RIVERFISH

by

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A THESIS

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Riverfish is a collection of essays attempting to uncover my past. Therefore, the collection is something of a personal history that I wrote, trying to comprehend my larger history as a human being. I chose the name “Riverfish,” which is an invented compound noun, connoting a certain strength that I appreciate in nature. The natural world has been, and remains, the primary environment for my development.
DEDICATION

In Memory
Horace Robert Owens
Samuel Wesley Dowdle
Lillian Kathleen Dowdle
James Lee Owens
Josephine Alberta Owens

In Life
Meredith Hoke Owens
Adam Burroughs Vines
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INTRODUCTION

Several essays contained in Riverfish attempt to uncover something that is lost or hidden. The eponymous essay “Riverfish” deals directly with my own Creek Indian heritage and the reality that my ancestors often concealed their own lineage. What is hidden rests beneath impoundments, dammed rivers, and years of my forefathers hiding their native bloodline. Only recently has Indian heritage been lauded. My grandfather and my father were not proud of their Creek blood. Not until I was young, during the late 1970s, did that lineage become acceptable, bordering on fashionable. However, the pride that Indians had found soon became convoluted in attempting to locate an acceptable label for that lineage. Addressing the unnecessary sensitivity to a name is a goal of “Riverfish.” I intend for the essay to demonstrate that American history, like any history, is subjective and that it often masks actual occurrences and what is essential to fight for. The strength, not the name, is worth fighting for. In other words, names that are appropriate and supposed to be written down in history books seem superfluous. “Bois d’Arc” addresses a heritage greater than my own. The essay attempts to recall Alabama’s lineage. Like the waters that drown history in “Riverfish,” the soil of Alabama in “Bois d’Arc” covers remnants of history and traces of time can be found in Alabama’s soil. I am often at play on land that should be duly reverenced.
Layers of soil and of other organic material are natural features that several of my essays explore. “Imprint” recalls a limestone quarry near Monroeville, Alabama that I visited recently. I was not there as a paleontologist-in-training and neither were the other members of my party. Just as my group is at play in “Bois d’Arc,” we are at play in “Imprint.” Nonetheless, I discovered a chipped Megalodon tooth of substantial size located one hundred miles from the coast of Alabama on an exposed and ancient seabed. In that moment, millions of years became tangible to me in a way that books could never express. Eras became more than abstract numbers. Having recently read Loren Eiseley’s *The Immense Journey*, I was fixed upon attempting to explain what that discovery meant to me. The discovery was similar to Eiseley’s discovery of a man-like skull in “The Slit” when the two beings seemed to look into each other’s eyes. In “Imprint,” I do not attempt to draw a conclusion from the discovery. Instead, I hope the essay evokes the same perplexity that I experienced shortly after finding the tooth. My own privileged access to an abandoned limestone quarry led me to discover a representation of my own place in history, which, in turn, revealed my insignificance in time. The discovery happened because machines and men uncovered a history that many people are not comfortable unearthing.

Similar to what lies beneath water and soil, I have found that the night conceals realities that often go unnoticed. In “Who Cooks for You?” I illustrate that wire-strung power poles routinely electrocute raptors such as owls. The essay is the introduction to a much larger work that will demonstrate the widely unknown fact that bald eagles and golden eagles experience the same fate as owls. This fate, and history, of America’s powerful national symbol goes unwritten while people sleep, which is a metaphorical and
literal irony. The stability of America hinges on the availability of electricity, yet that same electricity regularly exterminates its natural symbol. This irony is a clandestine reality that historians and naturalists do not mention in their books.

Though history is always subjective and skewed, one can capture moments that are not as open to conjecture. Because photographs are visual references to events, they can provide greater historical accuracy. A photograph was the impetus for the essay “Polaroid Angel.” This fading Polaroid is an actual record of the last time that I spent with an old friend. Neither of us asked for the picture to be taken, but it was taken, and we smiled anyway. I paid an inflated price for posing. Without that photograph, my last memory of her would be of her cold and dying beside a back-road. In “Aim Small, Miss Small,” I hope to convey that remembering the finest details is similar to aiming a rifle. Accuracy in memory is like accuracy in marksmanship: one must focus on minute detail and the target memory. Men who are no longer living taught me to aim, and with their guns and their knowledge of how to aim, I can remember those men perfectly.

Riverfish is my memory and my history. Accuracy in nonfiction is essential. Those who have not spent a great deal of time in the natural can never fully notice inaccuracies. I write to those who will. Fish from rivers possess an uncommon strength. I equate a lack of current to complacency in writing. One cannot drive past a river and assume to understand it. A river must be walked, and its smooth, mossy rocks must be touched. One must listen to it rumble during high water, hearing its force. A river must be entered and its current felt. Nonfiction must surpass and clarify previous understandings or misconceptions. Nonfiction should question and learn from close observation and application. When I cast a line into a river’s depth and a fish pulls against my own
resistance, I begin to comprehend how strong current makes a living thing. When I pull a fish from a river, I gain a greater understanding of the natural world.
RIVERFISH

Resistance is key. Fighting to remain where one belongs makes the difference. Resistance is why river fish are stronger than lake fish. Regarding the power that bass possess, I know the variation well. I know because my hooks have pierced both. I’ve fought them to the side of hand-made wooden johnboats, gel-coated fiberglass boats, and dinged-up metal canoes. So far, I’ve caught several thousand and have seen the difference a thousand times.

The moment river fish emerge from roe current pulls them. Immediately, the current they’re born into tries to force them downstream. All their lives river fish fight, but they need the resistance, needing it like I need the broad blue sky and the oxygen that helps create it. Without rain, the water level lowers, killing the current. Pools form in the river’s deep ravines and begin to evaporate. The dead water surrounds the fish, depleting the oxygen, asphyxiating them. Drained of vigor, river fish continue to swim, needing the pools to fill again. The promise resides overhead in darkening clouds that will dump rain and swell the water upstream. River fish live for the current. When it comes, rivers roll brown and vicious, spilling brisk bubbles into clear water. Current haunts river fish, pressing against them, making them stronger. Resistance is strength. To stay alive, they fight the pull that tries to take them. If river fish don’t fight, they go where all currents flow, and blue saltwater suffocates them. Other species of fish swim to saltwater and live, but they come back to the river.

Anadromous Pacific salmon swim to the sea. Their gills make the transition by processing the thick saltwater as if the fish were born there. Eventually, they leave the saltwater and swim back to spawn and die in rivers. Fishermen celebrate Sockeyes for
expending all of their energy, persevering through feeding bears, dams, and wild mountain currents to reproduce in river water. Many die trying. Sockeyes that do make it upstream still die, and their bodies wash toward the sea one last time. Within them, the pull of the river is forever strong.

Like piranhas in the Amazon River, North American Spotted Bass are ravenous, but they lack teeth, the negative publicity, and the legendary notion that they’d gnaw a person’s body to the bone. River spots don’t eat people, but I believe they might if armed with sharp teeth. They are mean. Like a prowling pack of hungry wolves, swimming in schools, spots chase and annihilate balled wads of fleeing silver shad. Spotted Bass rule lakes, but not like the spots that rule rivers. Hooked, river spots present twice the fight. Their very colors are deeper, brighter. The jade green and diamond-shaped markings above their lateral line are greener, and more defined than the muted and blurred markings found on impoundment spots. Their vivid coloring and their strength set river fish apart. Some people think the freedom of rivers gives them color and power, but it’s the current river fish fight.

Lake fish swim in calm water, happening upon smaller bait like unsuspecting bream that seek cover under docks or among other protective structures. Water-level abatement or the demand for hydroelectric power dictates the current that lake fish experience. Lake fish chase shad and shiners, but their energy is sporadic unless current moves the still water. Hours pass without current and, some days, it doesn’t pull at all. Current comes when locks are opened and the captured water above the dam turns turbines, generating hydroelectric power. During the generating hours, lake fish are active and behave like river fish, but, when the current stops, they resort to pecking and
lumbering about the lake bottom for crawfish, leeches, or other bait that hides in submerged treetops or rock piles.

I enjoy catching both river fish and lake fish, but even small one-pound river fish fight like lake fish twice their size. For this fisherman, few moments are better than a well-placed cast and reeling a pearl-white ¼ ounce spinnerbait over a submerged tree stump when one of those little savages swims from beneath the muddy-brown stump to murder the titanium bait. There’s a light tap then a strong pull and a zipping sound as the line slices the river water and throws a rooster tail spray across the glass surface, making tiny beads that dance. Several times, my rod has nearly been yanked from my hands, bent almost double, and scraped down the side of the canoe as the spot darts toward the deep green channel. Often, river fish hook themselves. I merely react. I just hold on. Sometimes, fishing puts part of my mind to sleep. River fish wake me up; I must quit dreaming and fight back.

After I land any fish, the next trick is to take the hook from its mouth. To take it out, I hold the bottom lip with my thumb while the knuckle of my trigger finger presses against the throat. I dislodge the hook with my right hand, performing the procedure as carefully as possible. I rarely hurry, taking my time because the gills are delicate. I’ve done enough damage by puncturing the lips. Mostly, my hook sets are fast and clean, which keeps the barbed hook away from tender gills and soft throat muscles where, if punctured, a fish will bleed like a stuck pig. I am deliberate and exact, setting hooks and extracting them. The lip trick momentarily paralyzes the fish, so it won’t flop around, hurting itself more than I already have. Lipping a fish is like holding a cat by the nape of its neck.
Lake fish are normally done fighting by the time they’re in the boat, but not river fish. Almost all keep fighting after they’re landed. I lip river fish, and they shake furiously to get loose. It takes all the strength in my hand to hold a fighter weighing three pounds or more. A river spot will bite on my thumb as if it’s is prey. Wrestling with hooks, river fish are determined to escape my hold as river current takes me downstream.

