and hugs me. He hugs me close and tight. I worry about the eyes around us, the others watching, then let it go. The embrace is complete. We linger for a moment, then we walk back to the trucks together.

“You’ll get it next time, just try to relax. Get your book out,” he says, then he leaves me to help the others. I breathe deep, picking up my book and opening it. Suddenly a wave of exhaustion overwhelms me. I set the book back down and close my eyes, focusing only on the pattern of my breath.

It's that time in the trip, thanks to my near miss, to tell survival stories again. The stories multiply throughout our dinner and into the night, as the boys are allowed to build a camp fire, thanks to the light rain in the afternoon. It's strange, the way we attempt to harness the elements. Put a fire out here. Start a fire over there. It barely makes sense.

When I open the door of my tent, I freeze in my tracks. The wolf tooth is still on top of my pillow. I stare at it, waiting for it to explain itself. The air is very still. I listen, but no answer comes. I crawl inside and pick it up. It's different than the ivory, much smaller, practically weightless and bright white. I hold it to my mouth and run it across my lips, taking in the coolness of it. It's smoother than the ivory and just as harmless, its soft white enamel reeking of moonlight and the cold night air. I close my eyes and remember the dark, damp earth of the den all around me until I can taste it. I breathe deep, thinking of the rain, then place the tooth in my pocket, listening to it clink off the ivory. Predator and prey. Now I have both.

Outside I listen to horseplay and laughter. Their stories have transformed, with the waning of the sun, from memories of battle to incredulous tales of the paranormal. Ghost stories don't bother me during the day but at night, well, when you have to sleep alone after a long walk back to your tent, the shadows seem to stretch too tall, too grand for mere humanity. The energy changes in the dark. The photosynthesis stops and the air feel dead.

I bring my book and my headlamp to sit near the outskirts of the circle. This time the circle is big. Most of the crew is here. I am drawn to the fire, like everyone else, but try to keep my distance from debate. This never works but I keep trying.

“Hey Bear! Wanna hear some stories from back on the res?” Scottie asks.

“No. I’m reading.”

“But they’re true stories! The best kind!”

I ignore him so he shines his own headlight on the cover of my book, noticing the animal pictures. “Sure you do. They’re about wolves. Just like your book. Wolves on the res. Near that famous canyon in Arizona.”

“The Grand Canyon, you dumb ass?” Ball says.

“No, no. The French one with all of the smooth rocks and round caves.”

“Canyon de’ Chelly?” I ask.

“Yeah, that’s it! I grew up there, you know. Near Kayenta. Before we moved to Reno.”

“Really? Cool. But there are no wolves in Arizona. I don’t care what you say.”

“Yes there are! Or there were, many years ago. They were killed off before I was born. And my cousin told me that they already brought them back to the Apaches down south.”

“Whatever.”

“No, seriously. My aunt was married to one.”

“Ha, ha. I’ve heard this story a hundred times already! Your uncle was a skinwalker, right?”

“No. He was a shape shifter.”

“Same difference!”

“No it’s not.”

“Did he kill your aunt too?”

“No. He killed my other uncle, and then he disappeared.”

“Perfect. Seriously, I heard the same story from all the Navajo’s I worked with before you. No offense but it’s not a true story! Isn’t he confined to the reservation and only allowed to mess with Indians anyways?”

“Nope. He’s old. Been a shape shifter for hundreds of years.” Scottie says, without batting an eye. “He can travel off the reservation and he can curse anyone he wants.”

“What about the Indians that live here, in these mountains?” Eric butts in, trying to make the lore more local. “Do they have skinwalkers and shape shifters?”

“Only the Navajo. The Hopi and Apache know and fear them. But these people here wouldn’t know what to do with them,” Scottie says, completely sure of himself.

I sigh and put down my book. "All right Scottie, tell us your stories. I can hardly wait to see if it sounds just like the last one I heard."

"It's about baby's bones and animal skin. Smoke and fire and ash."

"Of course it is."

"I can tell you the story, but I can't tell you any names. Especially not at night."

"Get on with it Scottie," I say, and lean back against a big rock. The rock is familiar and forms to me. I roll to the side of it, curling into a ball, to listen to the balance of good and evil.

