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Excerpt from "Ruthie Fear"

2.

The first time Ruthie Fear went hunting with her father, she saw a huge winged skeleton flying in from the north. It approached over the dawn-lit mountains, wings stretched across the horizon, undulating on currents of air. Each bone rose and fell discretely, hinged together like vertebra and marked by shafts of light. The skull pointed toward her. Its shadow slid over the earth. An alien, Ruthie was sure, some creature that glided from world to world on gravitational tides and had died in between, the heat of a thousand suns slowly stripping away its flesh.

Only five, she felt the vastness of the universe. Saw herself as a single dot. Imagined skimming through the cosmos beside this hunter, without fear or hunger, passing strange worlds and towering nebulae of green and purple gas millions of miles across.

Her father's Auto-5 shotgun broke her reverie, and shattered the skeleton into a mass of flapping, twisting parts. One tumbled down to the ice-covered pond before them. It landed silently in a puff of snow. The rest of the flock reassembled, carried on, and were lost in the shadow of the Sapphire Mountains. Her father cursed and lowered the gun. White frost clung to his red beard. "Pulled too early," he said. His orange cap was the brightest piece of the morning world. Ruthie struggled to understand: one moment the skeleton, the next a dying goose. Smoke threaded up from the gun barrel in a mirror of her father's breath. The goose dragged itself across the ice with a broken wing, making not for the shore but the center as though it would be met there in safety by a benevolent, healing force.

The cold air stung Ruthie's throat. Sudden warmth ached behind her eyes. She mourned the loss of the winged skeleton much more than the goose dying in front of her. The impossible distances it had crossed. The freedom to move from galaxy to galaxy, feeding on light, while her

own life was confined to the trailer she shared with her father, and the valley that surrounded them. Finally, the goose collapsed. Only its unbroken wing continued to beat weakly against the ice in steady, desperate cadence. Her father cursed again. He breached the stock and emptied the spent shells into the snow. Gunpowder's acrid ammonia smell wafted out. "Point away," he said, handing Ruthie the shotgun. "Not at me, not at you." Ruthie gripped the warm barrel to her chest. She wished the skeleton had passed overhead. That it had streamed on to Las Vegas or Cancún or one of the other exotic places, populated by bikini-clad women, on the posters on her father's bedroom wall. He was only twenty-four, not much more than a child himself.

Together they stood before the world.

He turned and picked his way down through the brush to the edge of the pond. He paused on the shore, his eyes narrowed against the cold, his eyebrows drawn together in determination. "Never do this," he said.

He lay down on his stomach and spread his arms. Paused there for a moment, a supplicant flattened with his chin to the snow, then pushed off the snowy bank with his legs and slowly pulled himself over the creaking surface by the elbows. His arms in a crooked V above his head, his body flat, one ear cocked to the shifting sounds beneath. Heat seemed to ribbon off him, an invader on the blank white void, only the goose also moving within it. Willow forest on three sides, and the snowy roof of former country star Wiley King's unfinished mansion—on which Rutherford had found temporary work after the closing of the mill—a white slope in the distance.

The wing beat like a heart, *whomp, whomp . . . whomp*, slowing, failing, a bloody motor running down. A trickle of red reached out to meet her father, to guide him, as a serpent to its

lair. Ruthie wanted to scream, but she was afraid even that sound would crack the ice. She held her breath. Her father inched farther out. Ten feet from the shore, twenty. His gloved hand reached for the bird's black foot. Nearly touched it, when a sound like another gunshot split the morning and two white walls tipped up to form a canyon, sluicing both man and bird into the dark water below. Then flopping back to horizontal, only the jagged vein between the sheets revealing the break.

For a moment, Ruthie did not move nor scream. She was trapped between reality and her imagination. What had been real? Her father on the ice or lost in the dark water below? The flying skeleton or the flock of geese? Her booted feet in snow or skimming along beside a huge winged creature in the black of space?

The ice violently upended into a mountain and her father's orange hat burst forth. Icy water gushed off his cheeks. He howled. His arm thrashed free from the water holding the struggling bird by the feet. He flung it toward Ruthie. It skidded into the snowbank on the shore. It looked oddly unharmed there, only dazed, with all the blood washed from its feathers and its wound temporarily frozen shut. Rutherford brought his elbows down onto the ice, breaking it again. He twisted his shoulders like a bear and lurched toward Ruthie. She stood frozen in terror holding the shotgun. His approach was relentless, smashing through the ice in the waist-high water, his face contorted. Monstrous, beastly, a killer who would kill again. For an instant, she was so afraid that she thought to level the barrel to her father's chest, pull the trigger, and send him back beneath the ice. Seal it above his head; the massive skeleton once again winging south across the sky.