I try to stay in the middle current away from the bank’s snaky over-hanging trees and log jams. If I veer from the middle current, the side currents will put me dead to the bank where I don’t want to be. I’ve seen sunning moccasins nearly as wide as a trucker’s tattooed forearm perfectly concealed and intertwined in tree roots. I know their mouths are as white as cotton. I’m steady. Patiently, I go for the hook in between bites. The villiform teeth on the lips scrape my thumb and knuckles. My hands are full. The river is moving. Shoal approaching. Ahead, I can hear the swift water shooting through the maze of slick boulders, making green swirls of foam in the pool. Below the shoal, in the fast eddying currents near the bank, the fishing will be choice. There, in the swirling foam or behind a rock, a big fish will be waiting to ambush a smaller one washing down river. I will make the right cast and reel the bait naturally along the flow of the river, mimicking a baitfish. As my bait moves from the protection of the bank to a rock or submerged structure in the river’s middle, a bigger fish should be waiting.

On my knees, I prop my paddle while I attempt to unhook a fish. Teeth look and feel like coarse sandpaper. I enter the swifter water, the canoe pitches, and my paddle slides across the gunwale into the green water. I grab it quick. My fingers graze the spot’s tongue. The hook is there. I take it out. The tongue patch is unique. Other than it, the diamonds, and the size of its mouth, a spot looks just like a Largemouth Bass. The
sandpaper teeth are useful for grasping fast and slippery meals like smaller spots. Bass are cannibals. With lake fish, the bigger the bass the bigger the grit, but river fish teeth are more developed, even on small fingerlings. River teeth wear away the skin faster. The fingerlings are tiny fighters constantly aware of their perilous environment down in the murky pools amongst fat cottonmouths, alligator snapping turtles, long-nose gar, flatheads, and prehistoric bowfins. Any wrong turn can mean death—a meal to other predatory animals that materialize from the grainy liquid brown. I ease the river fish into its cool, swift river water, and it swims back to the protection of its muddy brown stump.

* * *

Along the rivers I fish, Muskogulge Indians once lived and speared and caught spots without graphite rods and low-profile reels. They felled and hewed trees, crafting canoes with animal hides stretched over white oak staves. They sealed their canoes with animal fat. My 17’ ultra-light Penebscot canoe is made with a polymer plastic incorporated into a multi-laminate construction that can, supposedly, bend from bow to stern and never break. I can portage it to the river, over my head, by myself. The space-age polymer’s molecular configuration is strong and light. My canoe is a world of technology that demonstrates a brilliant manipulation of chemical compounds, but I never forget that its form still adheres to an earlier, more perfect design.

When the fish aren’t biting, I rest my paddle on the anodized aluminum gunwale and enjoy the current easing me downstream. I keep a lookout for Indians. I always think I’ll see one high above me on a passing bluff staring back at me, arm raised, holding a longbow over his head, friendly-like, a lone eagle feather stuck into his black hair made taut by braids, but I never do. I know it sounds crazy, but I imagine him often. Always, he is a dark shadow high above, but, when I paddle, he comes closer. With the raised
bow, he means to acknowledge the blood flowing in my veins—a brother. I believe he’ll sense it when my canoe silently approaches. The bow pointing toward the sky and his clenched fist are meant to offer strength. Sometimes, I raise my paddle to a ghost, returning his strength. The river flows, a spot busts the water, and he’s gone.

I always look for him, though. I look, hoping a handful of Indians slipped through the cracks, and their wives and many children live in the rock bluffs. They would call themselves Yuchis, Cowetas, Coosas, Natchez, Yamasee, Alabama, or Tuskegees, but the name that he is called will not matter to him. I will know him broadly as Muscogulge and, then, as Creek. I hope he has never heard the name Creek. For him, the new name never happened. His people were Muscogulge before those who would exterminate them renamed them Creeks. I would not tell him. I never would. The rivers, creeks, and streams would only be where he lived; they would not be his name. Creeks. To me, he is Muskogee—people of the swampy ground. Some historians write that settlers noticed the Muscogulge living along the prolific waters in what is now Alabama and Georgia. That is how they got the name Creeks. It is like naming Americans Streets.

In elementary school, I learned that the Creeks had a bad reputation for being confrontational. They weren’t known as artisans and creators of an alphabet like the Cherokee that hailed from northeast Alabama up to Tennessee. In fourth grade, Mrs. Dunn said Creeks were downright mean, said they were hostile. She read the overflowing facts from our Alabama history books.

“Remember the four Cs: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek. There were four tribes indigenous to Alabama. Who can tell me the definition of indigenous?”
No one answered. Mrs. Dunn gave the impression that Alabama was a state back then, just like now, back when the four Cs roamed the Southeast and Indians stayed in the confines of a state. It was as if Georgia possessed another set of Indians and Mississippi some more, four Indian names beginning with the same letter representing each state like football teams with tomahawks and war paint. She didn’t explain that there were no boundaries at one time—no imaginary lines. I wish she had. I’d like to have known it on one of my many trips up river to the principal’s office.

“All four were savage tribes, but at least the Cherokee and the Choctaw were civilized. Many were artists. The Cherokee Indian named Sequoyah developed an 86-character alphabet. He called paper ‘talking leaves.’” Mrs. Dunn went on to tell us how Sequoyah saw the white men looking at scrawled paper. It seemed like magic. The pages talked to the men, and they could understand the paper. She told how he believed the ability to preserve man’s thought on paper was like “catching a wild animal and taming it.” Sequoyah set out to tame the wild animal for his people. That information really was interesting, but she never had anything good to say about the Creeks.

“The Creeks were a very hostile tribe. They were belligerent. Who can tell me the definition of belligerent? It was on your vocabulary list last week.”

“War-like.” It came quick from a kid on the front row.

“Very good! Yes, remember class b-e-l-l-i-g-e-r-e-n-t.” Mrs. Dunn spelled it slowly, enunciating every letter for us. I never forgot those letters and never will.

Savagery was in their attitude. It flowed in their blood and down their rivers. According to our history book, the wounds were still raw. Before our fourth grade lesson on Indians concluded, Mrs. Dunn managed to paint a picture for me of blood-soaked
Creeks hiding in the darkness, in every closet—under every bed, poised with sharp, ragged flint knives. I saw my grandfather, himself Muscogulge, standing there waiting and redefined by history. Mrs. Dunn moved back to Sequoyah’s Cherokee alphabet, and we stayed on that accomplishment for two more days. The picture of the Cherokee poster child, Sequoyah, smoking his long pipe, pointing at the tablet, showing off his written language, appeared in every book and hung on the classroom wall. He was a scholar. I did an assignment on him. I wrote a two-page report on “talking leaves,” tucking the sheets of loose-leaf proudly into a red folder. I thought Mrs. Dunn would like it because I wrote it on a Cherokee, but I got a C.

Creeks fought back relentless waves of whites, and for that they acquired their reputation. Historians labeled Creeks because they fought. They were supposed to succumb to the white man, but they didn’t. Creeks couldn’t write history books, so historians recorded them as hostile, and the reputation stuck. Ultimately, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, they made one last stand on the banks of the Tallapoosa River in 1814, standing against the Indian-fighter Andrew Jackson and his flood of soldiers that rolled down the Tallapoosa. They’d had it with the Creeks because of the Fort Mims Massacre. At Horseshoe Bend, Creeks called themselves Red Sticks. Some write that they painted twigs white and red and placed them into two piles. Creeks who wanted to fight chose red. Those who didn’t chose white. White walked away, following the river currents until they came to the Florida swamps, renaming themselves Seminoles. They found safety in cypress swamps and mayhaw groves. The Seminoles stayed hidden in the backwaters with the gnats, mosquitoes, alligators, and moccasins. They were hard to find. Streets hadn’t been cut through the swamps—not yet. The swamps weren’t drained, and there
was no flood control. Osceola was their leader then. Now, a large recreational lake near Disneyworld is named for him.

The Seminoles’ claim to fame is that they are unconquered. Some of them escaped assimilation, but it’s because they hid. Maybe it was the thing to do. The Red Sticks stayed to fight the man who stares back at me from twenty-dollar bills. He blew through a gap in the Red Stick line, came around from behind, and slaughtered nearly every Red Stick at Horseshoe Bend.

Across the Tallapoosa from Alexander City, Alabama is the town of Jackson’s Gap. It’s just a small green road sign, really. Jackson’s Gap was the weakness in the Creek’s defensive line. Creeks never were the same after Jackson. He pushed thousands of Creeks into the Tallapoosa. Red Stick bodies floated downstream that March day in 1814, dying the river red.

Three years after Horseshoe Bend, Jackson followed the Apalachicola River into Florida. He went into the backwater after the Seminoles. Again, historians write that he won. Later, he became the seventh President of the United States for his military prowess. The whites called him Old Hickory because he was immovable like dense hardwood trees. Indians called him Sharp Knife because of the blood he spilled. For his greatness, his picture was painted many times. One portrait made the center of the twenty. As President, he signed the Indian Removal Bill in May of 1829, which led to the Trail of Tears less than a decade later. From Tennessee, Southeastern Indians walked to Oklahoma because of a current almost too strong to fight. Many died.

*   *   *

In North Georgia, down from the Tray Mountain Wilderness and out of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a stream trickles and builds through rhododendrons and Douglas Furs.
Kissed by cool mountain air, the Chattahoochee begins near where James Dickey’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Deliverance* was filmed. The Chattahoochee flows southwest, picking up streams and smaller rivers. Near Atlanta, it is wide. As the Chattahoochee flows on southwest through Columbus, Georgia, heading dead south near Auburn, Alabama, it forms the Alabama-Georgia border. In the lower west corner of Georgia, near Bainbridge, it meets the Flint River and, before 1957, the confluence of the Chattahoochee and the Flint formed the headwaters of the Apalachicola River, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

At one time, an Indian could float the whole of Georgia into Alabama through Florida to the Gulf of Mexico and, ultimately, to the sea. Now the Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam suppresses the flow of the Chattahoochee and the Flint and forms a 22,000 land-acre impoundment named Lake Seminole. The river confluence was dammed, and Lake Seminole was created to provide hydroelectric power for the grids of houses and streets throughout South Georgia and the Panhandle of Florida. The Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam cost $46,500,000.00 to build. The Florida Power Corporation sells generated power to pay for it.