I am soon drifting in and out of sleep, listening to Scottie talk and the other boys react. I am the first to leave the story circle. I can see my tent in the shadows. I listen to the door flapping loudly in the breeze. I can't recall Scottie's entire story, which parts were a dream and which parts were real words. Images of wild human animals knock at my peripheral and whispers of *yendalooshi* tickle my ears. I can't be spooked. I have too much on my mind. And I am dead tired. I sit down and kick off my boots, in the doorway of my tent, determined to sleep well tonight. Determined not to dream. I have to meditate and breathe without panting. I lie down and search for images to exhaust my mind with.

I notice the stars are nearly lost above me, out the door of my tent, the canopy of the moon so bright it shades them. I want to write about them. To capture the moment. I reach into my backpack and take out my pen and small book and begin scribbling. Writing fast, encircling letters with patterns of leafy vines, knowing I will return to these page with color in

mind. I write my thoughts. It's been too long since I've let them out and they flow like a river. I want to write about the road, too. Gentle reminders to my soul. Motion is natural. Stasis is not.

I write for some time, then stop, staring back at the sky, watching the clouds race across the face of the moon without hesitation, echoing my needs. I feel moisture in the air. It makes mud of the dirt on my skin, on my lips until I can taste it. I can always taste the dirt here, but it is different at night, beneath the moonlight and a coming storm. Different then daytime. I listen to the sound of soil and tiny rocks move across my lips as I lick them and imagine I am caught in a rip tide, the sky racing faster above me.

Sometimes the clouds move so fast that I feel still. So still that time is moving around me, parting like gentle channels about my hull. I dig my feet into the ground, standing firm because this is my place. Upon solid land and no matter how intoxicating the moon, how strong the tidal bulge, I need ground beneath me. All around me rising into celestial peaks, dropping into deep into dry desert valleys. Collecting sun, moon, rain, wind and stars, weathered and molded with time.

I write again, for a while, but my words begin to twist back upon themselves, expressing old ideas in new arrangements. New collections of quiet sound. I tire of the cycle, put my pen back in my bag and close the door of my tent completely. I need time out of the elements or my dreams will keep me wandering, hunting and stalking some invisible prey. I crawl back in my bag and close my eyes to sleep. I am relaxed. My head is heavy. I drift with the memory of clouds, slowly, back into my dreams. I sleep and the women come to me on all fours. The

women from the forest. They run into me, lunging upon four legs and reaching for my heart. I jump with them and we roll into a pile of silent laughter and playtime. We roll to the bottom of a deep ravine, then begin running again, all of us yipping and yapping. I can make out the dark landscape, always with a faint glow in the back, creeping between the thin veils of my eyelids. The moon. We are running towards the moon. We leap for it, catching it in our teeth, and my wolf friends turn into witches and fly away, leaving me. I sit back all alone in a field of tiny violets, watching them leave. I relax deeply into the rough stems around me, the light petals brushing my cheeks and lips, and close my eyes. I burrow deep into the purple mountainside and sleep beneath the earth.

This is the day. I can feel it. Everyone can feel it. The smoke is everywhere, even in base camp, and the women in the breakfast line look anxiously at our large plates of food, as if we should skip the ritual and address the fire this instant. The woman with the spider bite is back again, but this time she is handing out lunches. Today she is wearing a green shirt with Indian teepees and Buffalo on it. She looks directly into my eyes and hands me a lunch. "Have a great day," she says. I smile, nearly running away and my dreams are back, sharp and overwhelming. I try to outpace them, thinking about work. I focus on the smoke and allow it to distract me.

It is a good day for something to happen. The more idle the days here the more vivid my nights. My dreams. I can't control them. I've stopped trying. And the running and panting is exhausting me. I shake the dream dust from my head again and climb into the back of the truck. It's been many days since I've driven, but strangely nobody bothers me about it. Matt is driving. I climb into the seat behind him because it is the only one left. No one is talking yet. The day is quiet. I lean close to my door, my head against the window, to stay out of the reflection of the rear view mirror. I still cannot look him in the eye.

The overlook at the top of the hill is completely smoked in. It is impossible to see anything. We get out of the trucks and I imagine my saw melting into a plastic and wooden sculpture, yin and yang, right on the slope where I left it. We ought to consider retrieving it. Some hippy in some mountain town would probably make a coffee table out of it. Until yesterday, I thought Sandy might have been one of them. But she is different today. More like

one of us. A little tougher. Maybe a little more real. Definitely dirtier and smellier, after the hike out. And my visions. She runs with me in my dreams.

