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YOUTH AND LEGENDS:

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Creative Writing Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Jennifer Kiefer

******

Western Kentucky University

2011

CE/T Committee:

Dr. David J. Bell, Advisor

Professor Walker Rutledge

Dr. Angela Jones

Approved by

Advisor

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

While young narrators or protagonists have been included in many famous works, such as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* or Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms,* typically the main character of a work of fiction is mature. The pieces in this collection of stories, however, are centered around children. Adolescents act as the protagonists of the stories, exploring an adult world. The goal of this collect is not to contribute to young adult fiction or child fiction, but to appeal in style and form to adult readers in a mature, adult writing style. Exploring adult themes through the points of view of children allows for a different feeling or idea about them. The perspectives vary from omniscient narratives, limited-omniscient narratives, and one first-person account. While the stories do not name specific places or give characters specific names, each story stands alone; no character reappears in another story.

Keywords: children, creative writing, english, fiction, legends, youth

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Major Field: Creative Writing

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This collection of stories borrows heavily from the tradition of Southern American literature, although a few pieces vary in style or voice. Throughout my writing career, I have been influenced by William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, as evidenced in my pieces here, especially in the grim legend of "Hands" and the destructive child in "Nest," as well as by less obvious authors, such as Kurt Vonnegut, evident in the science-fiction future of "Shallow Roots," and Katherine Dunn, evident in the grotesque nature of the death in "Heavy."

The pieces in this collection have been described by some as having a mystic or "fairy tale" quality to them; though this was not strictly my intent while writing, I can see how this quality is evident in my work, whether it be in the folktale in "Hands" or the futuristic setting in "Shallow Roots." One of the reasons I chose to write about children is because, in their innocence and naïveté, they truly believe in stories and legends, while adults often lose this capability.

In my experience in reading the works of my peers, I believe my writing style tends to follow a more antiquated form or voice as opposed to the styles of more present-day, living authors, with the language being more drawn out and elevated as opposed to the more simplistic, matter-of-fact style I observe in more contemporary authors. This is not to say that I am completely unique in my style, but only that I do not believe it is

what the majority of my peers are writing.

The elevated language, in these stories, allows them to reach an adult audience, even though they are about children. They, with the exception of "Shallow Roots," utilize more formal language and such grammatical structures as absolute phrases. While "Shallow Roots" is also aimed at an adult audience, it is the most likely to transcend into the realm of children's literature. The pieces are very subtle; I want the readers to come to their own conclusions, just as children eventually come to their own conclusions as they grow older.

Stylistically, I chose to write "Shallow Roots" in first person, the only piece written this way, because of the futuristic nature of the world. As a writer, I had to balance explaining the world I was creating without over-explaining it and developing and creating characters. I felt that this balance would occur best in the presence of a first-person narrator, as the child's natural language and vocabulary do this naturally. While this change may jar some readers or seem out of place, the overarching theme of innocence and the loss of this innocence binds it to the rest of the collection. Because it is so far removed in many ways from the other stories, I placed it at the end of the collection to set it apart, almost like an epilogue which shows a different approach to writing about children.

Childhood is a mixture of awe, fear, and confusion, and I tried to express these qualities in the stories: the awe of birth, fear of becoming lost, and confusion about natural processes like death. The innocence of children allows me, as a writer, more freedom to express these ideas; whereas an adult narrator or protagonist may be jaded to these experiences, they are new for children. For example, in "Unpunished," the neighbor

calls the birthing a “miracle,” but the boy actually believes it is one.

Though each story is separate from the others, in each there is a loss of this innocence, though it may be small or subtle: the boy in “Hands” realizes that the story is just a tall tale; the girl in “Shallow Roots” realizes that what she finds extraordinary is a simple fact to her father; the boy in “Unpunished” works to help a scared animal in the woods only to be scolded for his good deed; in “Nest,” the young girl repeats the destructive actions of her playmate; and a girl learns that her uncle’s death, a somber occasion, will go as unnoticed as his life in “Heavy.”

The collection unites style and theme to express the inevitable enlightenment and loss of innocence accompanied by children. While these stories cannot possibly encompass every emotion or experience of childhood, the few examples express an in-depth exploration of youth through language, voice, and style.

CHAPTER 2

HEAVY

He died alone on a full-size bed with barely enough room to spare even for her. A bachelor his entire middle-aged life, he lived alone amongst piles of empty wrappers and rotting Chinese food, the furniture of his childhood cracked and concealed beneath old, mildewed magazines and spare change and loose ends. No one ever visited, and it seemed as though he appeared or left his home only on holidays to give each of the children a quarter and a magic trick that even the youngest didn't believe. He would arrive as the table was set and would leave only after the turkey's bones were dry, a cage of cartilage left jutting out of the oily pan.

He died on a Tuesday—at least the doctors believe so. Even as newspapers and mail and stench piled up around the house, no one investigated. He would somehow weed out his bills or the comics while leaving the rest in its place, ancient subscriptions clogging the box for years. Only after a stray baseball crashed through the window some days later did anyone notice something wrong. The wind howled through the hole for an entire three days even then before someone thought or saw or wondered that it had not been crudely covered with cardboard or plastic wrap.

Brave neighbors bored into the house, tearing the hole in the glass until the entire pane fell in jagged pieces along the floor. With their shirts folded up in front

of their noses, they crept and sludged though the grime, sidestepping mold and ruined antiques, a stink staining everything, sponging inside even the wallpaper so that they were forced to search every room, poking or pushing aside round piles with their shoes until they found him. He sprawled beneath the overgrown sheets. His whole body limp, he engulfed the mattress. When his body was somehow lifted from the bed and down the complaining stairs and sideways through the door like a piano, the springs inside the mattress remained compressed and coiled, mangled still underneath the invisible weight. An eerie, round dip was forever pounded into the bed, and it was thrown on the curb to collect the weather until a garbageman heaved it into the back of his truck and drove away.

He died in early winter, and she held her mother's hand in the snow, looking at the basin of white in the bowl of the mattress. Her father had gone inside the house. He was standing behind a board in the window talking to a man she did not know. The wind blew the snow from the roof, white dropping straight down in front of the windows, the wind sometimes catching the powder again and tossing it at an angle. In the back of the driveway stood his car, and in the cold the pane of snow slipped from the hood, cracking and shattering like glass as it fell away. It hadn't been driven in some time. His last gorging was the Christmas before, almost a year ago. The front bumper leaned against the ground, one end still kissing the hood.

She shivered next to her mother and stamped her boots in the snow.

“Do you want to make a snow angel?” her mother asked.

The wet cold seeping through the cotton of their layers and against their faces, they both fell back into the cushion of snow and waved their arms and legs in

a fan and shimmied out of the imprint, the girl still leaving a boot print on the stomach of her angel. They looked down at their scraping stamps, the snow piled in soft mounds around the borders.

"What happened?" the girl asked.

"Your father's brother died, honey. Do you remember Uncle Johnny?"

"He died?"

"Yes. He went up to Heaven with Grandpa." The mother rubbed her hands together and swept the lingering white from her daughter. "Let's go wait in the car while your father finishes what he's doing." The girl looked past the plywood at her father's face. As her mother started the car, he was laughing.

After she had drawn in the window fog, her father returned with an envelope and two keys on a ring. He tossed them inside the glove box.

"He ruined the house," he said. "Just completely trashed it. And all that nice furniture. I bet his car is a pile of rust, too."