Many Americans can trace their ancestry to specific ships that sailed the Atlantic. I can put part of myself on one, but a large part of my bloodline comes from the land under Lake Seminole. A trail leads to the sandy shores of the lake, but at the water’s edge the trail goes cold. The trail sinks into the dingy, shallow water until it vanishes into the deep and murky whiskey-colored water. If I could follow it, it would lead me to more answers, but they are beneath the water and years of my ancestor’s concealing their blood. The currents of the Flint and the Chattahoochee swelled and created the lake
where a part of me originated. I don’t want to think that my ancestors fled to the Florida swamps, but I will never know.

The waters have risen at Horseshoe Bend. The tremendous, u-shaped bend of the Tallapoosa River where the fighting raged has become Lake Martin—an impoundment for the Alabama Power Corporation. Lake Martin’s banks are lined with bright homes. Deep under the clear spring-fed water beneath the wake of Sea-Doos and sleek gel-coated bass boats, the current vanishes and a once-powerful force only murmurs. The arrowheads and tomahawks of the Red Sticks blend with all the other flint rocks. Down there, among crawfish and leeches, chipped flints rest beside Jackson’s lead bullets. I would have to look close to find a worked flint, hone it, and fasten it to an arrow. All is buried. All is forgotten and traces of a people are hidden. There is rest. The Tallapoosa is controlled. Every river tamed. Every Indian assimilated. The spots take it easy. No need for insurmountable strength. Lake bass lumber about, pretending to be river fish when the turbines turn. They are river fish now, only in memory.
Bois d’Arc

A line exists between the earth and the sky. In a South Alabama field, the Johnson grass often grows three feet high where the earth touches the sky upon a gradual rise. Near the hill, I can reach into the blue world. There, as in most skies, mourning dove fly unburdened of the weighted earth. Hollow white bones and silvery gray feathers ride falling and rising air currents. I go to take them from that world.

It was still dark when Dr. Mike pulled into my driveway in Birmingham. The pink dawn became day as we turned left onto Highway 5, heading straight south through the heart of Alabama toward Selma. Almost two hours after leaving Jefferson County, we met his younger brother Dr. Dan on the shoulder of Dixie Overland Highway 80. Dr. Dan, a psychiatrist, waited with his twelve-gauge automatic, cooler, and dove stool. Wiry and ready, he leaned against the gate to his five hundred acres. He looked like he’d been there for years. Tires scrunched the gravel entrance and we stopped. Dr. Dan opened his gate, gathered his gear, and got in the backseat. He buckled his seat belt without saying one single word. I turned and acknowledged him with a nod. Tires rattled over the cattle gate. Dr. Mike hit the gas and we drove through the high grass and across the country field.

“Easy drive?” Dr. Dan asked after we drove onto his land.

“Cooler up our way.” Dr. Mike answered.

Dr. Mike’s Trailblazer mowed down the headlight-high grass and flattened anthills, ramping the big vehicle almost airborne at forty miles per hour. Besides being anxious to get anywhere other than where he currently is, Dr. Mike was wired on old gas
station coffee he was sipping, though it had gone cold fifty miles back. Dr. Mike’s a veterinarian who hates to make people wait.

“Doc, you sure this is a road?” I asked.

“We’re on it. Dan and I’ve been coming here since the 50s.”

He swore we were on the road, but I wasn’t sure. It wouldn’t have mattered if not for the rainwater swaths that washed and cut through the land, fully capable of wrecking almost any truck. The road was clearer and easier to decipher during winter hunts. When the weather was cold and dry, crusty gaps served like an autopilot through the field. In late September, though, the grass was thick and the Trailblazer plowed it over like a tan carpet crafted from thousands of straws. The old ruts caused by vehicles moving over the same spot for years defined the old road. The heavy Trailblazer seemed to float as tufts of dry hayseed covered the windshield.

Sure enough, we hit something. Almost everything not tied-down seemed to fly around inside the Trailblazer as we ramped what could’ve been an anthill the size of a thick log. We bounced when the right front tire landed. My elbow nearly cracked the window beside me and my 200-count case of twenty-gauge shells slammed against the hatch door. I thought about all 200 ready primers situated in line with their powder and pellets of lead shot. I imagined the hole they could’ve blown through the gas tank had firing pins struck them in unison. The cold coffee that dripped down Dr. Mike’s window didn’t slow him down at all. Unfettered, he was headed toward what he and Dr. Dan called the back forty. It’s forty acres next to Bogue Chitto Creek—a narrow stream marking the backside of the huge property.

Dr. Dan’s five hundred acres was apportioned in a triptych. Rows of crooked trees
accompanied by occasional ancient oaks created three smaller fields within the large rectangular tract. All of it would be ours for the day. The rows of twisty, spiny trees known as bodark, or Bois d’Arc, indicated field barriers and old fencerows that had been defined for generations. The briar-laden branches of the bodark had been used as living fences since before twisted barbed wire was patented in 1873. Before barbed wire, lines of bodark served as scathing barriers for livestock that were meant to be kept in, or out, of fields.

“Mike, I believe the road’s a few feet to your right,” Dr. Dan said from the back seat. Dr. Dan is a quiet man, so when he forms complete sentences it’s something of a shock. He’s employed by the state of Alabama, making the final call whether mental patients are sane or not. Based on his evaluation, a person can be committed to a mental institution for life. He has never said one word about the conditions he’s seen.

Mostly, Dr. Dan uses the land to deer hunt. He’s built small, elevated shooting houses, like boys’ clubhouses, to hunt the deer from. At least one small house overlooks every field, but he doesn’t allow many people on his land. Dr. Mike and I, naturally, feel fortunate when invited. It’s a nice place. It’s good to feel ownership over an expanse of that much earth if only for one day. For me, it’s a heavy place too. I see the land’s history and I walk on it. The soil of Alabama blesses me and it haunts me. As an Alabamian, I am constantly reminded of the wrongs committed by and for the land. I’m not allowed to forget no matter where I turn. The black eye of Alabama’s history resides within its black and red soil.

The fields that we drove had to have been cleared and designated for several hundred years. The three fields were roughly marked with the Bois d’Arc trees dividing
them. The rusted barbed wire that they grew through came much later. In 1817 Alabama became a state, designating the parameters by the 31 and 33 parallels to the northern and southern borders, the Chattahoochee River to the southeast, and other established landmarks until near straight lines were drawn and something of a square defined. Like other states, Alabama gave almost any man forty acres and a mule early in its history. The back forty, as the doctors called it, was probably still designated by a deed written on sheepskin and signed by President Monroe. In bank deposit boxes and safes, the rustic words are inscribed on skins, tucked away, folded, and brittle with age. Over the years, families sell land while others add to theirs. The skins change hands.

Like all natural places, Dan’s land possesses a tempo of its own. A man with a broken tailpipe dangling from the rear of his truck comes a few times a week to feed cows. Compared to the man’s old pick-up, the Trailblazer was quiet as Dr. Mike looked for the biggest oak he could find. The leafy branches camouflage the truck, so the shining roof and hood were hidden from overhead.

“Dan, will this do?” Dr. Mike asked as he crunched fallen limbs with his tires.

“Yes.”

We gathered the guns, shell vests, small coolers, stools, sunglasses, hats, and shot shells. We walked toward the far away tree-line at the back corner of the acreage. Fifteen hundred yards from the Trailblazer, the rolling field ended in a cluster of trees that backed-up to the Bogue Chitto. Before we arrived, the field was serene. The tall grasses blew, cows ate at the engulfing grass, and various birds flew over it all.

Everything seemed to hush or run as we walked. The place where the earth and sky met appeared ahead of us. With high steps, we treded over the thick Johnson grass,
passed around fire-ant hills, cow patties, and the large lime-green fruits known as hedge apples, or mock oranges, that had fallen from the bodark trees. The fruits were scattered like children’s toys forgotten after a ballgame. Green and brown grasshoppers hurried to make way. I kept an eye peeled for any type of snake. They slither like silent streams of quicksilver, never disturbing a single blade of grass when they move. Ahead, three tufted titmice flew from cover to thicker cover, avoiding our heavy steps. The titmice seemed to bob up and down as they made way. They, too, seemed to be playing. Dragonflies sailed about, darting from this place to that place like toy helicopters.

Over the rise, at the rear of the field, we took our positions for the day: Dr. Dan at the tail end of the tree-line approaching the cornfield, Dr. Mike at the far left, and me at the far right. We formed a triangle. Alone, I studied the ground for a few moments and then positioned my dove stool, stepping down field grass, creating a cushion so thick that it felt like springs. The sun pounded. In the canvas pocket of my stool I had a bottle of water and a melting Twix candy bar to get me through the day. The sky was bluebird—not a cloud or even a wisp of white in sight. It was the kind of day someone dressed in a bathing suit and lathered with suntan lotion would hope for at the beach. I, however, was in the middle of Alabama, wearing a camouflage shirt, khaki pants, and Maine hunting boots. I was armed with a twenty-gauge shotgun and two boxes of high brass #9 shells.

I was situated at the beginning of a long tree-line that ran for a hundred yards or so and ended into a perpendicular fencerow. To my right a tilled brown square of rich dirt almost the exact width and length of a football field barely grew winter rye. The sprouts looked chartreuse. Over the rye, bush hog and disc had mutilated hundreds of stalks of corn, and their dried red husks looked like carnage. I could see the spots of busted yellow
corn cobs freckling the field and dry feed corn scattered for good measure. Dr. Dan did all the work. Dr. Mike paid for the corn. No human ever ate the corn that grew there all summer. It was plowed under to bring the dove. For two months, Dr. Dan added extra corn to keep them there. He planted rye and corn, so we wouldn’t be shooting over a baited field. It could be a crop, but it’s a loophole in the law.