Outside the smoke burns my eyes and lungs. I squint, but cannot stop the tears. I wipe my eyes but it's useless. I am tempted to give into the moisture. To let the tears flow, washing me from the mountain, extinguishing the fire below in great torrents of salty tidal waves and mudslides. But I don't. I don't even think I could.

"Bear, hurry up. You're gonna get us in trouble!" Cannonball moves me aside and opens the gear compartment. I can't see and my nose is running, but I keep moving. I shake myself hard, walk to the back of the truck, place one finger over my left nostril and blow. Then I switch nostrils and blow again. I wipe my face with the cleanest part of my yellow shirt sleeve and put on my sunglasses. I almost forgot this part of the job, when thick smoke gets into everything and turns it black.

We gear up and line out, all of us, across the edge of the overlook. Staring out again, like so many days past, the wind picks up and blows the heat into our faces. The smoke lifts above us, swirling into the trees and straight up into the sky. We can see the fire now, clear as a line of cavalry. The main fire is still a hundred yards out, with a few single trees igniting in the forefront, trumpet buglers leading the way.

"Mark, keep an eye on the backside of the ridge. We don't need a fire coming at us from all sides," Brian says. He sighs and walks up next to our line. "All that's left now is to watch and wait."

The fire is moving fast but the line of trees below is broken by several feet of dirt and rock, so that the closest trees are still a stone's throw from our feet. The bosses are hoping this break in fuel, along with the break of the road, will keep the fire from blowing over us and down into the opposite, southern canyon. Or throwing embers over us, igniting new fire down below to run back at us. If this were to happen, if the south canyon burned too, we wouldn't have much time. South facing aspects get the most sun. The fuels are always drier and preheated. Fires consume the fastest there.

"Enjoy the show kids," John says, as he leans on his tool and crosses one boot over the other. The bosses don't seem worried. All of this feels like a simple matter of precaution. John really does not seem worried, his mind probably drifting back to the days of orange and red gel inserts and track lighting. The canyon in front of us is like a stage, with the only seats high up in the loft. High upon this overlook.

As the fire gets closer, the wind blows even harder. A chorus of crackling and sizzling rises above the wind like summertime cicadas. Then the buzzing gets louder, like an angry swarm of killer bees. Sticks are crunching and breaking sharply, pine cones exploding. A strange song comes into my head and I can't stop the lyrics. *Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.* The sweet melody is familiar and dark, comical in the face of disaster. I fight the urge to sing out loud. To laugh hysterically as we watch the forest disappear.

We hear a loud snapping sound, followed by hissing. One of the trees just below us is on fire, its arms and needles swallowed by flames in less than thirty seconds. Moments later, more trees around it ignite until the last one disappears into the flames.

The fire bumps up against the north face of the canyon hard and hot. We hold onto our helmets, feel the heat sink deep into our exposed cheeks and our gloved hands shielding our eyes. Radiant heat washes over us. I close my eyes, but the glowing light, the glare is still there. The light hovers in front of me, in the darkness of my mind, until it becomes a faint glow. I want to crawl towards it, to see through it like the light in the shadows beneath the cabin or the faint, welcoming flicker in Claire's window.

I open my eyes again. The fire is already backing down, taking the heat with it. As it folds back into itself the wind shifts and the smoke fills back in around us. Mark emerges from the grey, his sunglasses on and black smeared above his mouth.

"Nice mustache," I tell him.

"This smoke is turning everything black. I can feel it inside. I've got the black lung for sure," Mark says, faking a deep cough. We all laugh a little, out of empathy, out of nervousness. Then he walks over to Brian and John. "Nothing going on down the backside. Of course, I can't see a damn thing now, but ten minutes ago I could and there was nothing."

"Good," Brian says. "Get back up there and check again with the next wind shift."

Mark nods, his freckles and red features contrasting sharply with the black smudges on his face. He turns and disappears back into the haze.

As if on command, the wind shifts again, pulling the smoke back into the canyon like the flush of an open current. I open my eyes wide beneath my glasses and look for Mark. He's at his truck again, climbing onto the back and staring out into the southern canyon.

"Seems kind of silly," I mumble.