3.

Ruthie felt the nearness of unseen beings. On fall trips into the national forest to poach firewood with her father, she searched for them in the bushes between the trees. Patches of larch flamed ocher in the midst of the evergreen forest. The smell of butterscotch wafted from ponderosa bark. Ruthie walked carefully, avoiding fallen branches. Like the winged skeleton, the beings seemed to follow her; only their shadows remained by the time she whirled around.

“All this land used to be free,” her father said, stopping to appraise the trunks surrounding a small clearing. “Free game, free wood.” He’d been a stacker at the mill and now worked whatever construction jobs he could find. He tapped the head of his ax against a young ponderosa, and nodded at the dull *tock*. He stepped back. “Now the government thinks they get to decide who uses it.” Ruthie watched him brace his feet and shake loose his shoulders. The tree he’d chosen was twice his height, with a straight, reddish trunk and thin branches growing thinner to the needles at its top. The ax’s haft doubled the length of his arm. The blade’s concave head gleamed. *A maul*. Ruthie couldn’t remember where she’d heard that name, but it seemed fitting. What her father was about to do to the tree was what a bear would do to him.

Blisters from previous firewood expeditions marked the palms of his hands. It was their first season harvesting their own wood. They hadn’t needed to when he worked at the mill. His eyes fixed on a single point on the bark. He raised the ax and swung it down in a hard, smooth, clean motion. The wedged blade chunked into the wood and he immediately jerked it back, in rhythm, to chunk again. “The woods will only be for the rich.” His muscles strained with each successive chop. The wedge deepened; veins stood out on his arms, his body like the piston of some terrible machine. Splinters shot from the trunk and littered the ground around him. He

began to sweat. “With them shutting down the mills and the mines.” The violence of the work increased, as if he and the tree were pitted against one another—both could not remain standing. The blisters split open on his palms. The tree began to moan. Ruthie covered her ears. Sap leaked from the scaly bark, like the blood on her father’s hands. When the wedge was deep enough, Rutherford circled the trunk, wiped his brow on the shoulder of his T-shirt, spat, and began on the other side. Ruthie watched him, torn between fear and love. His swings were tired now, hacking unevenly into the new wedge to create a hinge with the other, but still they did not cease. The tree’s top swung unsteadily in the breeze coming down from the mountains. It leaned over him.

Ruthie backed to the edge of the clearing. Would this be what killed him? It seemed fitting: a tree he’d cut falling down on top of him. She touched the bark of another ponderosa and felt its rough, steady life. The butterscotch scent had grown stronger, marred now by suffering.

The tree fell with a rending creak. Her father hopped to the side as branches popped gleefully overhead. It crashed down beside him and for a moment he was lost in the dust that billowed up from the ground. When the trunk settled, neatly bisecting the clearing, he stood over it. Sweat ran down his dirty cheeks into his beard. Broken branches hung like garlands from the pines around him. Sunlight poured through the fresh space above the stump. Rutherford looked at his bleeding palms. He grimaced. “They always put up a fight.”

“Why don’t you wear gloves?” Ruthie asked.

“Because then my hands would stay soft,” he said. “Is that what you want?”

Ruthie didn’t answer. She wanted to be a wolfling, free to run from him through the unbroken woods.

On the long walk home, Rutherford knelt beside Trapper Creek. The large bundle of wood on his back loomed over him as he rinsed his palms in the water. Ruthie—her own, smaller bundle chafing her shoulders—watched the blood slip away in the current: two red, ropy fish elongating as they were carried downstream.

Ruthie, Rutherford, and the dog Moses lived at the mouth of No-Medicine Canyon near the southern end of the Bitterroot Valley. Above them, Highway 93 rose to the hot springs and Lost Trail Pass into Idaho. Their teal trailer was set across the driveway in front of a single acre of barren ground eight miles from Darby, Montana. Theirs was the smallest property on Red Sun Road. In the winter, they slept side by side next to the woodstove, the windows sealed with plastic to hold in the heat, a towel stuffed in the crack beneath the door. The sheet metal siding rattled in the wind. Ruthie was often too cold, or hungry. The Bitterroot Range loomed overhead. Ten-thousand-foot peaks seeming to attack the sky with jagged, glaciated teeth. These were mountains that forced Lewis and Clark a hundred miles north and ended, once and for all, their dream of a northwest passage.

The north entrance to the valley was marked by a sign reading JESUS CHRIST IS LORD OF THIS VALLEY, and the south entrance by a sign advertising Second Nature Taxidermy School, where farm boys with ghoulish ambitions came to learn the modern, fetishized art of embalming. Between these risen corpses, thirty thousand people lived.