The woods were behind me. As my dove chair sunk into the grass, I scanned the cloudless sky above the rise. The pale blue was infinite, turning fire red to my right, and I learned not to look that way again. I stared, looking for tiny hints of gray flying too high for a shot, but low enough to indicate that they were considering the area. I saw nothing—not even a sentry dove watching from a high naked limb. The sentry is important because it brings the others, making them feel safe. The wind had died. If they came, they could come from any direction. They could come down the fencerow, from the tree line going away from me, or from beyond the blind rise of open field ahead, or from the deep woods behind. Often, they follow land features like fencerows and tree-lines. They seem to materialize from nothingness: not knowing from where they will appear is the sport and the exceptional difficulty of actually shooting one from the sky.

I studied the routes for two straight hours. Eager yet rusty, I raised my twenty-gauge twice. For a while, little birds and dragonflies taunted me like field furies. I raised my gun on an unidentified bird that looked like a fast purple martin and, then I raised it again on a dragonfly. I stared into the deep blue for so long my spatial sense could not differentiate between a big bug and a bird.

One hundred-fifty triangulated yards apart we sat, covering the plowed field like sentinels ourselves. We sat far beyond any possible conversation. My water bottle was
lukewarm. I placed half of the Twix on top of a fire anthill just to see what they’d do with all of that sugar. They covered the chocolate bar, turning it a reddish-brown that became fuzzy and moved like it was alive. From above, the scene was somehow tranquil, but I knew that it wasn’t. The ants devoured the candy bar and looked to be devouring one another. The sun was relentless and, still, no breeze. I could smell the rubber of my boots warming. The field slept. Not even the wrong birds flew. I studied my gun for a while, considering its simple and efficient design, its social complexity, and concluded that it was metal and wood with a trigger. Still, no dove nor peep from the doctors. I drifted again.

I could’ve been sleeping. I don’t really know. Ahead, on the crest of the rise, I imagined the transformations of the field in time, when no one owned it and only trails existed. I saw three braves creep slowly upon a grazing doe, their orange wooden sticks moving slowly, slightly above the high grass. Though the spiny Bois d’Arc trees were planted to separate land holdings and to prevent erosion, Indians would journey south for hundreds of miles to obtain a long straight piece for crafting bows. Quietly, I saw one of the strong orange bows bend and the ripple of the deer’s muscles as the arrow entered. I saw the shooter and the other two ask pardon and they carried the meat sheathed in its useful hide into the woods that bordered Bogue Chitto. They carried it for three families, anticipating the honor for their kill. The spirit, Little Deer, was as fast as the wind and pleased with their respect. Then the three red bodies dissipated into the field grass.

It wasn’t long until I saw field hands, thirty of them, working the land. Plows and oxen shackled like they were born and shaped for the other. Hard and strong backs pulsed from breathing—man and animal. Muscles rolled over bones like boulders tumbling
down a hill. Sweat washed over them, dripping down into the black soil. Children and wives, at no leaner tasks, toted their own burdens and loaded heavy wagons of seed-filled cotton that smelled like the earth does when the earth smells sweet. I saw the women fetch creek water, deliver it, and wipe brows as they came from the woods again and again. I saw them at their dinner in a dark cabin lit by grease candles and the pride they found in what they had to do. The wives, children, and fathers ate and were full.

I could have been asleep, but I know that I wasn’t. Watching the rise, I knew I missed nothing. I saw the hopping birds fly through the field hands. I saw the lone wasp dance about the anthills for what could have been an hour as the Indians crept upon the doe. The rise was empty. Ever so faint, wind began to blow the field grass. Three dragonflies dispersed among the field. I did not raise my gun—I watched them. I looked into the sky and surveyed the sun. We had tilted. At three o’clock, the sun was less severe and the powder blue of the sky had slightly darkened. Still, there were no clouds. The wind began.
Paw Paw’s Model 61 Winchester seemed much larger when I was a boy. I have grown, and the rifle’s tapered barrel and slim, wooden stock feels like a BB gun in my hands. Now, the butt of the stock is too short. My arms are longer, and I must pull the stock back toward my shoulder to shoot it. If I don’t rest the end of the rifle there, the barrel dangles with nothing to steady it. I have to hold tight. If I don’t, the smallest twitch can make me miss. Worn and ragged, the .22 is deadly. The little rifle has been around for as long as I can remember. The last time Paw Paw shot it, sunlight surrounded him. Sometimes, my mind captures moments like photographs. In my last memory of Paw Paw, he was surrounded by brightness, pointing the little rifle straight at the sun over South Georgia. My Daddy and I stood beside him. I was only a small boy.

* * *

The three of us were on the sand road that cut across Paw Paw’s one hundred acres and led from the cinder block camp-house back to the spring-fed pond. The walk to the pond was a ritual that Paw Paw first took when he was only a boy. In the years that followed, my Daddy took that walk, then my brother, and then I. Sometimes, we took it together. We’d caravan from Alabama, and the moment we stepped foot on his land in South Georgia, Paw Paw would rig a rod and reel, so he could try the big bass on top-water. He always took the Model 61 for snakes. Even at dark, he and Daddy would venture into the blackness across the peanut field right past the red, rusting combine with the black polyethylene awning that blew in the wind. I never knew who parked the combine, killing the engine for the last time at the edge of the field, but I knew its black awning. It was weather-worn and moved like a ghost farmer with the slightest wind. Only
one side of the woven plastic cloth held fastened to the metal canopy frame; the rest of it would blow about, moving as a man once would’ve, sitting in the driver’s seat, reaping what grew from the flat, fertile land. In the daytime, after the gate swung open, I would stay close to the men and pass the combine with my eyes trained on it until it was gone. It haunted me. To me, it guarded the field. I suppose it was simply the imagination of a boy. In each of our own decades, we all walked that haunted road: Paw Paw in the 1920s, Daddy in the 1940s, and my brother in the 1960s. Nineteen seventy-nine was my turn. I was six. I’d walk to the pond many times since, but I can never forget that day. My older brother watched football in the camp house while the three of us looked into the blue sky at a hawk gliding high above.

At six years old, I couldn’t look into the bright sky for very long, but Paw Paw and Daddy never took their eyes away. We stood for hours, yet maybe a minute passed as the silver barrel followed the rising and descending hawk, a speck of black in the painful blue. Silent, I stood with them as the 61’s barrel circled with the hawk until it and Paw Paw seemed connected by a long, straight string. All the while, Paw Paw kept a constant bead on his target.

I only knew Paw Paw as an old man. His gait was slow and slightly bent. His skin, rather than wrinkled, bore a thousand lines like Geronimo’s in old photographs. As Paw Paw pointed the gun, his body bent with the lissomness of youth. I’d never seen him move so fluidly. I could see the crow’s feet beside his eyes deepen as he squinted, tightened his body, and narrowed his aim. He waited until the hawk flew directly above. From below him, I could see down the slender barrel as my eyes began to bear the bright sun. When he squeezed the trigger, the rifle made a cracking sound, and the hawk fell
straight down, appearing larger and larger until landing in the pale-green briars a few feet away. The blood roll down the brown and gold feathers, and I didn’t understand why he killed it, but I’ll never forget that shot. It was perfect. No shotgun could’ve breached that distance, and few men could’ve made that shot with a bullet so small.

“Damn buzzards,” Paw Paw said as he pumped the Model 61’s ribbed forearm, ejecting the spent brass shell onto the sand burm at his feet.

“Hell, it’s not a buzzard; it’s a hawk. One hell of a shot, but it wasn’t hurting a damn thing flying up there,” my Daddy said.

“Why hell, I know what it was! Hawks eat the damn quail and the damn snakes eat the damn eggs. Here you take the damn gun. Shoot snakes then,” Paw Paw said and handed the 61 over to him.

That was the last time I saw Paw Paw touch the 61. He was seventy. Today, nearly thirty years later, tarnished freckles caused by the oils from his hands spot the 61’s silver action and barrel. I run my fingers down the pitted metal and feel the painful sun on my face and the soft sand road on my bare feet. I can place my hand where his hard hands held the rifle, duplicating the shot that killed the hawk I hardly saw. The ribbed wooden forearm shows crude waves of walnut stain where he tried to make it new again. Every scratch and scar on the 61 has its own memory.

At one time, the wood was glossy and the pitted silver barrel was a mirrored blue as it rode toward South Georgia on Highway 231. It was before cops had radios and radars and “all a man had to do was outrun the sirens behind him. Drive and don’t look back.” That’s what Paw Paw said and exactly what he would’ve done when flying down the roads between Birmingham, Alabama and Bainbridge, Georgia—where he was
born—going where he’d built the cinder block camp-house. He’d go when the city became too busy, returning to the place where he’d walked plowed fields as a boy hunting coveys of bobwhites. Along with his shotguns, the 61 made the trip every single time he went go home.

The 61 is only one of his Winchesters. When I was thirteen, Paw Paw passed away, and the 61 and the other guns became Daddy’s. When I was thirty-three, Daddy passed away and all of the guns became mine. The guns are records of the men before me. The guns take me back to places I can’t remember by myself. I have their guns because they are dead. I inherited the guns from my father—the ones I once couldn’t go near without the men beside me—because I knew the guns. I load, aim, and shoot them to remember.