"What'd you say?" John asks, untangling his feet and standing up straight. He walks right up to me and leans into my face. "Do you realize how important a lookout is on any fire?"

I can't really take him seriously, but I nod and apologize. "Sorry. I get it."

"I just don't know if you do. You almost got hurt bad yesterday, do you remember that?"

"Of course. That was different though." I wish he practiced what he preached.

"How! There's fire all around us! How is it different? What if the fire burned us over up here? Do you know how god damned hot it would be up here, on this ridge, with the heat and smoke coming at us from all sides? With the super heated gasses trying to burn you from the inside out?" John is hollering at me.

"Yeah. Yes, sir. I mean no, I can't really imagine. It sounds terrible," I manage to say.

"Then what?" John leans into me.

"It's just that everyone seems so relaxed. It feels like we are going through the motions." My final words escape before I can stop them and I know I've gone too far.

“Going through the motions? Is that what you are doing Bear?” John is not backing down. “I think we better go through some real motions, just to make sure you are all ready for action. Everybody, drop and give me fifty.”

I hear everyone groan around me, cussing beneath their breath. We begin to take our gear off, but John isn't done, “Leave your gear on! Tools in hand, too!”

We all drop to the ground and begin pushing. One to fifty, perfect form, then we slowly climb back to our feet.

“One more time!” John hollers. We drop back down. Thirty more pushups and I have to start using my knees. As I get up again, John hollers, “Again Bear! None of this knee bull shit! Do you want special treatment? Do you think you deserve it?”

“That's enough John,” Brian comes over. “I think she gets it.” We make eye contact and I struggle not to glare, my anger consuming. I feel the camera back. Everyone is watching me. My face heats up, hotter than the canyon fire.

“Pushups are good,” Brian continues. “We should all be doing them. Let's do fifty every hour, on the hour, just to stay awake.”

“Hey! Hey!” Mark starts hollering from the truck top. “I see a smoke! I can't believe it! There's a small grey smoke out there!”

Mark is jumping up and down on top of the crew truck and pointing into the southern canyon.

“Its way the hell out there! Boy that wind must have kicked up really hard!”

Brian and John rush to join Mark. I slowly gather myself back up again, my pride damaged, but everyone around me has stopped grumbling. We wait to be called over too.

The two men walk quickly to the southern edge of the overlook. “Come up and check it out,” Mark says.

“Don’t have too,” Brian says. “We can see it from down here.”

“Come on guys. Come have a look too,” John says.

John is playing the nice guy, sucking up after losing his cool and scolding us like children. Scolding me. We all begin jogging and join the Captains and Crew Boss. John extends an arm and a long, hairy finger. He’s still not even wearing his gloves, the hypocrite. “Right there,” he says. We all follow his finger, from flesh out into the open air. “See it?”

I stare hard at first, looking too close below. Finally I see it, thin and grey coming out of a distant Ponderosa stand, next to a meadow, at least a couple of miles out. “I see it,” I say.

“What did I tell you Bear? There’s your going through the motions. Anything can happen out here, right guys?”

“Yes sir,” the group answers collectively, their voices full of new spirit and amazement. It really is amazing, that a burning ember could travel that far.

“Well, let’s get ready to go. The longer we wait, the hotter it’s gonna get. And the hotter it gets, the bigger that suckers gonna grow,” Brian says. He glances at his watch. “It’s already noon. We will be working this thing through peak burn time. Gear up. Bear, I want you on the saw.”

“But it’s gone,” I remind him.

“Take Tom’s. Carry it. He can swamp for you.”

This might be punishment or a second chance to shine. Either way, I am nervous. I’ve already sacrificed one saw to the flames, what will I do to the next one? To Tom’s saw. I look up at him. He’s already walking back to his truck. “Yes sir,” is all I can manage. I force myself not to look for Matt. Not to test his eyes for jealousy.

We line out again, the entire crew this time, and drop into the southern canyon.

“Maybe we’ll get to see those cabins after all,” Scottie speaks up, a few positions behind me. I glance over my shoulder at Tom. He is staring right at me. He smiles faintly. I smile too, then face forward again. I am carrying the chainsaw, but downhill isn’t so bad. It’s the uphill that really makes my lungs scream and my knees shake. We hike through the area we have already gridded a thousand times, side hilling towards the smoke, which is already twice as big and twice as dark. The terrain here is steep, the trees smaller. It’s the first time I’ve been here by day. I realize that the southern slope, with all its sunshine, is dry as a bone. It might as well be an entirely different forest.