Collected inside a box by her father were plastic gloves and clear glasses and round paper masks like cups which concealed her father's nose and mouth. He looked like a strange, overburdened bug inside the wrapping of plastic and canvas and leather. He left early in the morning, before even the winter sun, the space in the driveway empty with oblong stains, an open square in the white snow. He didn't return until after the sun had fallen behind the ground.

The house, absent of its owner, still stunk. The smell settled, dense and heavy, burning through the paper cover even after he masked himself. And after

exhausting their horror and digging through the rotting piles, and after an infinite number of filled trash bags, he carted only a small postage box full of keepsakes out to his car. Every day he'd leave and return, sunlight filling the gap. Her father and a handful of others worked from the outside in, tireless ants evacuating each room, hoping for treasure but pulling up only more filth as they gutted the house into heaving bags. To neighbors there seemed to be an unending stream of modest men dragging bags from the front door to a large metal dumpster engulfing the driveway and smashing part of the yard into a muddy swamp. The once-muffled stench, hidden behind walls, now leaked out in the open air. Bored women walking their dogs pressed their sleeves to their faces and tugged their dogs away from it.

Each day her father was left with only a handful of items—sometimes nothing—and brought them home in the same refilled box. She waited at the window in the evenings, watching for him. His mask hung around his neck with the goggles and he carried his gloves inside his pocket. He held the box inside his bare hands. Most nights he would set the box on the kitchen counter and her mother would clean the things inside while her father sat down to eat. When they were washed, the girl took them into her own hands, sliding her fingers across ancient porcelain and trophies. Once her father brought back with him a small pile of metal soldiers. He said he had found them in a thin shoebox shoved into the top corner of the closet behind the long-broken swinging light bulb. They were wrapped individually inside strips of mustard newspaper, and they were heavy inside her hand.

“When we were your age, your uncle and I would battle with these,” her father said. “They'd circle around the entire floor, sometimes standing in place for a whole week before we got bored or they were knocked over.”

In his absent hibernation, he had accumulated mass, both around his belt and from the walls in. It took many overseen and ignored years and relatives to accrue such a weight. So much that his girth could not fit inside a standard coffin. Against the wall stood instead a giant oak box as wide as their dinner table, and the girl's fingers grazed the top of it, sealed and massive. Too large to fit inside of a hearse, the short procession followed a large, dusty white van.

She stuck her hand in between the lid and the bowl of the casket, pushing upward until her mother took her hand away. “It doesn't open,” her mother explained, kneeling.

“Is Uncle Johnny in there?”

“Yes,” her mother said. “But it doesn't open.”

Trailing her away from the coffin, her mother trooped her around the sparse crowd, exalting her spelling-bee landmarks and spreading wallet photos, the closed box ignored and stagnant against the wall, the whole ordeal tucked inside the smallest parlor of the building. The room was only speckled with people, few she knew but everyone in the same haze of muffled speech and diverted small talk. It was more a reunion than a funeral—the spectators shunned the huge, gray box and lone photograph and pitcher of flowers, chewing crackers and cheese in an absent filler. Through the barrage of empty conversations and slight boastings, the girl

craned her neck to look back at the silent box. Each time it was vacant and abandoned.

She stood next to her mother in the cold, looking down into the massive hole twice as wide as the headstone would be. The indent was the size of two graves shoveled together, and the casket wavered above it, held only by a thick metal frame and straining, taut belts. Snapping, the wind crashed the piled snow into the hole, sliding between the hovering oak and the cavity. A shorter line of cars had followed the white, makeshift hearse, confused, stalled drivers searching for the trademark black, often not stopping at all for the head of the line. She sat in the backseat of her mother's car as the line wove across the city to an unknown corner cemetery where the grave was dug behind a crumbling limestone mausoleum.

A solemn man she did not know moved in front of the casket. He held a book inside his hands and broke the pages apart with a ribbon. He shuffled his shoes in the snow and read aloud, never lifting his head to the small, shivering group in front of the huge box. The wind shuttered through them, striking their dry faces. Behind the girl someone hunted inside her purse while someone else fidgeted in the snow.

The man shut the book against the ribbon and stepped back in silence. The girl shuffled her feet in the wet snow, and as her mother dragged her away, the taut bands trembled and the tremendous box moved down inside the hole, sedate and static, until it anchored at the bottom. Behind them men came and yanked the thick ribbons out from under the casket.

After scourging the house, clawing away metal and porcelain, piling the filth and towing it away in large trucks until they had only cleared the front rooms, the rest of the house still sagged and stunk with garbage. Black mold snaked along the baseboards, and the plaster beneath the second floor cracked and crumbled, raining debris and soaked, stained mildew against the newfound floors, the wide, oak panels scraped and eaten and thin. The walls stained and peeling, the small team of men dug and plowed through the house until they discovered the kitchen where piles and stacks of decayed food lingered and the stench grew. Inside the stove they found a nest of rats writhing in filth inside an old pan. They abandoned the kitchen, leaving unprocessed food inside the blender and the single greasy pot on the one uncovered burner untouched.

In the dining room, in the corner above the ruined, chipping table, her father began to pull a box from a stack. The box was heavy, ripping, and as it moved away from the stack, the wall moved inward too, the old paint still sticking to the side of the cardboard. As he tried to push the box back into place, it creaked and groaned against the weight of the house.

They scraped through the house, ignoring the kitchen, until even their masks could not cover their disgust, and they packed up, abandoning the rest of the crammed rooms, leaving the heavy, crashing mess of the second story, save for the bedroom and the garage, untouched. The dumpster outside binged and purged four times before they retired their suits, the gloves and mask rotting on a high shelf, hoarded and folded inside the box her father would return with every evening.

They took her to watch. Standing across the street in front of her mother, she waited as a yellow crane ripped and clawed at the house, pulling away plastic siding and smashing its face into windows, rousing the stench once more into the cold air. Pushing into the walls, the machine crashed into the roof and tugged at the walls until she shivered and held her coat in front of her face, covering her eyes. Most of the house stood even after it became dark and the machine stopped, frozen next to the house, the useless car already dragged away.

"They're tearing through my old bedroom window," her father said, watching the crane flick through the glass and strip away the siding. "Who knows what was stashed in there."

"I'm sure even your brother didn't know what was in there," her mother said.

The girl could see inside the crumbling mess, the skin peeled away, and through the packed rubble she tried to imagine the cross section clean and tidy, her father not yet her father, smaller and less gray, her uncle shrunken and thin, the two lining up the soldiers along the wood floor, the same set shoved inside dated newspaper in a box on a high shelf she could not reach. Out of the stinking rummage stuck a rusty, mangled bed frame, one side ripped apart and dangling towards the first floor. She could not see past the congestion of squirreled boxes and papers and rotten stacks, the doorways and walls concealed as well by the filth as the torn plastic siding.

In the dry cold, her father clapped his bare hands and scraped them together, still looking at the demolition. "They're done for the day," he said. "I suppose we should be going, too. It's getting cold."

In the back seat, the girl watched the weeping, ruined house through the back window. The stink dissolved in the thin, brittle air as they moved farther, and stopped only when they had returned to their own looming, tidy home, filling the space in the driveway.

After the debris had been hauled away, the glass and ripped plastic shoveled into the mouth of a dump truck, and the scent had thinned and disappeared, the plot remained like a missing tooth, the driveway and cement walkway preserved. The wooden legs of old tables and chairs had stuck like weeds inside the rubble, already gnawed and broken. In the back seat, the girl looked out at the empty lot, a square of dirt marking the perimeter of the house. Her father pulled a sign from the trunk and dragged it onto the lawn. With a hammer he pierced the sign into the earth, his arm slicing down in an arc. The hollow, thick noise echoed through the gap. Beneath the offer, her father had painted their phone number.