The days when I could not touch them have passed, but I still respect what they meant when I was small. Holding one and shooting it could’ve propelled me into manhood and made me smell of sweat and cigarette smoke and smoldering cotton under the terrible Georgia sun. I recall Paw Paw’s rough, sparse whiskers wet with warm Pabst Blue Ribbon and his gruff voice, teaching me to skin squirrels and crack pecans as we sat in aluminum folding chairs in the shade. We were under the sole live oak tree that stood in front of the cinder-block house. Me Maw kept its white, sandy yard clean with a broom. The 61 leaned against the oak. As a boy I imagined that, if I’d walked over and picked it up, placing the stock between the small muscles of my right shoulder, and aimed it as Paw Paw did, the percussion of the powder and the death that the spiraling bullet delivered would’ve made me as strong as he. Somehow, my tender skin would’ve become hard, aging with a thousand lines like his. I could’ve had the skin that didn’t
wrinkle like soft, wadded white paper like the skin of other grandfathers. Shooting the .22 would’ve made my eyes coal black, narrowing to slivers of nothing in the sun. The gun would’ve tempered my voice like his—a voice that made me shiver when it deepened. The 61 would’ve made me a man as rough and as deadly as he was with his plaid shirt and khaki pants, no matter the weather or the occasion, and the scuffed leather belt I never felt, but feared. I can recall these pictures perfectly. His guns take me there.

* * *

For years, I saw my Daddy every day. Up until I was old enough to drive, we went almost everywhere together. We cycled thousands of rounds through all of Paw Paw’s guns, shooting at targets rather than animals. Once, Daddy stood on the high bank of a flooded Valley Creek, throwing empty glass bottles to his right. The bottles bobbed up and down in the rapid, muddy current going downstream. Clear bottles were the toughest to hit. They were almost invisible, blending with the stained water. I could only see the paper labels moving by. I’d learned to lead by anticipating where a moving target would be instead of where it was. I’d aim, having learned to recognize the crucial difference between a static target and a fleeting one. I learned to seize seconds, aim, and shoot before the brief moment was lost forever. By then, I was almost as good as Paw Paw and Daddy were with the 61. I aimed the rifle that was still big and rarely missed the colorful labels as they floated toward the Warrior River. I smelled the salty gunpowder and the sweet anise of heated Hoppes gun oil. Daddy’s hands, as soft as mine are now, handed me the gun, trusting me with what it could do. I heard the crack of the .22 bullets and the plunging concussion as they entered the dense water. If I’d been told a day would come when I couldn’t remember my Daddy, I wouldn’t have believed it. Sometimes, though, the specific lines of his face are lost to me.
The first gun I ever shot wasn’t the Model 61 Winchester. It was my great-grandfather’s Ithaca—an old rabbit ear, double barrel 12-gauge shotgun. I shot the relic while sitting Indian-style beside the pond the day the hawk went down. Remembering the way the gun put my brother on his back six years before, Daddy told me to sit so the recoil wouldn’t knock me down. A moment later, Daddy walked a good distance away and pressed a waxed-paper oil can into the sand near the boat landing. Paw Paw loaded both of the Ithaca’s barrels with high-brass shells, handed me the heavy gun, and told me not to touch the triggers until he said so.

“Remember, when you aim, you aim small,” Paw Paw said.

“Cock the ears back, and when you’re ready, don’t pull. Squeeze the triggers slow and you won’t pull your aim off target. Forget everything but the can,” Daddy said.

I let the rest of the world fade away until the only thing I could see was the oil can between the barrels. With both rabbit ears cocked and my muscles struggling to hold the long gun, I placed the can beyond the barrels’ bead and felt the smooth, cold metal triggers. I raised a knee to steady the heavy barrel and squeezed, and the can flew backward to the lily pads that bordered the pond. The gun recoiled into my shoulder as if Paw Paw had hit me as hard as he could’ve. A red welt began to rise where the butt of the stock had been. Lead shot clinked in the can as Daddy walked back shaking it at his hip. My shoulder and ears hurt and tears came to my eyes, but I did not cry out loud. I didn’t know not to squeeze both triggers, and they didn’t tell me. They never wanted me to forget what a gun could do. I never have.

“Two double-aughts. Good aim,” Daddy said.
“Not bad, but that can ought to be in two pieces after that much lead,” Paw Paw said. “Next time, don’t aim at the whole damn can. Pick a letter and aim at it.”

Years later, I would learn that the Ithaca had flown from Daddy’s hands when he was six. It was a ritual.

The guns go back long before I was born in 1973. As a boy, I shot the 61 the most. It was lightweight and easy to shoot like my Benjamin pellet gun, but the .22 caliber 61 was far more powerful and deadly. With nothing to stop them, .22 bullets travel a mile or more before expending their velocity and falling back to earth. They’re light-grained, rimfire bullets without the recoil of shotgun shells. They are deceptively quiet. Standard .22 cartridges produce 140 dB (decibels) whereas a 12-gauge shells produce 150 dB. The .22 isn’t quite as loud, but since standard bullets achieve supersonic speed before leaving the barrel, the crack of bullets breaking the sound barrier that close to one’s ears is detrimental to one’s hearing. Like a dog whistle, .22 cartridges fired over and over do their damage without the shooter knowing until it’s too late. I can feel when the shotgun damages my ears. When I was small, the sound scared me. The booms from the shot shell’s powder, not the recoil, made me gun-shy after I fired those two shells beside the pond. The small .22 shells only cracked when they fired, thumping into the South Georgia soil.

* * *

The rusting combine, sinking into the field, stood guard at the beginning of the sand road. I was so small that the half-mile walk to the pond seemed like miles. It would be several years before Paw Paw would shoot the hawk.

“Daddy, don’t carry the shotgun; carry the .22,” I said.

“We might see a deer and Paw Paw’s wanting meat,” he said.
“It’s loud, though,” I said.

“I see,” he said.

We were out of earshot of my Paw Paw, but Daddy understood. The three of us set out toward the pond. They were astride the soft white sand road, and I followed dragging a stick that made a snake track behind us.

“What’d you bring that little gun for?” Paw Paw asked Daddy.

“Just felt like it,” and Daddy changed the subject to the crop of soybean sprouting in the field beside us where the watermelon had grown.

“You can’t bring a deer down with that little thing. We might as well turn around for the 12.”

“Let’s go look at the pond. It’s too hot for deer to move, anyway.”

I was tired of walking, so Daddy carried me on his shoulders. I held his short black hair like a rein. He smelled of Brut aftershave and the cigars he held in his mouth but never lit. His face was as smooth as mine. At the split in the road, Paw Paw walked straight to the pond, and Daddy walked me the long way through the stand of ancient live oaks. Together, we were eight feet tall. He carried the 61 under one arm and held my foot with the other hand. I could see the big live oaks, the rest of the woods, and everything in them. That’s how I saw the doe.

She was half concealed by palmetto. Without a word, I moved my father’s head in her direction like I was positioning an action figure. When his eyes met hers, she bolted upright and stood as stiff as she could. She just stood there. That’s all I saw before my body hit the ground. My father shrugged me from his shoulders, and I fell to the ground that was blanketed with leaves. I remember only one shot on my way down and two
others before I got to my feet. A few moments passed, and we walked over to her. She was dead. A stream of red blood poured from her ear.

Daddy called the 61 the gallery gun because it was the kind he used in the shooting gallery at the Alabama State Fair when he was a boy. He’d tell me of the flat, iron targets traveling across a wall thirty or so feet away. The targets were shaped like ducks, squirrels, and deer, disproportionately sized, but painted to resemble real animals down to little blue eyes on yellow ducks and black eyelashes on gray squirrels. The 61 was exactly the same gun, and Daddy didn’t miss after he paid the carnival guy a quarter for the ten brass shells to slide down the magazine tube. Daddy learned to shoot living targets with real fur and feathers, so painted iron cutouts weren’t hard to hit, especially with a gun he knew so well. Just old enough to steady the rifle with his elbow propped on the counter, he’d nail ten of ten. He was just a kid, but, year after year, the carney hated to see him coming because he had eyes that could count painted eyelashes.

He told me that story many times—58497 is the serial number on the 61, and, according to Winchester’s records, it was manufactured in 1942. Daddy would’ve been one year old.

* * *

When I was only two, a two-toned red and white 1971 Ford F100 with a white cotton tarp covering the bed ran like a scalded dog down Highway 231. Paw Paw and his best birddog Pal were making the trip from Birmingham to Bainbridge to hunt quail. Pal rode under the tarp on a pallet of fresh pine straw. Along the way, someone in a car ahead of them flicked a spent cigarette from a window that landed on the cotton tarp and caught fire. By the time he or Pal knew what was happening, the bed of the F100 was a ball of flame flying down Highway 231 near Ozark.
That’s how three Winchesters lost their bluing. The 61 got it worst. As the fire moved from the bed to the cab, the 61 and the others remained in the fiery truck as Paw Paw ran after Pal. Scared and confused, Pal tore across a field toward a stand of long-leaf pines. Paw Paw followed, leaving the truck and guns, but Pal only ran faster. Paw Paw must’ve decided to save what he could when he went back to the truck and reached into the flames for the guns. He reached for the 61 last. To him it was a tool—a hammer—nothing more and nothing less. Maybe it was just chance he saved it. With both arms badly burned, he must have been holding the 61 as he turned to watch Pal become a small black speck as the dog reached the other side of the large field.

“Pal was the best birddog in the world,” Daddy would say in the late 1980s as we drove down the long highway toward what was once Paw Paw’s land.

Always at the same place, along that straight stretch of 231, Daddy would point beyond the large field usually planted in cotton. His finger would aim at a small cluster of long-leafe, remembering Pal and telling me again about the birddog I never knew. The pines marked a small spot in the distance. I couldn’t tell which cluster he meant, but I’d act like I knew exactly where I was supposed to look. It was too far away to be sure. To him, the distant trees were the last he knew of Pal. The pines were a marker—no different than a tombstone. Sometimes, though, he would slow the car as if to see Pal running back to the highway, bounding over the plowed cotton rows, coming to him after so long. It’d been years, but it didn’t matter. He missed the birddog, and the pines reminded him. I only saw Pal in a few photographs, but I have no doubt that Daddy could see the white-and-liver-spotted pointer running back to him as if time had stood still.
The fire melted the bluing, turning the 61 a true gunmetal gray rather than blackish-blue like most guns. A collector would consider it ruined: with patches of rust on its silvery barrel, the wood showing char, and its loose stock that rattles. It has very little monetary value. It’s a tack driver, however. With a steady hand and a good aim, it can outshoot almost any .22 it goes up against.