As the dust swirls around our boots, the forest feels familiar. I wonder if we are near the path that Tom and I took. I wonder if the smoke is close to the cabins. It is impossible to know. I only have a sensation. A feeling. The outline of a forest filled with dark images and shadows from the night. And the cabins. As we walk, I imagine we are on the same path, with each tree shape more memorable than the last, with its long branches and rough bark. We are leaving the Douglas fir and Lodge pole Pine trees behind. Ponderosa, with their long, straight needles, rub up against us. The sensation is familiar. But there are no signs of our footsteps. No tracks. We must be on a new route.

As I walk, Coleridge's poem returns, filling my head with meter.

*But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted*

*Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover !*

*A savage place ! as holy and enchanted*

*As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted*

*By woman wailing for her demon-lover !*

I involuntarily reach for my pockets, thinking about the book but of course, it is not there. I am not wearing my sweatshirt with the center pocket in the front. I don't have any books with me. This journey down into the southern canyon is different. By day, it is more like marching off to war, the poem resounding like a battle chant.

*Five miles meandering with a mazy motion*

*Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,*

*Then reached the caverns measureless to man,*

*And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean :*

*And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far*

*Ancestral voices prophesying war !*

Our feet fall in unison. No one else knows we are marching to poetry deep inside a metaphor. There are eighteen different sound tracks to this march, each playing silently within our heads. Two soldiers, Crewboss Brian and Amy, stayed behind as lookouts for both fires, both northern and southern, to keep us informed from above. Their minds will move at a different pace. But the rest of us, poetry and lyrics and memories unravel as our feet fall in unison, bringing us closer to the head of the flames.

It is impossible to tell where we are. The forest becomes thicker as we descend the steep slope. This area probably has not seen fire activity in years. And the rain in this canyon has been sparse. The trees around us are soon mixed with sagebrush and bearberry. Over John's shoulder just ahead of me, I can see our options for open space dwindling. He circles back up the hill and around the area. We are quickly closing in on the smoke, gravity pulling us downhill and the atmosphere urging the fire up.

On the ground around me I notice small black shards of broken rock. It is Obsidian, invisible by night, but full of light magic and reflection by day. The small pieces signify Native American heritage here. If Kalie were here she would stop and pick each piece up, analyzing its origin, hoping to find one solid arrowhead out of the whole mess of broken pieces.

The piles of obsidian begin to grow. I glance back over my shoulder at Tom to see if he's noticed. Again, he is looking at me. I notice something shiny in his left hand, dark and glossy, contrasting sharply with his chalky white glove. He winks at me. Of course he's paying attention. I reach down and scoop up a shard of obsidian too and put it in my pocket with the elk and wolf teeth. My collection of artifacts, both human and animal, clink together, the fine line between worlds blurring.

When I look back up, the lines in the trees around me are moving. The bark is changing shape, the lines moving so quickly, I nearly lose my balance. The patterns in the bark rearrange themselves, shuffling quickly like computer data on a screen until they slow again, with new shapes forming. Faces with tall foreheads and large noses peer out from everywhere, their wooden eyes watching me walk until I reach back into my pocket, take the obsidian out, and return it to the forest floor. As quick as they came, the faces melt away.

I look back at Tom again. He is still watching me.

"You didn't like that piece?" He asks.

"Um. Not exactly." I face forward again, laughing at myself. Then I bend down and pick up another, even nicer shard. I look at the trees, waiting for the faces to return, but nothing happens. I keep my eyes focused on the back of John's shirt in front of me.

Finally we break through the pine trees and into a meadow. We must be close to the cabins. I can't see them, but I can feel them in the air, the coolness of their rock walls, the strong animal musk flowing beneath them. On the far side of the meadow, the fire is burning

through the brush and pine needles, threatening the trunks of many tall trees. At the center, another snag is fully engulfed in flame. Although it is not huge, this spot fire is much bigger than the one yesterday. John grabs my arm, "Come with me," he says, nodding towards the blaze, and we are already hiking towards it, the rest of the crew staying behind in the meadow.