The sign sagged in the dirt for weeks before the telephone rang and her father answered it, laughing and moving into a benign, quiet room. The next afternoon he left alone and returned, pulling the sign out of the back seat and shoved it into the garage, behind the lawnmower and bicycles and tools. Repaired and replaced, the gap was filled with a new house, wood and metal sprouting out of the ground as the snow sank into mud, identical to its neighbors. After every Christmas dinner, meat still squeezed against bone while the double-wide grave remained unkept and wild, tucked away in a tiny corner, the stone eroding, shaving away even his name.

CHAPTER 3

UNPUNISHED

Through the dim, copper ringing of the school bell, he broke into the long line of trees, crunching pine cones and sticks beneath his shoes. The sun stuck its light through the branches and the still-green leaves and through the humming and twittering of the remaining birds. He could feel its heat stinging in spots against his freckles as the static sound of giggles and young screams fell away behind the oaks.

The leaves kicking and jumping in the tornado wind, he kicked a rock through the dust with his foot. The gurgling, syncopated noise of the other students had disappeared behind the trees. Now he could only hear the raging, rapping tin sound of the distant rifles blazing through the woods, snapping prey straight before they darted away unscathed. The guns would sound and fire and yell for one exploding instant before a moment without sound. Everything hovered and held its breath—the leaves froze on the path and the branches of the trees quit their swaying movement. Even the boy stopped, listening, the rock rolling soft against the dirt.

The too-warm November breeze scraped across his face, and his books slung heavy against his back and thin shoulders, pulling the stressed seams father apart. His mother had already mended the bag once this year, slicing up old blue jeans for patches along its bottom and looping the straps together with thick thread. Two twin splotches of

browned red stained the canvas on the left strap where she had pricked her finger, screaming and damning at the kitchen table as he sat listening to the television.

The clap of fire distinguished, the wind raced through the path, rousing the paper leaves and shaking the sleeves of his jacket, the elbows filled in with the same mending. The air purged the metal noise as the hunters waited for the quiet return, sinking back into their camouflaged hideouts, and the unusual heat sank onto the boy's shoulders. He pulled the brick bag off and dragged it behind him. It tore through the dirt. The dry scent of earth lifted as brown concealed the patches and blood. The gray rustling obscured the imminent scolding rising in the back of the boy's mind.

Behind the line of trees the guns yelled again, a distant, syncopated metal vibrato. The boy kicked a flat rock, skipping it across the dirt and into the brush. Something whimpered. It moved the leaves of the bush as the boy stopped, squatting and listening beneath the scraping wind and animal sound. And it came again: the hushed noise of stretched breathing, heavy and low, nestled behind the thorned branches. Pulling back the veil of thick, tumbleweed thrush, he pricked his hand.

Her belly was huge—bloated and swollen and heaving with enormous weight. Her head against the ground, her eyes rolled around to look at him, her mouth open and sucking in air. He abandoned his tearing bag in the path. Her stomach dipped and waved, the skin and hair stretched taut and stiff as she breathed and panted, her tongue lolling out and collecting mud. He laid his clean hand on top of her mountain belly, hiding his ripped palm in a fist inside his pocket. In her breathing pain she showed her teeth, and the boy's hand jumped away.

“It's okay,” he said. He moved his hand in front of her snout before sliding his

fingers behind her ears and across her head.

To the boy she looked like the one last summer across the street—the stomach expanding and bowing between two pairs of short hound legs until the full nipples had grazed the ground, and she slept and moaned in the shade outside of the tiny house. Inside a breathing, sticky mass of children, he stared at her inside her newspaper nest, almost wheezing for air.

“You kids are going to witness a miracle,” his neighbor had said, stroking the fur. “Her second litter.”

The boy could see her ribcage above her round belly. She stood and paced, trying to move away from the bustle of bodies, building up the nest and whining when the man pushed her back into the corner. She shook and cried. They waited a long time, some of the children abandoning the miracle for kick ball or tag, or some other immediate pleasure, before the mother lay down. The boy could hear them in the street. The dog began finally heaving its stomach, whining at the noise and bustle as the man called through the open window for the others to come back inside.

In huddled fascination and disgust and sweat, they watched the babies emerge, some turning their heads away and some marking their aversion with cacophonous shouts or comments. They came one after another, the mother seething and licking her babies to breath, until seven tiny dogs as big as the man's hands lay against their mother, blind and sucking against her side.

“Now as soon as these pups are ready and weaned, you can each have one, 'long as your mom and pop say it's all right.” The man moved them into a clean basket.

The fleshy pups were silent and lethargic, clinging to their mother, who curled

around them, looking on at the children. Cutting different colors of soft yarn, the man loosely tied seven different colors around each of their tiny necks. The man plucked the blue puppy from the side of the mother, and it balked in soft, high yips.

"Careful, now," he said, and he dropped it down inside the boy's arms.

Weeks later the neighbor tacked a crude sign into the dirt across the street. A chicken-wire cage held the dwindling number of puppies with their lamenting mother, and the boy poked his finger through the holes as the dogs licked and chewed and sang, their eyes finally open.

"You want one of those puppy-dogs?" the man asked.

The boy looked up at him and back to the pen with the writhing fur. "Yes, sir," he said.

Bending over the wire wall as tall as the boy, the man lifted a slithering pup out of the cage with one hand. He held it in front of the boy. "Your momma said you could have this, right?"

The boy nodded.

"You're gonna take care of it?" The boy nodded again, unspeaking and reaching out for the dog.

Inside her nest of leaves, the dog stood and circled, pushing leaves with her nose and singing in sharp noises, throwing her tongue out. A third shot fell through the trees, into the shady brush, and the mother tensed and howled and scurried around her crinkling, dry nest. The hair upended along her spine, the mother moaned and whined, her full belly shaking inside the nest.

During pauses of stillness, the mother lay down and whined. After each birth, the mother ignored the boy's insistent cooing and soft petting, busy with her young, primping and hawing and nudging each one. After each shot she crowed and growled, snapping sometimes even at the boy, who whistled and shooed, pushing back the rustled hairs on the back of her neck. Between the shots each dog was born, chirping and searching in the leaves for their mother.

The blind pups collected dirt inside their feather hairs, lying in her makeshift den, as the mother tried to lick them clean. Her eyes were wide and she moaned and whined, intent and thorough. They crawled against their mother, following her cries. Another shot moved through the space, and she tensed and howled as the boy hummed and pulled his hand along her spine. In the darkening cold he covered the dirt with his jacket, moving each new baby into the clean, cotton burrow.

As the sky grew purple and dotted, the shots ended and only the mother made noise, chirping and sighing over her tiny babies, who squirmed at her stomach. In the new coldness, she snaked her body around them, shaking and pointing her fur on end. Tiny pinpricks of skin raised against the boy's skin as he overturned his bag, pages winging in the air, opening wide and sinking down into the dirt. The mending broke, the dried brown separating, and the boy blanketed the dogs.

Across the street on the chalky wood-planked porch he held the feverish dog, a boy with all black except for a white snout and belly, squeezing it to his chest as his mother asked, "Who let you have that? That man across the way? You can't take care of

that. You're only a child, and I don't want to deal with it."

Still moving and howling and sniffing, the puppy licked his face. "Please," he said. "I named it Bullet."

"We can't have a dog. We just can't feed it," she said. She stood on the hot, unswept porch, stiff and straight. She looked across the street. The man's truck was gone, tire marks still in the dirt. "I guess we'll have to keep it for tonight. There's no telling how late he'll be back."