At the trigger end, a V rests inches away from my eyes. On the other end, from where the bullets spin from the spiraled rifling, stands a vertical bar. The top of the bar should be barely visible between the V if I want to hit something at a respectable distance. When the V and the bar become one as I look down the barrel, I know that I have the aim right. When the sights are lined up correctly, the shot will be dead on. If the two sights separate before I squeeze the trigger, the slight distance will become significant the greater the distance. Placing the V over the vertical bar and finding a specific spot on the target is aiming small. Hitting the target dead center is missing small. Perfect execution occurs between the two sights. The slightest deviation or flinch will ruin a shot. Aiming is like memory.
One cold Sunday morning, beside a back-road, someone found her face down in rocks, lying like a doll flung from some car window. She landed wrong side up where a gravel side road led into dense pines and sweet gums. She was almost home. No one seemed to know who took her there. Someone just opened a car door and threw her away. Once, she had been almost angelic. Sometimes, I imagine her brought down like a wayward one. Shot from the night sky as she searched and felt her way. Blown-down, while flying under the cover of night—flying unnoticed like angels. She didn’t have far—five miles, maybe.

Fourteen years before, I took her home every day after high school. She worshiped my Pontiac GTA. It was one of the fastest cars in Hueytown, armed with a 350 cubic-inch V8 engine. Candy-apple red, loaded like a Corvette, it could jump from zero to sixty in 6.5 seconds—three miles registered on the odometer when I turned the key the first time in the summer of 1989. I was sixteen. Everyday, I took curves posted for twenty-five at speeds exceeding sixty. The suspension stuck 16” tires mounted on gold honeycomb rims to the black asphalt like bubble gum. The GTA never failed me. Other guys wanted to race when they saw it parked at Taco Bell with girls all around—pretty girls sporting teased bangs, wearing too much make-up, hovering like honeybees. Below their hairspray, eye shadow, and caked powder they were beautiful. Beneath the hood, the GTA’s stock 235 horsepower was red-hot, inciting anyone who walked by. Other guys with fast cars wanted a shot. Some guys should’ve known better. I’d tell them there was no use, but they’d want it even more. On a straight section of some road, they’d see what
I meant. Sometimes, they skipped the race and wanted to fight. Either way, we went to the back-roads.

Sometimes I dream. I can feel the cold, white rocks and can see her inhale the dry, white dust. I see a stream of warm red blood roll down her face to the rocky ground and coagulate. Her last minutes move slowly like a lifetime, yet the blood races through her veins. At night, while I sleep, she comes to me in red and white, rings still on her fingers, her thick Coke bottle glasses broken beside her, one dime in her pocket. I see the tattoo on her back. It was something new—something I never saw when she was alive. I’d only heard. Her older sister told me long before the fall.

“The tattoo is only the tip of the iceberg,” her older sister said. It was all part of a downward spiral—a decline I never saw with my own eyes.

One night, on the quarter mile at Pittman Straight, she sat beside me while we raced a baby-blue Corvette. The quarter-mile began in a curve and ended in pines. Racing Pittman Straight meant death. One had to win the race to the designated finish line and, then, the race to stop before the car wrapped around a pine tree, crushing like an aluminum can. The secret was to brake at the last possible moment, knowing just how far one could go. Speed was only half of the battle. The driver with the guts to brake last would win. Knowing when to stop meant everything. She loved to race, and, often, she’d be there like lady luck. By the time I hit 70 that night, the trees were dead ahead. I locked the brakes, sliding sideways until the wide, sticky tires finally stopped on the loose gravel. A few feet away, our dust blew toward stout pines, coating them like sugar. The guy in the Corvette drove up and said he’d missed second gear. He wanted another shot. We lined up, side by side, on the dark road for one more go. I knew he found second the
next time when I heard his rear tires bark, grabbing the asphalt like only second gear can.

It didn’t matter. We smoked him.

I called her Reese Cup because her breath often smelled like peanut butter while I drove. Every day, driving from school, she’d want to stop to buy candy. Beside me, she’d sit half on the console and half on her sister’s lap, eating chocolate, playing the stereo, and looking into my eyes through my rearview mirror that she’d readjust when she’d slide close. She’d stare like we were the only two people in the car, or on earth. Her big eyes were deep, making my stomach burn when she wouldn’t look away. She’d eat her chocolate, and, sometimes, I’d watch her full lips rather than the road. The whole time her sister would tell her the junk food would make the pageant dresses too tight. She didn’t care. She couldn’t have cared less. Once, she reached down near my right knee, turning the volume way up, *Every Rose Has Its Thorn*, singing the Poison song louder than her sister’s warning.

Years later, choruses rose from clean churches while she lay on sharp, white rocks. It was February—the coldest month in Alabama. Her beautiful face was blanketed with dust beside that back-road while rocks pressed their images into her soft skin. Frost came before daybreak, and frozen crystals glistened on pine needles and grass blades, coating anything exposed between earth and sky. She’d pushed the limit, too far. She hadn’t stopped.

In the last picture I have of her, she’s wearing those thick, red-rimmed glasses she’d wear if she wanted to see. People called her glasses Coke bottles because they were thick like the bottles filled with the cocaine formula way back when drug stores were apothecaries: like the bottles that I’d look on the bottom of to see where they were
from—the ones worth a dime when bottles meant something more, like the clear glass ones I throw away, now, since they’re not worth a penny. Old men still lace these bottles with peanuts, remembering themselves as boys long ago.

In high school, people thought her Coke-bottle glasses were funny. They did look out of place on her pretty face. Because people laughed, she rarely wore them. Her world must have been one big blur, but none of us really knew that then. She’d say contacts weren’t strong enough. At one time, the glasses had been funny, but not anymore.

She was one year younger than I. I graduated high school and went to a small college to raise my GPA, hoping to get into Auburn University. She dropped out of high school her senior year. In time, we lost touch, but I saw her once in Birmingham before she got her tattoo, and someone took a Polaroid picture of us at 5 Points Music Hall while we held beers and smiled. We weren’t legal to drink, but we had aliases. Almost everyone from Hueytown had at least one fake ID. Go to the right place, say the right thing, hand the right guy a $50.00 bill, and anyone could be old enough. I was home for Christmas. My arm is around her and hers is around me. It was 1993. She’s wearing a grunge-flannel shirt like Kurt Cobain and sporting those crazy red-rimmed glasses.

In high school we took turns. I’d find new girlfriends and she’d find new boyfriends and, always, we’d find new ways to hurt each other. In the Polaroid, some years had passed and in it we’re friends again. We’re older. We’re thinking the worst is over—survivors of our hometown and veterans of one another. Hueytown is in the rearview mirror. It’s all behind us. The dust has settled. She’d finished her GED and enrolled in Jefferson State Community College. We were catching up at the big bar, being all grown up, when some man with the Polaroid camera asked to take our picture.
We posed, and he demanded ten dollars as if we’d owed it to him for months. He was wired. I gave him a ten; he gave me the picture. He had a scheme—taking pictures for another gram of coke. The photograph became clear when he walked away.

After the picture developed, she looked at it and laughed. I put it in my shirt pocket, thinking I’d wasted the money. In it, I see her bright red lipstick, her trademark dimples, and the biggest, prettiest cheeks supporting the heavy glasses she never wore in pageants.

I can see her, now. Dressed like a doll with her back to the curtain, facing rows of blinding lights that distort an auditorium full of judges. Her dress, hair, and make-up are all perfect. She smiles at a blurry wall of strobe-light images while other contestants smile at proud parents and multitudes of camera flashes. If she can see the end of the runway, turn at the right moments, and walk back behind stage, she will place. She did in every pageant that she entered. Most of the time she won. She never stumbled or fell.

One summer night, four of us drove to Tuscaloosa for no reason. Her best friend sat beside my best friend in the back seat of the GTA. She sat close beside me as I drove. It was a double date. The GTA was brand new, rumbling west down I-20/59 like a bright red arrow fired into the night. Looking back, I can’t believe how young we were. The girls didn’t know what my best friend and I were doing. They didn’t know why we wanted to drive so far or so fast. We wanted to move at 90 mph, seeing the highway reflectors shoot like stars through the darkness. The T-tops were out and the wind blew our hair. The girls played music. I watched the streams of light from the oncoming lanes until they blurred into an infinite white line. It all flew past us into the darkness and settled near pines and sweet gums beside the warm road.
Elements more numerous than calcium in the earth’s crust could have been used to build the skeleton. Our history is the reason—we came from the water. It was there the cells took the lime habit, and they kept it after we came ashore.

–Loren Eiseley from The Immense Journey

Expansive white slopes were smoothed and channeled by rain. On a high bluff beside the Alabama River, the old limestone quarry was nearly five acres square—skinned into the, otherwise, deep woods. Except for humans walking the snow-like slopes, the quarry was stripped of life. Earth-moving machines and men left three wide steps dug into the side of a limestone hill. The half-moon cavity of their labors resembled a terraced amphitheatre capable of seating giants. Bulldozers and loaders had removed the brown soils, halting the spread of prolific vegetation that would normally thrive and tangle in tree canopies far above the white acidic soil. Several cedars had taken root and stood in the graduated whiteness like Christmas trees. Besides the cedars and sparse tufts of grasses, very little would take root there for some time. The dig lasted for twenty-odd years, and it had gone deep.

We hunted shark teeth. To me, it was difficult to comprehend that they’d be there, but Tom, the property’s owner, said they would. Still, we were one hundred miles north of The Gulf of Mexico and well up into the Coastal Plain where southern pines grew like weeds and timber rattlers were plenty. We were near the stretch of highway where cars packed with vacationers headed to the Gulf’s sugary-white beaches and its blue-green surf. To most of the southbound beachgoers, the hot, tick-infested woods were only woods, always would be woods, and always had been.
Before leaving the warehouse, Tom showed us spoils from past trips to the quarry. Two shark teeth half the size of my hand were framed in a shadowbox and presented as prized discoveries. Over the years that the Stallworth family had owned the 2,000 acres and the abandoned quarry, only five such teeth had ever been found. The two on display were the largest and the most intact. And, as Tom told us, the teeth were impressive enough for an Alabama natural history representative to officially record them into a book.