The fire is at the bottom of the canyon and, fortunately for us, the meadow separates it from the base of the slope that we just came down. As John and I approach the fire, another large ponderosa ignites. We keep our distance, the fire on the ground kicking around in circles. "Help me size it up," he says, and we begin to walk around it.

The fire is probably at least two full acres, with five or six pine trees burning and a lot of brush. Small patches of duff and grass swirl into orange and black tongues. We hike quickly back to the crew, meeting with Mark who is bringing up the rear, first.

"Looks good. Two acres, routine, you be our look out here," John manages to huff and puff out the words, then he takes me back to the front. He turns and hollers at the crew, "Anchor into this meadow and anchor good! Cut it off quick! Fuel break four solid feet! If things go bad, this is our safety zone! Mark will be our look out. Safety first!" He turns and waves us all on. Just before we hit the smoke and flames, I yank my cord and the saw rages louder than the fire in front of us. I am back in the zone, bending and sweeping low, cutting out the bush. Tom works quickly, removing the brush piles, and our pace is steady. From the corner of my eye I can see the flames licking up the side of another Ponderosa ahead of me. I cut the line further away from the tree to keep the fire from falling outside the circle of black. The fire is growing quickly now, spreading sideways along the length of the meadow. I cut

faster, hoping to head it off, but another tree ahead of me catches too, its trunk consumed by the elements. There is nothing to do but cut the circle bigger.

Tom is working so fast he nearly out paces me, pushing me faster. Behind us all the chopping, digging and scraping widens the fuel break. Just as promised, a four foot ribbon of pure soil, rich and dark as coffee grounds, unravels behind us. Finally, we hook the fire and close the circle. Without water most of the burning trees will have to come down. Particularly the dead snag in the middle. I set my saw down, take a deep drink from my water jug, and wait for Tom to catch up with me.

When he's finished, he stands next to me, drinking water too. We quietly wait for the rest of the crew to finish. We can't bring down trees until everyone is out of the way.

"Bear, do you want me to cut down the snag? Because I will if you don't feel comfortable. Fuck everybody else." He says this without looking at me. We both look to the center of the fire where the white bark of the dead tree glistens with orange animation.

"I will fall it. Will you help me buck it up?" I ask. The falling part is more strategically challenging, but bucking up the tree into several much smaller round sections is exhausting. Tom, taller and stronger than me, will do it well. He will take up the saw when I get too tired.

When the rest of the crew finishes cutting line, we all break to give the fire time to burn more fuel inside the circle. Soon we begin churning up the soil and flames from the outside in, pressing our way to the center. The dirt smothers the flames, depriving it of oxygen. Tom and I

walk through, cutting up logs and large branches on the forest floor and rubbing them into the dirt.

When the sun is nearly down and the flames have cooled, Tom waves to John and John calls the crew out of the fire. It's time to bring down the big tree. I approach it head on, walking close to its base, then stare up at the top. Fire is still burning from inside the tree, a sign that some or part of the tree is hollow. I watch as the dead tree blazes bright against the darkening sky, smoke billowing out like a tobacco pipe. I walk around the base of the tree, searching for the lean in it, the angle to lay it across the ground but I can't find it. I walk around and around, tripping over roots and stumbling over rocks. I turn to find Tom, to ground myself, but he isn't there. I reach out and touch the tree, avoiding the flames, and close my eyes. Darkness comes fast and I am running, panting loudly, the smells of mold and wet dirt overwhelming. I am in a dark forest. The sound of sand crunching around me and aqua blue light tells me I am not alone. I am running with a pack. I run faster, breathe harder. I can see the outline of the cabins in the distance. The wolves follow me over the hills, through the bushes, and straight down into the earth, deep beneath the old building, and into the den. Our bodies relax into the darkness, the blue light fading. We curl into one another, naturally. I close my eyes, longing for sleep, but the light grows bright again, and my hands begin to throb.

When I open my eyes, the tree has grown hot beneath my touch. I look around again and everyone is waiting. Tom nods at me. I step back and walk around the tree one more time, barely looking up. I know where to put it because I know where it wants to go. I pick up my saw, yank the cord and I cut down the dead tree. We cut it up into smaller sections, scraping it

with our tools and smothering it with dirt until there is no fire left and the smoke disappears above us, drifting into the night sky.