The boy said nothing. In the ebbing orange sunlight he sniffled and pinched his eyes closed. He squeezed his teeth together, and the dog whined and scratched against his arms, scraping its skull beneath the boy's chin.

"I don't want to hear any crying or begging, either," his mother said. "You have to give it back tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said. She went back inside, and the screen door scratched closed behind her.

Inside the house he heaved the writhing dog up the stairs into his bedroom, the house stifled and shaded, an iron clang sounding from the kitchen where his mother had begun to prepare dinner. The dog still clawing and moving, the boy wrapped his arms around it, scratching his nose against the soft, clean fur until the pup howled and begged, and he set the wild legs on the floor.

From the mouth of the staircase, his mother's guttural cry rose out of her throat and up through the bare, peeling wood, and the dog howled at the noise, lifting its head and singing into the ceiling. The boy bayed and yowled too until the cacophony shadowed his mother, and she smashed up the staircase and into his bedroom.

“Stop making all that noise and come down before your food gets cold,” she said. “If you keep making it bark, it'll carry on all night long.”

After the dog's sniffing and jumping and crying, after the two plates on the table were empty and naked, the boy's mother scooped the leftover, stray green beans and chopped pieces of fat from their meat into a small bowl and set it on the floor.

Once it had exhausted the room of scents and sounds and excitement, the boy swathed the lethargic Bullet and carried it into his bed. It nestled against the boy's stomach and slept next to him even in the summer heat until morning.

“Where's that dog?” his mother said. “It has to eat, too.”

“We don't have any dog food,” the boy said.

“I guess it can have some of this oatmeal. You aren't eating it.”

“Dogs don't eat that stuff. They eat meat.”

“If oatmeal's good enough for our breakfast, I suppose it won't hurt it to eat it just this once,” she said. “After it eats, you need to go across the street and take it back to that man. And I don't want to hear any complaining about it.”

Without noise the boy left his full bowl at the table and slouched up the stairs to let the whining dog out of his room. His mother scooped half of the oatmeal out into the trash and put the rest on the floor for the dog to devour and whine for more, jumping against the cabinets and following in between her feet until she stumbled and sprawled across the linoleum, demanding that the boy return the dog immediately.

As his mother watched through the window, her hands holding apart the curtains, he moved across the dry street into the backyard with the cage. Only two were left to yap and jump and squirm, a girl and the runt. On the free side of the cage Bullet barked and

wagged with the others. The screen door scraped against the frame, a tin pitch, and the man bellowed down to the cage, the porch steps bending and soughing underneath him.

“Surely you can't be here for another,” the man said.

“No. I'm not.” He looked down at Bullet.

“Then what do you want?”

“I can't keep him,” the boy said. “I came to give him back.”

“I thought your momma said you could have it. I thought you said you'd take care of it.”

“She changed her mind,” the boy said. “We don't have any dog food.”

The sky was freckled with white when he left the mother and her babies nestled inside of his jacket, each in a line against the mother's stomach. He heaved the jumble of books inside his naked arms and sludged through the unsounding forest, the stack leaving red creases along his dirty elbows. The faint hunters had forgone their pursuit, the tin shots silenced at dusk, evaporating with the daylight. He moved between the trees, balancing the heavy paper until he emerged out of the thick wood.

He shuffled through his neighbor's backyard, passing the empty patch of dirt where the wire square and writhing puppies had been. In the cold evening he crossed the street and moved up the stairs and inside the house. His dropped his unclothed books, and in the oak clamor his mother abandoned the telephone, ambling to the front door.

“What happened? Why did it take you so long to get back?” she asked, checking his elbows and knees and face for blood. Mud streaked across the fabric of his pants and shirt, drying in clumps across his nose and even binding strands of hair. He didn't

respond.

“And what did you do with your jacket? And your book bag? You're always ruining or forgetting or losing things,” she said, standing tall and staring. He rolled his caked hair inside his fingers, and the dust snowed to the floor. He still said nothing.

Inside the kitchen his mother withdrew a plate from the mouth of the cold oven, the ceramic no longer warm, and set it on the table in front of the boy. She moved back to the receiver, canceling stray, secluded searches, unspeaking and waiting for the boy to finish chewing so she could throw his soiled clothes into the hamper and scrub the dirt from his hair with warm water, the tub filled with muck and bits of leaves and tree, silent still even as she ushered him into bed and closed the door, the boy unsleeping in the damp darkness.

CHAPTER 4

NEST

They could hear it twittering beyond the tangling leaves and branches and small gold and white blossoms. They could not see it. Still he aimed, careful and precise, the tip concealed by the green, swallowed completely by the thick mass of wood and heat and smell. His face was pressed against it, one eye closed and the other squinting, the color not moving but hovering to something invisible.

"There's a nest in there," he said. He moved nothing but his mouth. "You got to listen for where it is."

The sun-stained heat devoured everything—the air, the small bush, them. Dripping down through their cotton shirts and shoulder blades in thick, sticky beads, sweat left growing splotches on their clothing, behind his knees and against his chest and under the arms and through the hair of the other. The heat even permeated the already stagnant, jam scent of the honeysuckle which hung in the air. Every breath was sweet and heavy and dry, silent against the fake plastic wood of the barrel.

"You have to be dead quiet," he said. His tiny hands wrapped around the proportional weapon, one finger hooked around the trigger and the other nestled palm up under the forestock. He waited. It had stopped making noise.

"Maybe it's not there anymore."

"No," he said. "It's got nowhere else to go. It's still in there."

“I don't think it's there.”

“It can't go nowhere. We'd see it.”

“I don't see a thing at all.

“Hush,” he said, adjusting his slick, slippery hands against the barrel. Once more the sharp chirps sounded, a quiet staccato almost inaudible amidst the stagnant air. Again, he held his gun level inside the branches, looking but not seeing.

She plucked a yellow bloom, the branch vibrating as she pulled the tiny tendril from the mouth of the flower, its petals smaller than her fingernails. Below the pollen heart, hovering beneath the thin, pale straw, clinging against the unsinkable forces of gravity, a small drop of oil lingered. She lifted it to her mouth, and the nectar absorbed onto her tongue, the flavor disappearing almost as soon as it fell away. The plundered flower fluttered from her palm into the grass below.

She slipped her hands down across the harsh cotton of her skirt, looking up to see his finger twitch and bend and click around the trigger, his gaze still unmoving as the quick, blue snap resonated through the bush. The bird, green and no bigger than his fist, flew up out of the top branches. Its staccato beat as fast as its invisible wings, it hovered before abandoning the sick honeysuckle.

“A hummingbird,” he said as she watched it go.

“It's pretty,” she said.

The gun lay in the bright roots, the paint already peeling away from the stock. Reaching his hand inside the leaves, he scavenged around, stamping his face against the flowers. He leaned back from the bush. Inside his hand was a nest. It was the size of a quarter, the sides plastered with web. The mother had laced petals inside the tiny,

spinning mass, speckled with cloud tufts and bits of leaves and bark, and the girl could see two white eggs. The boy cast them inside her palm. She purled them with her engulfing fingertips, each egg no larger than a jellybean.

The boy, still holding the nest, curled and smashed his fingers together. It crashed and curled and bent, soft as dough, and when he opened his hand again, there was only a small gray ball. Threads connecting his palm to the destroyed mass, he picked them away with his fingernails and slung it into the dirt. She turned the eggs in her hand again before he gathered them into his own rough ones.