“These are two my sister found. This biggest one is just shy of the Alabama state record by a ¼ of an inch. Don’t expect one like this, but there are plenty of little ones. You gotta have sun so it’ll catch them just right. With it, they’ll shimmer like shards of glass,” Tom said.

Past the dusty shadowbox glass, not a chip showed in the brown enamel. A porous calcium carbonate served as the root. I couldn’t feel them, but the serrated edges looked sharp like knives. The big teeth were so pristine they seemed recently lost, but no living animal could’ve lost them. They were nearly five inches long, belonging in the gum of a forty foot, or longer, shark. Only a fish at least the length and girth of a bus could carry two full jawbones stacked with rows of five-inch teeth. The largest Great White ever caught wasn’t even twenty-two feet with teeth half that size. The handful of small teeth that Tom showed were the same size of those that wash up with shells at the beach. They were glossy browns, grays, and whites—long and pointed just like Makos.

“When we get to the amphitheatre, you’ll see three levels. We never find any at the top level, so you’ll be wasting your time up there,” Tom said walking out of the warehouse to pack a cooler full of beer. “You should find some, though, scattered in the
upper portion of the middle level. That’s where we find them. Remember, you’ll catch them shining out of the corner of your eye.” He meant the small ones would shine like glass in the sun. He didn’t expect trophies like the two framed ones. Finding a big tooth was possible, though, and I hoped to come across one. I wondered how the big dark-brown ones might shine—or even if they would. Though the bright sun would help, the recent rain would’ve washed away the fine limestone, exposing the tooth.

Driving to the old quarry took us through the dense woods and over rich land. It was a stretch to imagine it covered with water at one time. Tom’s woods were full of large pines and old-growth hardwoods descended from the same types of trees thousands of years before. After the waters receded, the first ancestor trees would’ve begun growing after the last known Ice Age during the Pleistocene Epoch. For two million years, leaves and limbs had fallen to the dried sea floor, layering it with decomposing organic material until most evidence of a seabed was slowly buried. Layers of tree debris and other organic material shaped North America into the continent that people know.

“Careful over near the pond. We got a big gator at least ten feet. I saw it just last month,” Tom warned as we pulled to the foot of his quarry and got out of his truck.

Five-foot cattails circled the pond, providing convenient and advantageous cover for anything lying in ambush. The pond was unnaturally quiet and still—eerie as if something big lurked beneath the placid water or among high cattails. The croaks and splashes that should’ve come from smaller reptiles, amphibians, and fishes were silenced. The water was too quiet, and no birds fluttered above. Instinctively, I kept my distance from the cattail wall, even though I knew alligators, unlike crocodiles, rarely attack humans. Nonetheless, it was a good fishing pond. By then, with rain and natural process,
the sediment pool had become healthy and looked as a pond should, encompassed by its cattails and lily pads, filled with murky water, and dotted with structure where baitfish could hide. The water’s color was ideal. Dissolved calcite and fine suspended limestone particles, which once would’ve made the water a strange, milky turquoise-blue, had settled. The water was rich with algae, creating a nourishing murky-brown where aquatic life thrived.

Geologically, the quarry was a glimpse at time long ago—an era when receding water covered that area and mammoth beasts swam and ate and survived. In nature, the era was past and should’ve stayed concealed by clay and topsoil, but the men, needing lye for concrete, had exposed it, revealing and awakening a record that some prefer hidden. The four of us walked. Gradually, the quarry descended toward the settling pond where familiar woods began again. It was a beautiful and unnatural void in the green density of the Deep South.

Though we came to the quarry together, I soon found myself alone on one side of it. As the others walked away, they became smaller and smaller as I periodically glanced to check their location. I could still hear their muffled voices as if I were beneath water. We walked beyond man. The machines had dug 65 million years down to the beginning of the Cenozoic Era to the Paleocene Epoch where Tom never found teeth. The dozers had stopped there, never quite reaching the time of the great reptiles of the Cretaceous and the Jurassic, but this land had been the sea. Great reptiles never walked here, but swam. I traversed the barren lower level for close to an hour and found dozens of spiraling shells and one sea biscuit, but no teeth.
I was too deep—too many million years in the past. Like the other limestone layers, the lowest had formed as a sea floor from the decomposing sediment of mollusks and other calcareous shells, but the teeth from the fish that I sought grew from a fish the size of a Greyhound bus. Sixty-five million years ago was too far back for the fish that I hunted. As far as the eras were concerned, that fish was young—a new species to the ages. It was the Carcharodon Megalodon—an evolved super predator of tropical seas, stalking the waters over North America from the beginning of the Miocene 22 million years ago to as recently as 5 million. Its size and dominance over the seas was a crescendo in evolution.

As I ascended to the beginning of the middle layer of the 22-million-year-old Miocene, finer limestone appeared like smooth ice. As I reached the middle of the second step, an overwhelming sense that I did not belong there overcame me. My body was not built for that time. Everything about me was insufficient and inefficient. As I walked, I looked back at the impressions that the tread of my shoes left in the soft dust. The imprints of my soles looked alien on the sea floor. Then, I realized just how small my teeth were and the likelihood them being lost inside the ages—forgotten. What would look for traces of me? I thought how hidden my small teeth would be in the whiteness.

I walked on. The waters rose and, again, became the sea. The lower portion of Alabama was a reef where giant Megalodons as large as modern day whales roamed. It was the dawn of mammals coming forth after the mass extinction of the Cretaceous. At that time no men, arrows, or spears existed. Larger mammals walked the earth.

As I walked upward through time, the limestone became a finer powder, and I noticed two discs side by side from an ancient dolphin or carnivorous shark. They were
fossilized vertebra, which meant that the limestone particles were once ultra-fine and capable of permeating the cartilage before time dissolved it. The waters became calm and isolated from the rest of the sea. Deep became shallow. There was a large pool, now, and my footsteps still pressed into the earth as I walked up the incline. The pool became smaller and smaller, concentrating every swimming thing in the last small depth that the amphitheatre once had been. It was a last resort—a deep pool or a saltwater lake from where nothing could escape. It was a battleground and a graveyard. The great fish were trapped, killing and eating one another until the last one died.

My mind imagined the tooth many times, but, when I looked again, only a pointed stone or some other similar formation resembling a tooth caught my eye in the limestone. I looked for hours. Up and down the amphitheatre, I walked even after the others returned to the warehouse. I collected as many spiraling shells as I could carry and began to cull them, keeping only the biggest ones. Those that I left could go unseen forever. I imagined the tooth encrusted with soft limestone and how I’d clean it by dissolving the white envelopment. With a stone, I’d chip away millions of years. I would wash it under running water and clean the residual debris, polishing the tooth until it shined. I didn’t suspect to find it polished.

When I saw it, the large light blue tooth did shine like a crystal in the sun. For perhaps as recent as five or as many as twenty-two million years, the tooth washed about a sea floor until it was covered. I picked it up from the limestone mesa that elevated it. The tooth was raised above the limestone floor as if on display. The edges couldn’t have been sharper or more defined. I could see and feel the tiny serrations—hundreds of small ridges like a steak knife lined the 4-inch tooth. It was small. It was smaller than the
shadowbox teeth, but twice the size of the largest living shark’s. Straight from the bed of limestone, either side could’ve easily sliced through my flesh with ample pressure. It had been one tooth among many. It had been part of a regenerating row—a mouth full of teeth that could’ve cut me in half like a baitfish. The very tip of the tooth was missing—broken and lodged in a whale’s bone, I suppose, millions of years ago.
Who Cooks for You?

Barred Owls are killers, but they’re not cruel. They eat their kill in order to survive—eating to live not living to eat. They’re never gluttons. Barred Owls soar through dark forests, detecting slight movements in pitch-black night. They’re perfect predators, residing at the top of the food chain, picking squirrels from lofty nests while squirrels sleep.

The last time I saw a Barred Owl it was night. I was in the kitchen looking down into the stainless steel mixing bowl of my white KitchenAid mixer when my wife Meredith brought news about meringue.

“I just got off the phone with Mom and she said meringue is the hardest thing in the world to make and it’s why she doesn’t cook lemon meringue pies.”

“Well, I’ve almost used a whole carton of eggs,” I said, clearly frustrated from wasting eight eggs and having nothing to show for it.

“She said if anything gets in with the sugar and egg whites, ‘even a drop of water,’ then it won’t whip right and you won’t get the meringue to peak.”

“All I can make is foamy white liquid. I’ve done it twice.” I showed her the concoction that looked like a milkshake rather than the foamy meringues that I’ve seen under bright lights of curved glass display cases. I thought I’d give one a try. “Call her back and ask if there’s a secret.”

“She’s going to bed. It’s 11:00 already. I’ll call her tomorrow,” Meredith said and went back into the bedroom to watch television.

The first two times, I saw yolk ooze in with the white, but I didn’t think it mattered. The recipe called for four whites beaten until creamy. It suggested an electric
mixture at full speed. In a different bowl, I separated the yolks from the whitish albumen cytoplasm. Then, with my high-powered, commercial-grade mixer, I beat the ever-living hell out of that cytoplasm, rich with protein for embryonic development. I mixed until the ingredients were creamy, then I added sugar. Next, I put the stainless bowl under the mixer, locked it down, and flipped the switch to full blast, sucking electricity through copper wires so egg whites and sugar could become one. On full, the mixer almost screamed as it blended the sugar and eggs. It seemed a straightforward process, but I tried twice to no avail.