We work on the fire late into the night, cutting and dragging, digging and smothering. We bone pile all the pieces of wood into several piles, allowing them to burn hotter and faster. Tom and I working together, hand over hand, seamlessly. It's a routine we know so well. As the large flames shrink and wither without fuel or oxygen to feed them, a nearly full moon mounts overhead. The night is bright without clouds, the shadows long. From the dark around us I see quick flashes of light. I can't hear or see her, but I know Sandy is out there capturing our actions of habit, frame by frame, infusing them with thought and purpose. No one else seems to notice. My awareness heightens and I can feel the forest breathing again, in sync with the rise and fall of my chest. Adrenaline fades while the vividness of night grows.

We finally break to bed down at two in the morning, ashes from the burning trees still raining down upon us. We make our way to the near edge of the meadow, each firefighter feeling the ground for flatness, kicking rocks out of the way. We each keep a tightly folded and wrapped thermal space blanket inside of our packs. We drop all our gear and dig for these, not needing headlamps for the light of the fire and the moon above. The sound of crinkling foil erupts as we shake the blankets free of their plastic wrap. These thin, map-like barriers will be our beds tonight. We lie down, curling our bodies around our bags, using them as pillows.

I turn over onto my back and stare up at the sky, feeling the weight of my body against the clumps of terse grass beneath me. My limbs are tired and heavy, my hands prickling with pins, numb and stiff with exhaustion. I feel the gravity of the earth pulling my body down, demanding tranquility. The rustling of the crew lasts only moments and then quiet overwhelms. My eyes move slowly across the familiar bodies resting upon silver blankets. We all lean closer to the center. Closer to one another. We are tired, but strong. I smile and close my eyes, giving into a dead sleep.

I am wakened at dawn by gentle nudging, cold and wet, then more persistent. A flicker of fur and tail cross my face as I open my eyes. I sit up and look around me. I see, with the faint grey rays of dawn, a stand of aspen next to a meadow. Sandy is beneath the trees. She looks directly at me, her long black hair blowing in the breeze. I rise to follow, picking my way between sleeping bodies. Someone is watching me. I turn back and look at the ground beside me. Tom is laying there, his face glowing with warmth and pride. The reflection of the nighttime fire still burns there. His bright green eyes flicker through a haze of sleep and he winks at me, then closes his eyes again, his smile growing. I smile too, then continue walking, this time effortlessly through the strewn out, sleeping bodies, my eyes returning to the trees and the beginning light in the sky above.

Sandy already has her arms stretched high reaching for the lowest limbs, her feet poised to scale its slender trunk. I listen for the sound of footsteps behind me, but the wind picks up and I hear nothing but a howl ripping through the trees. I touch the collection of teeth and obsidian in my pocket and breathe the morning in deep. The smell of dew and smoldering wood is thick. The smoke makes my eyes water and the ground moves as I walk across it, blending like wet paint on canvas. I focus on the tree, Sandy's tree, and feel my way to its base.

The bark is just how I remembered, thin and cool, pale as the underside of my arm. I grab hold of the trunk and shimmy my way to the lowest branch, grabbing hold and pulling myself up. I move into the branches next to Sandy, listening to my heart pound in my head, feeling lighter than air. I squeeze myself into the tightest branches surrounding her, getting

closer, until I can see her face. See her yellow brown eyes, but she is staring out across the meadow. I follow her gaze. A grey wolf is sitting on the far side of the meadow, all alone and watching. It tilts its muzzle up, sniffs the air, and is gone.

Sandy takes my hand and squeezes it. The sun rises through the trees, rays shattering through canopies, making the sky pink. She smiles, then let's go. In my hand is another wolf tooth, this one large and pointed. I turn the tooth in my hand, she kisses my cheek, then she lets her body slip slowly through the branches, carefully lowering herself. She scales down the tree, smooth and fluid like a snake. I watch the top of her head descend in one motion, her feet swinging beneath her, planting firmly upon the ground. Without looking back at me, she begins walking towards the meadow. On the other side of it, she runs. I watch her for a few moments, her features fading, and remember that sound. The sensation of her. Her vibrations. The enamel and sharp edges. I have a small collection now, a complete set of incisors for both prey and predator. A gentle wind stirs the aspen leaves and my hair. The crisp leaves make a melody. They urge me to stay and watch as the sun slowly lifts itself above the ground, big and round and brilliant, forcing me to squint, then my eyelids drop like lace curtains, the new day still seeping through. The heaviness in my limbs anchors me fast. Sleep returns.