“Careful,” she said. He drew his knife from his pocket, turning out the miniature blades and files until he found the corkscrew. One tiny white egg inside his two fingers, he punctured the bottom, clear ooze trickling away from it, clinging and failing like the honeysuckle oil until the egg was dry.

“What are you doing?” she asked. He took the second egg and poked it as well. “Why are you breaking it like that?”

“I don't have any hummingbird eggs,” he said, smiling and watching the flow.

Inside a white blossom growing in the grass next to the bush twittered a bee. He put the tiny, hollow eggshells into the front pockets of his overalls, the thin pearls against his chest and invisible beneath the fabric. The innards like spit in the dirt, she bent her face down to it, her lips almost touching it, the mucus with a transparent scent.

“I thought there were baby birds in there,” she said.

“They weren't cooked yet,” he said, studying the bee.

“What do you mean cooked?”

“The mother bird has to sit on the eggs and heat them and cook them so they can hatch,” he said. “Like chickens.”

“Then why didn't you let them cook?”

“I told you. I don't have any hummingbird eggs.” He stared at the bee, as still as he had been before taking his shot. “Watch this,” he said.

The bee hovered and moved and purred, its legs and face covered in yellow. The boy's fingers the size of the fluttering insect, he engulfed it, pinching its wings and tiny hairs and scruff behind its head. She watched as he dragged it away from the flower, its legs splaying and agonizing and writhing. And suddenly he moved his fingers forward, holding it around the neck. The bee darted its black hind. It tried to escape its imminent fate. But his fingers collapsed into each other like a snap. The bee fell apart, the two ends drowning inside the blades of grass. The boy wiped his fingers against his knee.

“The trick is you got to watch out for the stinger,” he told her.

He clawed the gun from the grass and shade, and, the nose dragging through the dry dirt and gravel, he scraped away from the bush without sound. They creaked and crept through empty lots and twigged fields. He crunched cicada skins and sticks beneath his boots, a confetti of scattered remains trailing behind him. Putting her own smaller footsteps into the same path as his, she followed, unthinking, watching the desecrated carcasses instead of the destination.

And underneath her feet the soil squashed, thick and dark, squirming with worms and seed and invisible roots. The claw-scratch marks of the gun disappeared, and she saw the boy leave the false rifle, the cold sound muffled in the soft ground as it drowned into

the earth. The barrel spooned dirt inside its tin mouth. She rescued it from the gnarling, tangling roots and weeds and held it inside her small hands. She felt the parabola of the trigger. Raising it to her shoulder, she held it as he had, one pupil unopen and the other unmoving.

The empty eggs still hidden beneath his front pocket like buttons, he tore a ground-scratching limb away from a tree, beating at the path and raising clouds, moving towards a stray log. She could hear the plastic shell of his pocketknife jangle against the change, and he dug his stained fingertips into his overalls to retrieve it, still smacking at the path with the stick. The gun weighted her hands as she watched the boy slide, his eyes unblinking as he poked the log. Something moved beneath it, and she saw that the boy held the pocketknife in his opposite hand, the tiny blade pointed, no bigger than his thumb, replacing the corkscrew.

She watched without sound as he stamped the log with his foot. Pieces of old drenched bark peeled away into the dirt. Something small coiled and rallied, and the boy pinched the tip of the stick into the top of the wood, it still breaking and crumbling into fingernail shavings of sawdust.

"What are you doing?" she asked, lower even than the birds overhead.

"Seeing what's under here," he said. "Might be some more eggs." He squeezed the tip farther inside the now-gaping hole he had carved until it hooked and caught. The boy twisted the stick, the blade still peeking away from his flesh as he gripped with both hands until the log tumbled and flipped, scraping into the path. In the damp crevice writhed a bowl of wrapping scales, miniature snakes engulfed and circled by one thick mother who slunk away from her lair and licked towards him. He searched for smooth

white but found only gray spaghetti. The blade pointed towards the rocks on the path, and his hands slithered around the stick as he saw the brown hourglass curl towards him. She stepped backwards, almost shrieking, the gun still inside her hands, the tip dragging a line through the dirt.

"Shoot it," he said. He held the stick hovering above the path, the tip shaking near the pendulum head of the snake. Its mouth open, it shook the dust, its tail unwinding. The boy slapped at its back. She lifted the gun once more to her face. The barrel shook inside her unable hands, and she tried to point toward the mother, but the eye against the cold metal was concealed.

"Shoot it," he repeated. "Now. Quick."

The snake jumped and exploded across the path, and the boy jumped back, striking the limb down. The girl held the plastic forestock against her cheek, trying to line the tip with the head of the snake. Pulling the trigger, the shot rounded into the trees, the metal sound exploding and echoing into trunks and leaves, tearing only bark. She moved the mouth of the gun lower, attempting once more to overlap the edge of the long nozzle with the howling face of the snake. As the writhing beast snapped and weaved towards the boy, she followed, the weapon a burden in her rattling fingers.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He thwacked down once more, the twig fingers brushing the scales. It waited to lunge, hovering in the dirt. "Kill it."

She held her finger against the miniature curve, waiting, until she jerked her fingertip inward towards herself again, the noise springing away from her in red strides through the gaps and holes in the forest. The boy growled and scratched his teeth together, the snake still pining; lunging, it caught the stick in its teeth, the ooze sliding

over the bumps and cracks off onto the path. The bowl of infants writhed and pulsed, the nest empty of eggs, some of the skinny snakes escaping. They crawled into the roots of trees or across the path towards her. She whined, and the weapon vibrated inside her arms.

Her feet scraping through the leaves and soil, the babies crept closer, wiggling and snapping their tongues. They squirmed. She squashed backwards, unspeaking, stabbing at the snakes with the nose of the gun as they neared. The boy watched, still dueling the mother across the path.

“Shoot,” he repeated.

“I can't,” she said.

She stared down at the inching animals. Her hands were against the forestock and barrel, abandoning the curve of the trigger, and she smothered inside her own breath. Snarling, he rammed the limb onto the dirt, snapping up dust. The snake bounded and hovered and twisted through the path as the boy swept the dagger points of the stick against the ground.

“You don't know what you're doing,” he said. He pinched the dirt beneath the mother until she brushed on top of the hand of twigs. His hands red, he overturned the branch and the snake writhed into the air, catapulting into the brush on the opposite side of the path. The boy stood with the branch upright in his pulsing fingers as the girl struggled with the gun. The tip fell into the dirt, bobbing up and down, throwing clay as she tried to drum the snakes away. He watched.

“You got to shoot them or stamp them,” he said, strangling the wood. “Or else they'll bite you. Then their bite will run through your blood, and you'll die.”

Her breath rattled out into the air, a high, exhausting noise. With the expanse of his arms he shoved the stick to the ground. It skinned the dirt, leaving claw scratches. He turned without noise and ran. His slapping feet squashed through the dirt, the wet, copper sound nearly silent beneath the wind and inside the pockets of trees. She watched him as he skipped through the trees and dodged roots until even the sound of his thick breathing evaporated behind the rising wood.

"Hey wait," She called. She panted and swung the gun towards the snakes. "Where are you?"

But she heard nothing. The heat had dropped down in between the trunks, sweat dripping through the thin cotton along her back, plunging even as she scooped her feet from the sloshing, stick dirt and ran, the face of the gun snaking a zagging line into the dirt. Her hand wrapped against the chipped paint, she dragged it behind her, calling and yelling and crying for the boy. Her foot caught an upturned root, and she stumbled into the soil, mud against her face and blood against her naked knee. The gun fell out of her hands, the barrel clinking and jumping into the brush.