It sounded simple, but only three shots at a meringue existed in a carton of eggs. The whole time I tried and failed, lemony-yellow pie-filling thickened in the bubbling double boiler on the stove. If the last four eggs failed me, I’d have had to scrap the project.

The recipe was efficient and cruel. It called for four eggs: four yellow yolks into the pie filling and four whites into the meringue. Nothing wasted. The yellow and the white went into separate bowls for separate purposes. It seemed a complete violation of the natural integrity of the little white eggs that I always imagine are supposed to be little yellow chicks. Part of them goes into the pie while the nourishing cytoplasm constitutes the topping. The egg would be reunited as a sweet layered dessert—half yellow and half white. Of course, I’ve heard cooking eggs aren’t fertilized, but I’ve cracked an egg, poured it from the shell, and seen the faint shape of a developing embryo, so that little guy comes to mind every time I use eggs. To bake cakes, make pies, cook cookies, and a host of other desserts, I crack open a lot of eggs.

Always, I extract the stringy white line connecting the yellow to the white before
beating eggs into a batter. The white line is the soft spinal cord around which the chick develops. I could mix it right in there, but I never do. It just doesn’t seem right.

Often, I think about owls when I cook. Barred Owls, in particular, because, when they hoot, they usually hoot eight times. Some people call them eight hooters because their persistent call sounds like: “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you, all?” I’ve heard that call my whole life with its eight beats and the “awl” sound tacked to the end in a throaty growl. When I was a boy, my dad convinced me that owls could talk. He and I would hear them from our home deep in the country.

“Sure they can talk. How else could they be so wise?” he’d ask as we sat in the backyard as the sun went down, hoots sounding from different points in the darkening woods all around us.

“How come they don’t ask any other questions?” I’d ask.

“Because no one’s answered that one yet.”

Years later and closer in to the city, I still hear the owls asking the same question. Often, I sit under the stars listening and watching like owls do, trying to watch as deftly as they watch, detecting subtle movements in the shadows. I want to think like owls think: basing my life on my senses and nothing more, living without conscience, eating only what I need to live, wasting nothing. It is what I do when almost everyone sleeps.

Off in the distance, after the busy street near my house hushes and over the distant but constant hum of the interstate, owls call to one another: “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you, all?” The wise owls talk back and forth, asking the question over and over. I know they’re establishing and defending territory, warding off intruders, but I wonder if they’re asking me the same question they used to ask.
Owls ask who cooks for me and who cooks for us all. It’s an odd question. Maybe they are envoys of the natural world asking about human civilization. Maybe it’s the higher interrogative about us all. They question why humans do the things we do. Possibly fascinated with our intricate society, contemplating our brightly lit homes strung together with power lines. From our glowing houses aromas rise into the trees, and the owls ask what our electrical lives are all about, but none of us ever answers. Most never hear the question.

Like bats, owls are silent stalkers that hunt under the cover of night. When a Barred Owl catches prey, it flies to a fork in a tree and devours the bloody body of its kill. Along with protein-rich muscle, the owl peels off animal fur, swallowing it with skeletal bone. An owl cannot chew. It can only grasp with talons and tear raw flesh with its powerful yellow beak, swallowing whole chunks of bone, fur, and meat.

Barred Owls have wingspans up to four feet from wingtip to wingtip. Their presence means death to smaller animals, and their eight hoots, asking about cooking, send chills down furry spines that cower in dark trees.

It’s not hard to find where owls live. Scattered rolls of compacted bone and fur mark Barred Owl’s roosting tree. Once they digest the meat connected to bone and fur, they regurgitate the gizzard compactions, and the animal parts drop to the forest floor as wet, furry pellets. A scattered graveyard of compacted animal parts is the telltale sign of a roosting tree.

Mature forests provide a high canopy of limbs and branches interconnected like a skeletal structure for squirrels and chipmunks. They run amongst the limbs like elevated highways. Barred Owls take their pick. Hungry, they even will swoop down after house
cats or small dogs, taking them high into the trees. Owners think that pets run away when, actually, owls take them. When full, a Barred Owl lodges a carcass high in a tree cavity or back into the cozy nest from which the prey was taken. Only humans could consider that cruel.

I live and cook in what was once a forest. My house is nestled amongst towering water oaks that reach 100 feet high. In the 1950s, someone built my house deep in the woods, and the city sprawled to meet it. My neighborhood is not a forest anymore. Now, asphalt streets are dotted with mailboxes and lined with power poles. A chemically-treated electrical pole sits at the corner of my lot, strung with digital cable, telephone lines, and, on top, electrical lines, transformers, step-down boxes, and insulators. Neighbors staple yard-sale signs and computer-generated reward signs for missing cats and dogs to the pole. To the owls, the neighborhood is still the woods. Owls don’t know the difference or the dangers we present. To them, our power poles are only dead trees.

Like other owls, Barred owls roost in the same tree day after day. They do not build their own nests; they commandeer the nests of squirrels, woodpeckers, crows, or hawks and treat them as their own. Owls either evict the original tenants by force or simply kill and eat them. In the commandeered nest, the female lays one to five round white eggs. The female incubates them about thirty days while the male hunts and brings her food. When the little owlets hatch, the male continues to provide the female and the rapidly developing young with fresh food. At four to five weeks, the owlets leave the nest and huddle together on limbs while both parents hunt. Barred owls are believed to mate for life.
On the last attempt at meringue, I was ultra careful with the last four eggs, paying close attention not to disturb the membrane, keeping the yellow dome uniform and intact. I’d cleaned the mixing bowl and dried it thoroughly. I was determined to make an excellent lemon meringue pie to share with my in-laws the following night. Again, I added the sugar and the egg whites and flipped the switch on the KitchenAid to full blast. The mixer screamed. The egg and sugar began to froth and, at that moment, an explosion shook the house that rattled glasses in the cupboard. The house went black.

“What was that?” Meredith said, rushing into the kitchen.

“It sounded like a gun.” I said.

The bubbling pie filling in the double boiler began to cool. Outside, the whole neighborhood was dark, and the woods were as they once were. Meredith and I weren’t sure what to do without lights, television, or mixer. Our life was interrupted. We waited in the darkness. Minutes passed, and the house grew silent. As my ears adjusted, sounds from outside became clearer and clearer.

“Is there somebody out there?” Meredith asked.

“I think there might be,” I said slowly opening the back door.

There was a new moon, so there was no moon. Without light coming from streetlights or houses, the darkness I walked into was unnatural. Even at dark, there is normally some ambient light, but not that night. I relied on memory as I walked through the yard until my eyes fully adjusted. I found the front steps, sat there, and listened.

I could hear footsteps in the dry grass. Someone was in the neighbor’s yard and shined a flashlight into the trees. Slowly, I made my way toward him and followed as he walked down the street toward his truck. I kept a distance.
My footsteps were light and I moved closer and closer like a predator approaching prey. He wasn’t paying attention. I was within six feet, close enough to reach out and touch him, but I didn’t. He was getting into the lift-bucket with an insulated staff that he could’ve used as a weapon. It was an insulated tool for resetting breakers. After he settled into the bucket, I made my presence known.

“Man, what was that big boom? It sounded like a bomb.”

He turned, almost jumping from the lift bucket. “Whoa, you scared me. Where’d you come from?”

“From the woods. What happened?” I asked, again.

“An owl tripped the breaker.” He put his staff between us.

“What you want with that owl?”

“No, one got into a jumper wire. He’s laying over there in that yard.” He said still slightly out of breath. He killed the darkness with his flashlight, and I saw the feathery bundle of an owl lying on the grass.

“Can I have him?” I asked.

“What you want with that owl?”

“The feathers.”

“Yeah, you can have it. Here, I’ll hold the light for you.” Again, he showed the way and I walked into my neighbor’s yard and picked it up by its feet. The black talons were locked tight as if still clutching a wire slightly larger than my finger. I slid my finger through the frozen clutch. The talons held, and I walked back toward the truck.

“Do you see this kind of thing a lot? I mean, do owls get electrocuted often?” I asked walking back toward him.
“All the time. Every night. That’s what I do. I ride around these neighborhoods resetting breakers.”

“I thought birds could perch on power lines without getting shocked.”

“They can until they complete a circuit. Little birds don’t have no problem, see. It’s the big ones with big wingspans. Raptors. That owl was just fine until he decided to fly away. He was huntin’, see, and when he went and spread out them wings he touched that jumper wire there. What you gonna do with those feathers, make arrows?”

“Bury them,” I said.

I said goodnight and carried the Barred Owl back to my house with its sharp black talons still holding my finger. As I walked, the two broken wings flapped unnaturally in the wind that my movements made.

The Barred Owl had completed a circuit with its broad wingspan, and volts of electricity had blown holes where the wings joined its body. The feathers were melted beneath both wings. The body was stiff, and I could smell the cooked meat beneath the soft feathers. I folded the wings back and laid the warm bundle in the bed of my truck. Its eyes that could see at night were closed as if finally sleeping.
James or Jim Owens may refer to: Jesse Owens (James Cleveland Owens; 1913–1980), American track and field athlete, and Olympian. James Owens (American football) (born 1955), American football player and Olympic athlete. Jim Owens (1927–2009), head football coach at the University of Washington (1957–1974). Jim Owens (baseball) (born 1934), American baseball pitcher. Jim Owens (basketball, born 1950), American basketball player. Red Owens (James L. Owens; 1925–1988), American basketball player. At Dr. James Owens and Dr. Samuel Owens dental clinic we offer affordable dental care. With our premium service quality we bring your lost smile back. Drs. James and Samuel Owens Dentistry, 425 West Washington St S, Broken Arrow, OK 74012, (918) 455-7700. James J. Owens is a professor of management communication at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. He is founder and CEO of the charity The World Is Just a Book Away (WIJABA), which promotes children’s literacy internationally by developing libraries and educational programs. Since its inception in 2008, WIJABA has touched the lives of more than 70,000 children. James collected and edited the 60 essays in this book over the course of 15 years. His profit from this book will benefit the charity.