When I open my eyes again, the sun is much higher. Someone is tugging at my foot. "Bear! Wake up! What are you doing?" It's Matt. I am still in the aspen tree and Matt is climbing up too, into my tree with one of the silver space blankets in his hands. He struggles to hold on to the material and pull himself higher. The branches snag him, tugging at the silver

blanket and his fire clothes, scratching the skin on his arms and face. Matt is not much of a tree climber.

“What are you doing, Matt?” I ask him, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

“Me!” He shouts in a whisper. “Everyone is waking up and you’re out here naked in a tree and you ask me what I am doing? What is wrong with you?”

I look down around me and notice I have nothing on again, my clothes lying in a pile at the base of the aspen. I gasp out loud and cover my mouth.

“I would use that hand to cover more than just your mouth, Bear.”

His eyes are furious and confused and the whole scene makes me laugh. I begin giggling, quietly at first, then louder as I lower myself effortlessly through the branches. I am nearly hysterical when I drop to the ground with a loud thud. I sit down, still laughing, and begin squirming back into my clothes. Matt jumps down too and covers me with the tarp.

“You’re out of your mind,” he says, out of breath.

“I know,” I say, hugging his legs right in front of me.

“Keep dressing,” he yells at me, his voice softening some.

I finish tying my boots and stand up. Matt and I walk together, side by side, back to the rest of the group.

We grid the fire, watching for tiny smokes and feeling for hot spots the first half of the day. Then we rest in the shade. I look up from time to time, hoping to see Sandy in the bushes taking pictures, but I don't. Amy and Brian radio us from the top. They've been watching from the ridge all night, both canyon fires. The main fire, with the exception of this spot, has not crossed over the look out and has backed down into the canyon.

Early afternoon storm clouds begin building again, as we cold trail our spot fire one last time. By late afternoon Brian radios us again. He tells us a huge system of weather is moving in, that he and Amy will break down camp for us and we are to hike out the bottom, close to the river where the main road meets it. The trucks will pick us up there. There is not enough time to get back up to the ridge and packed before the storm hits. The sky tells us this too.

We begin hiking. The first crack of lightning followed by the booming bass of thunder splits the sky wide open and it begins to rain. We hike quickly, darting through the trees. We are not on a ridge or exposed, but walking in a gully. The lightning and thunder recede and the rain takes over, fully saturating and stifling the world, so loud, everything becomes quiet. Only the sound of water remains. We walk and walk, a small trickle beginning beneath our feet, growing deeper with each downward step until we are forced to walk along the edge of it, at a slant. The water grows deeper still, the runoff accumulating as our gully meets up with another, larger one. The water is a creek now. We move away from it, up above on the shoulder, our single file line marching in order, following John. We finally reach the river and the trucks are waiting there. We hike faster, then John hollers, "Everybody in!" I open the back door of our truck to toss in my gear and see all of our stuff inside. Everything is there. My tent,

clothes, and books, are all piled high, sealed and stuffed tight. I toss everything in and run to the front. Everyone tumbles in, with less order than our bags, and we close the doors behind us. We sit quietly, breathing hard, water beading down our faces, and watch the rain.

A call from dispatch. A new fire order. We are heading to Arizona, driving through Utah. My first place for the aspen. Scottie will be happy. He will tell his stories. I close my eyes and sleep, knowing there's still a lot of fire season left.

## Vita

Brianna Heisey began her outdoor adventures at age three, with the planting of her favorite backyard tree. She eventually grew, right along with it, tall and strong and found herself at the University level passionate about music, writing, forestry and feminism. She took a job fighting forest fires with the United States Forest Service that sent her traveling from landscape to landscape, meeting new people and learning new things, craving truth and wisdom from the world around her. In 2006, her desire to publish manuscripts and write full time sent her back to graduate school to receive her MFA in creative writing. She will graduate in May 2009 and return to the world of Forestry. She has been an instructor of English Composition, as well as Creative Writing courses. She is a familiar face at local open microphone venues, bringing her music, poetry, and fiction to the community. She has published her work in *The Rio Grande Review* and hopes to publish more from the bottomless pile presently resting at her elbow of recently completed manuscripts.

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