She abandoned the gun, untangling herself from the ground and running once more, red sliding down her leg and sponging into her socks. Screaming and searching, she clawed and fled through the woods, her face soggy with salt and grime. She moved through rotten roots and shade and a jungle of invisible buzzing until she reached a vein of pavement darting through the trees. She wavered at the edge of the gray slab, nestled inside the tall, jaunting forest, staring down the broken yellow in both directions.

The boy stood downstream across the street, waiting, at the edge of the path. She yelled to him, and he looked up. He threw a rock in her direction, the gray pebble

skipping and grinding against the concrete. She moved along the edge of the trees, holding onto scaly trunks, until she was parallel to her bored companion.

"Cross the street," he said. "I've been waiting a while."

Again she twisted her head and stared down the expanse of pavement, listening and straining, staring down the gray until it curved behind the elbow of trees.

"Did they bite you?" he asked, looking down at the blood. "If they bit you, you'll die."

"I fell," she said.

"Where is it?"

She looked down at the dirt on her hands.

"What did you do with my gun?"

"I dropped it," she said. "I was running. I'm sorry."

The boy began moving down the path inside the wall of brown before she had finished speaking, moving fast and certain, almost snarling, wading through ivy and felled trees and muck, never looking backwards to the girl who see-sawed behind him, paining to keep him in sight when he suddenly broke from the path, leaping over a slick log. She followed through the weeds and scratching tendrils, and he darted west again, breaking from the clustered trees.

They crept upon the backside of the house, a hound baying and shrilling, bound to its circumference by a chain. The boy dug inside his pocket and lifted out a small set of keys from the jangling metal. The screen door pressed against his overalls, the hatch marks shadowing on his neck as he twisted the locks and opened the door.

Hairy heads of deer and foxes held empty stares on the walls, and squirrels and birds froze along shelves and mantels. She stopped in front of a squirrel with its back arced and its tail vertical, its mouth closed tight, stiff in its false action. With one finger, she traced the parabola of its back, feeling the harsh, copper bristles of hair.

"Don't touch that," he said. "Follow me."

They crawled up the stairs, slinking beneath the overgrown skulls and zombie trophies and tracking dark footprints before turning at the head into a maze of portraits. Now stained with dirt and rips, the boy stared from the portraits polished and sewn, his gaze as vacant as the wall of flesh and his smile as constructed.

She followed with bare hands, watching his slingshot tick in his back pocket. They stopped at the end of the hallway in front of a door, the paint peeling and falling away, the same as his abandoned gun. Swinging the door back into the opposite wall, they went inside, stepping over toys and garbage, the bed unmade in the corner beneath a window. He curtained the ruffled blankets aside and pulled out a flat wooden box, the only object in the room not covered in a certain layer of filth or torn apart. The lid raised on its hinges, and he took the white pearls from his front pocket in his fingers.

The box contained a table of squares, most holding oblong, pastel shells. He set the twin eggs into one slot together, their tiny bodies rattling inside the square hole. The brass bay of the dog whined into the room. As he slid the box in front of the girl who perched above his shoulder staring at them, he watched as she touched a small white egg splattered with brown.

"That's a yellow warbler," he said. He pulled it out of its cubicle and put it inside her palm. The dog yelped and barked until the boy went to the window and cursed down

at it. The girl slipped the spotted egg into the small pocket above her wounded knee, the boy returning to shut the box and slide it back under the bed.

Inside her own walls, her knee bandaged and scolded, she took the egg into her hands. She found the rough pinpoint at its bottom as she turned it in her fingers, the rugged corkscrew hole. Beneath the overbearing purple, the heat standing inside the room, the breeze missing the open window, she closed her hand together, shards pinching and stabbing her palm. Her destruction complete, she opened her hand and let the puzzle of shell fall away.

CHAPTER 5

HANDS

Every summer when they would hide, crouching beneath the strands of wheat-like straw, waiting, not breathing, for someone to find them or pass so they could dash or crawl or slink to the scarecrow—the only thing seen from the road—he would dig. Nobody bothered tagging him anymore. He was too lazy; he didn't even try for the scarecrow. He just dug. From above there could be seen scraped patches like freckles among the field, but from the road or from the farm house only the scarecrow. He dug until he turned up only earthworms and roots and of course the upended harvest too soon, until even the sun was playing along beneath the wheat and invisible on the road amidst the young headlights. Until someone came searching.

Each night he returned home with muddy knees and muddier hands and wrists, the dirt somehow even scraped across his face sometimes and the same chiding—*How on earth, how on earth*—before the nightly scrubbing and supper in pajamas without dessert.

"How you manage to get this filthy every afternoon I do not understand," his mother said.

The water became darker as he pumped his unwashed knees. He wasn't listening. He watched the pulsing, dirty water dip and ebb, rolling towards the white walls in boiling waves, and then tip finally above the sill of the tub and onto his mother.

Screeching, she shot upward, catching her shin on the ceramic edge. He sunk lower, almost concealing his whole head. He listened to the garbled sounds of the ravenous water his mother's wet, distant scolding and the choppy rippling from the movement of his knees.

After his mother had scowled and scrubbed away all the dirt, he pulled the plug with his toes. She covered him with a towel. He watched the thin mud slide away from the white and down into a clean hole, twirling into a tornado of filth as it neared. Around the rim was a brown ring.

The next morning a round, large bulb hung below his mother's knee.

Pulling the stalks out in fistfuls, he dirtied his fingernails, clawing at the dirt. Even as sweat dripped across his eyes and through his shirt, after those who could afford to had abandoned the heat to the chilled theatre, he pulled apart the earth.

“What are you doing?”

He looked up. His hands stopped. Almost transparent and blazing pink against the sun, she stood there. She wore a checkered dress, and her hair curled and frayed in the damp heat, and it snapped and whipped against her face like fire. She squinted.

“What are you doing?” she asked again.

“Digging,” he said.

“For what?”

“I m not telling you.”

“Why not?”

“Because then you d be digging too and probably everyone else,” he said and turned back to continue.

“So it s a secret then.” She scratched her feet through the discarded stalks behind him. “I don't think there s anything here. Just wheat and dirt and bugs.”

When I do find it, I'll be a millionaire.”

“Maybe I'll just start digging and see what I find,” she said. She moved the ripped stalks into a pile and sat down on top of them with her legs folded under her. With her delicate hands, she grazed at the dirt. She used her fingertips instead of her nails, her hands remaining miraculously clean even after she had cratered the small portion of field. He turned away from her structural, straight hole and back to his own messy, sprawling one until she shrieked with delight. He twisted back towards her, his leg slipping through the loose soil into his digging, and saw her porcelain hand slip into her pocket.

“What did you find?” he asked, wide-eyed and searching, trying to see beneath the checkered pocket.

Months before, after the wheat had been cut and ground and the whole field had hardened with cold and ice and snow, he contemplated the hands, poking through the white with a post or looking across the emptiness for some strangeness, some sign or hint. He passed the flat, monotone expanse on his way home, dragging his heavy boots through the snow along the side of the road, stopping parallel with the scarecrow. With his gloved hands he shielded his eyes from the white, metallic glare, the sunshine bright and cold. But he only saw the naked, frozen earth.

Now she caught his hunchback figure hovering and toiling and milling, and she stood and watched, her hands buried inside the fabric of her skirt. The clean, dry heat

expanding through the unmoving strands, she slithered to her left as his shovel palms vaulted patches of earth, watching still after he had relinquished this spot and disturbed the statue wheat next to him to begin again. She moved closer, her toes almost shadowed by his see-sawing heels. He smelled like rain and trees. Arcing over his squashed form, her head parallel to the buttons of his spine, she said, “Boo.”

He bucked backwards, somersaulting into his back-pedaled pile of earth. The dust fluttered up around him in dark breaths, the haze settling in the thick air only after she had giggled and waved a dead strand through the cloud.

“What did you do that for?” he asked, swiping his hands together and watching the dirt fall away. She said nothing. He went back to his digging.

“What are you digging for?” she asked again.

“What did you find the other day?” He looked up at her. Her hair no longer spun and twisted, flying through the breeze. Still searching, he found a different fabric and no pockets amidst the gentle flowers on her dress.

“I'll tell you if you tell me,” she said, sitting on a cushion of stiff yellow. He yanked the harvest from its roots and held the stalks inside his palm. Beneath the curtain of the field he began, gesturing with wide, rapid motions, his voice swelling rarely above a raspy, hollow whisper.

His older brother had years ago told him the tale, the exaggeration, slinking beside the boy's bed. The most beautiful woman in the country, he had said, his voice low and cold in the dim, muddy lamp light, lived right here in this very country, this very town, right across the railroad tracks in a tiny house surrounded by an ocean of yellow, a

wilderness of wheat. She lived with her father, her mother long ago gone, peeling through the stalks and evaporating behind the line of trees just beyond the field.

The girl stalked through the field each summer, her spinning hair the same gold as the overflowing field. Her hands were long and delicate. They fluttered when she talked, moving and swaying like birds, twisting through her hair, unaware of their own symphony and grace until she caught herself and hid them beneath her knees or locked them together, intertwined in a tangled knot of bone and blood and skin. Her face and arms and breasts and hands grew into their own precocious beauty until boys hid in the strands of the field like rattlesnakes, waiting, the tiny bulbs of the wheat brushing against their invisible breaths in the red dawn.

Hovering in the breathing field, they waited not to pounce, but to see a slip of her thigh or a strand of her silk hair up close, perhaps to slide against her thin freckles, their fingertips rough and creeping as the wheat. They hid through the long summer, unbreathing as she glided past them until one did pounce, catching her in his net of charm and strength and tangled promises. He put a ring on her left hand, and they kissed in the field, trampling the stalks beneath their laughter.

But two sulking eyes glowered from behind the faint, flowered curtains of the house, watching the spectacle of the violent wheat roll and tumble like an ocean storm. He watched, hesitating and squeezing his fingernails into his palm along with the fabric of the curtains until he caught her trying to peel through the window, trying to elope from her own home his home her lily hands connected, buried inside her lover's, and with one swift arc and one growling explosion the lover fell limp against the roof.

Squashing the delicate hands inside his own, her father lifted the blade and sliced down through the air and through her wrist. The bone made a loud, wooden crack as it shattered beneath the stiff weight of the knife; blood dripped away from the edge as he lifted it once more to wind it down again through the flesh of the other, the same rising, fire sound screeching out. The ring still surrounding her fading finger, her left hand fell to the ground. The two hands lay next to one another in the oozing red, the ridges of the tips sopping it up.

With his own naked, bear hands, he scooped up both of hers in his left and headed out into the field. His shovel hung heavy against his stiff shoulders, the silver cold of the metal seeping through his shirt next to the blood. The shovel was old the head was freckled with rust, and the yellow wood shed away in sharp splinters like broken fingernails. They scraped into his palms as he laid the hands down and pierced the dirt with a grunting shove, peeling away the earth in layers until it was displaced in a mound next to a narrow, thin, sour hole. The dust of the earth, a blood clay, already sticking to their limestone tips, the hands still held the ring. It encircled one long finger even as her father sighed, breathing over his work, his hands pink and raw and low from the shovel's neck. Reaching down, he raised the two hands and set them in their grave. He covered them, concealing bone and blood and delicate skin and the protruding diamond.

Beneath the dirt of the cellar floor, he hid the rest of the piles of bone and cartilage and skin. Boys no longer burrowed inside the strands, evaporating as they saw only the father pass across the window panes, behind the fraying and ripped curtains. Perhaps out of guilt or perhaps out of mysterious revenge, the farm house caught fire, the

blaze illuminating the field and stretching towards the dark, freckled sky, burning the evidence and burning the murderer alike.

Years later, after the wheat overflowed into the road, wild, a new house was built over the ruins of youth and quarreling age, the ghosts still lingering but confused at the new blueprint of walls.

Pulling the boy through the wheat, the golden stalks waving with wild wonder, their rushing footsteps made a soft, warm sound beneath the overbearing yellow heat. They slithered through, passing the crouching players and even the seeker, who crept behind their line of lurching, a stalk having scratched the back of his neck, until he saw the dirt-stained, greasy elbow and nails and tunneled back into the field. Lifting his eyes above the field, he saw a mob of hands piled around the scarecrow.

They swam through, connected, the grime from his hand smearing into her pearl palm.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You'll just have to wait and see,” she said. “It's a surprise.”

He could almost feel the bones crane away from his joints as she continued to drag him, his feet tripping against the rigid stalks. She stopped only once they had reached the very edge of the gold, only a thin wall of harvest separating them from the hard, crawling line of trees. She hadn't looked back at his seesawing. Her tarnished fingers fell out of his own, his hand still parallel for a moment until his head mimicked the cars on the road far behind him, searching, seeing only yellow.

Beneath his feet lay a pile of overturned, ripped pieces of wheat littered above a mound of packed earth, the tracings of fingers and turkey hands stamped into it. He

cambered down in front of the dune of dirt, the buckling wheat hard and cracking under his short legs as he shaved the crude pieces away. Some stray pieces still lingering, they caught between his fingernails, breaking the skin, the earth turning to flecks of mud as he scraped and clawed and tore at the raw dirt, peddling it back on top of his already-stained knees.

Beyond the displaced earth, beneath the earthworms and pebbles and lacerated roots, when the hole reached up over his elbows almost to his shoulders, he held it inside his petrified fingers, letting it slip into his palm, specks of brown clinging to it: a single, crackerjack, copper ring with a plastic jewel enclosed inside its elastic, auburn teeth. He dropped it inside his pocket and peeled back through the field, away from the haunting trees towards the blossoming headlights under the red sunlight, searching.

And, after the long strands had been chopped away, leaving only stray yellow stubble and wheel tracks, he lumbered across the field, kneeling beneath the scarecrow. Trapped and chained against his wooden cross, the scarecrow looked straight ahead to the road. He removed his thin gloves and put them inside his pocket. Cars buzzed along the road beyond the field, silent, their twin beams no longer shielded from view.

His hands bare, he sunk his fingertips into the soft dirt, pulling against it and brushing it aside into a neat pile. He scraped through worms and debris and stray, broken, thin roots until the hole was halfway to his elbows, his back arced and intent and his fingernails filled with filth as he shoveled deeper. He scratched and burrowed, uncovering rocks and bugs and nothing until the pile of misplaced dirt concealed the feet of the scarecrow hovering above him. His search failing again, he continued. He scooped out the hollow hole, dirt falling back down, when something nearly pearl showed beneath

the endless brown. His eyes and hands leaped as he uncovered them bones, long and white, without flesh or skin.

In the cold September air his face lit with joyous finality, and his hands plucked them out of the deep, skinny hole. He spread them out in a line. The dismal bones were too thick and undelicate and long. And still he dug deeper. His knees were wet with earth, stained in dark smudges along with his elbows and hands and shoes. He smashed the dirt between his fingers, searching for the small, round, tiny circle. There was no metal, no ring, nothing but a short line of bungled, impossible white.

CHAPTER 6

SHALLOW ROOTS

The sun poked its yellow fingers between the tall line of buildings as I stared at their green sides. On the sides of the buildings were zucchinis and peas and even green beans, and once when we were going to school and they were collecting all the plants in bins on the ground with a giant machine, I saw a zucchini fall from the top and smash on the sidewalk in front of a lady. She was wearing new high heels and yelled up at the machine.

But now I just watched them pass in green streaks. My teacher in school called it urban agriculture and said that you can grow almost anything on the sides of buildings except for some fruits. She said those plants roots have to go too deep into the ground. Once in a picture book, she showed us a place where they grew apples and lemons and other things, and there were lines and lines of these tall green things with dots of red and yellow, getting smaller and smaller until they just sort of blended together in the background and you couldn't see any of the fruit inside their green hair at all.

But she told us that we don t have room for those inside the city so they have to use special areas way outside. The city was just a huge area of big slate buildings with green sides for food and grass and gardens on the roofs so you can play.

I'd never been out of the city. Every summer after school is over, the people on our floor always dragged bags and suitcases down the hallways, asking us to watch their apartments. Sometimes we had to watch their dog or cat, too. They pulled their keys out of their pockets, pinching one bag under their armpit and balancing another bag with their knee. They stuck one hand inside a pocket and sometimes had to dig in the opposite pocket before they brought out their keys and dropped them into my father s hand. They said they were going to see the ocean or visit the zoo or go ride a roller coaster all those places that were so far away you had to drive to them or ride in an airplane and stay for a long time. We watched them disappear into the elevator from our front door, all of us waving until the elevator door closed and we couldn t see them anymore. One summer we watched so many other people s apartments that my father had to build a little wooden box to hang on the wall with hooks for the keys and numbers. But the week before this summer, when they would come around to ask us to watch their apartments, my father told them no. The ones who brought keys put them back into their pockets and all of them walked back down the hall.

"This summer," he said, "we're going on vacation, too." I began stuffing my bag full of clothes and toys right after my father gave me my bag. This time we were the ones dancing to hand our keys away and scratching the floor with our bags, watching our neighbors wave at us before the elevator door closed.

Through the back window, over the top of the piles of bags and blankets and clothes, I watched the buildings get smaller and smaller until we turned a corner, and then I watched all over again. They were all striped with plants. There would be one row of plants and then a row of windows and then another row of plants. If you didn t pay

attention, the lines would blend together into a shapeless gray. Mother was sitting up front with a map. An old paper map with wrinkles and small holes and tears, all the streets so tiny they just look like small red lines spreading across the paper. When she had unfolded the whole thing, it looked like a blanket.

"I don't know why you insist on using that thing," Father said. "We have a machine for that." He pointed to the box next to the steering wheel and didn t look at her when he talked.

"I know," she said, "but it was my grandfather's, and I like using it."

We turned another corner. There were strawberries on these buildings, and the collecting machine crawled up the side like a spider and took all the red spots into its stomach. I wished there were strawberries growing outside my window. I'd like to see the big berries growing instead of cucumbers.

"I like the feel of a map, how you can see all the lines intersect and how you can see where you are and where you're going at the same time," Mother said, moving her finger across the map, following a single red line.

"Turn right," the machine in the car said, and we turned, and I couldn't see the strawberries anymore.

Once Grandfather showed me a picture book. In it were tiny buildings with triangles for roofs and little areas without walls in the front, and he said, "This is a house. There used to be houses of all different shapes stretching down the street. And people would go outside on their porches and talk to their neighbors or cut the grass or even just sit."

“What happened to all those places?” I asked.

“They ran out of places for people to live so they had to tear them all down and build all the tall buildings we have now.”

It's so old that it probably still shows where all those fields used to be,” Father said, touching the edge of the map.

“Oh, it's much older than that.” She pointed out the window at a building with radishes on the side and said, “Look. Right where that building was, there used to be a big library. It had a big staircase in front and was made from stone. In front there was a big lawn with flowers and trees.”

I looked out the window, trying to imagine the building, but I could only see one of those small houses like in Grandfather's picture book and the long row of apple trees until we drove so far past it I couldn't see it anymore. Mother looked down at the map again for a while.

When she looked up, she said, “You see that building there with the tomatoes?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to look into the windows as we zoomed past.

“That's the college where your great-grandfather went. Except when he went to school there, it took up three blocks and had many different buildings. When you went to class, you had to walk around outside instead of going to a different floor.”

“Was it really that big?” I asked.

“Turn left,” the machine said.

“This is an oak tree,” Grandfather said, pointing. His finger looked the same as the tree, but I didn't say anything. I just looked at it and then back at his finger, matching the bumps and wrinkles. The one in this picture would have been over one hundred years old.

“How did it get to be so tall?” I asked.

“It started very small. Once it was just a tiny seed no bigger than your fingernail. But if you let them grow for a really long time, they can get this big.”

I put my hand against the picture and dragged my finger along the brown base of the tree. Grandfather turned a page. The book was so old that all the pages crinkled when they were moved and some of the pages came out of the book in sections. It smelled the same as Grandfather.

“This one is a Dogwood tree. See the flowers? It bloomed in the spring,” he said. “But you won't see a Dogwood tree anymore—at least not around here.”

I looked up into his face. He wasn't looking at the book anymore, but was blinking and staring at the ceiling. Setting his shaking hand on top of my head, he said, “I wish you could have seen them.”

“Grandfather?”

He sighed. “The world used to be so beautiful.”

Mother kept telling me where everything used to be, but I still couldn't see any of it in my head. I could only watch the tall buildings slide past the car and then get smaller and smaller. Suddenly there were no new buildings zooming past us. Everything shrank until the city was just a thin row of tiny upright lines no bigger than my thumbnail. I watched until they disappeared behind the road.

And then I saw them. All these long, skinny things freckled among the gray stone tablets on either side of the car. I pressed my face against the window, trying to get as close as I could. They were tall and long and had lots of branches like arms with tiny leaves stuck to them. Most were pretty short, but sometimes there were really tall ones that were probably as thick as three or four of the smaller ones put together. They stretched so high into the sky that even with my face against the window, I couldn't see the tops of some of them. And the green tips were moving. They shook and waved and nodded as if they were all dancing.

"Your great-grandfather is buried in that cemetery," Mother said, still looking down into the red and blue lines on the paper.

And on the ground, by the bumpy feet of them, were little animals with long, fuzzy tails twisting around the bottom and chasing each other. They ran up one of the really tall trees, one after the other, like it was so simple to just run straight up. And in one big clump out the back window I could see birds. They moved in circles in a big black ball in the sky, moving and zooming, and then they all flew into the arms of the trees, disappearing inside the leaves.

We drove on and on, and soon all you could see was a thin line of road and the trees and the gray stones. My head still against the window, I kept looking for flowers in the green arms but there were only leaves. Father looked back at me through the mirror.

"I bet this is the first time you've seen trees in person," he said and kept driving.

And the birds jumped out of the trees again.

"Just in time of dinner," Father said.

In front of the car, as long as my finger, was a long line of tall gray buildings. They seemed to rise up out of the ground, getting bigger and bigger as if they were going to eat us whole.

“I didn't think we'd reach the next town for a while,” Mother said.

Through the back window, over the top of the piles of bags, I watched the trees get smaller and smaller until we turned a corner, and I could only see green lines on the concrete.