When Ruthie pressed her face against the window of her closet-sized room, she could see Trapper Peak, the tallest in the Bitterroots, hooked like a finger beckoning her above the tree

line. Circled by bald eagles and white with snow eleven months of the year, it reassured her that men were small scabbling things, crawling across the ice unaware of the depths below. The boys in her class made each other bleed with straightened paper clips. Her father's friends—Kent Willis, Raymond Pompey, and the Salish brothers Terry and Billy French—drank themselves into stupors of displaced rage and stumbled outside to shoot empty bottles off a busted washing machine. The glass shards glinted kaleidoscopically in the morning sunlight while the men snored in the living room, their arms sprawled tenderly over each other's chests, showing affection in sleep in a way that would be impossible awake. Tiptoeing around them to the bathroom, Ruthie wanted to fly away. She climbed on top of the toilet and wedged her head through the small window. Her gray eyes had a yellow ring in the irises like a wolf's, noticed by strangers, that she hoped would allow her to see farther. She tasted a storm approaching in the air. Saw herself zooming over the spent shotgun shells, the glittering pattern of glass, the cannibalized dump truck her father used as a kind of fort—full of whiskey pints and *Bowhunter* magazines—to perch atop Trapper Peak and look back down on her life, free from its bonds and humiliations.

When the storm came, she ran outside to catch frogs in the rain.

As if in opposition to the mighty peak, No-Medicine Canyon was a dark, narrow portal where wind sprang up of its own accord, to scream and rage and then cease without ever leaving the canyon's confines. Ruthie feared it instinctively, as did her father. They never went inside. She was sure that twenty thousand years of spirits lived within, beginning with the People of the Flood, a tribe whose marks were washed away when the ice dam broke at Glacial Lake Missoula fifteen thousand years before, but who remained below the dirt. Her friend Pip Pascal had found

one of their fertility icons on the bank of Lost Horse Creek. A plump, headless stone figure of mounded breasts and pubis that caused both girls to look down over their own skinny bodies and think, *No, this could never happen to us*. They found other mysteries along game trails: strange dragging tracks, ancient flint tools, figures with many arms chipped into the west faces of boulders.

“You should be afraid of every canyon,” Terry French told her, when she asked. He and his brother were the only Indians Ruthie knew, and she came to them with her most pressing concerns. He smiled and palmed her head. His wide, scarred fingers easily curled over her skull to the nape of her neck. “You’re six years old and you weigh forty pounds.”

Ruthie stared up at him around his thick wrist. Sleep crust stuck in the corners of his eyes. A red rubber band loosely held his ponytail. He smiled down at her. “Now help me get this meat into your freezer so you and your dad don’t starve.” The hindquarters of an elk, poorly shrink-wrapped, dripped blood in the bed of his truck. He handed Ruthie a haunch. Reluctantly, she lugged it inside, dumped it on the kitchen table, and left Terry in the kitchen talking to her father about where work might be.

She watched the canyon. There was something inside, she could feel it. Water slid down the cliff walls, slicking the granite black as obsidian. Strange ferns and mosses grew along the bottom of what was once a mighty riverbed and now held the low flow of Trapper Creek. Ruthie walked to the edge of her yard and pissed in the soft dirt. She saw the chasm that formed, the power of water. The ferns trembled in the wind. The long shadows held a wet, fecund darkness utterly apart from the dry valley outside. Ruthie shivered and pulled up her pants. She walked as close to the canyon’s mouth as she dared. Moses barked and ran across the yard to her side. She

touched his ears. He sniffed the air, worried. Bleached skulls were piled in the far corner by the shed. Hunters from all across the valley brought trophy heads to be cleaned by Rutherford's dermestid beetle colony inside the shed. It was his only regular source of income since the mill closed. The fifty thousand beetles lived among wood shavings in three large plastic bins beneath heat lamps. In a constant state of ravenousness, they could remove every shred of flesh from a bear skull in twenty-four hours, leaving the bone porcelain-clean and preserving all the delicate structures within the nasal cavity. Ruthie sometimes snuck in to watch, transfixed, as the beetles swarmed over the flesh, flooding the orifices, adults and larvae working together with a speed that filled her with dread. On the coldest nights of winter, when the heat lamps weren't enough, Rutherford brought the bins into the trailer and Ruthie had to listen to the larvae squirming over one another as she tried to sleep on the wolfskin rug.

She knew not every girl lived like this. Some had mothers who sang lullabies.

Moses began to tremble. What was in there? Ruthie smelled something from the canyon's depths: a rot, a dead thing come back to life. She crouched beside Moses and rested her hand on the wiry fur of his neck to calm him. He was a Yorkie, always alert, save for in midwinter when he grew depressed. His breath came in quick pants. Together they stared into the shadows.

She probed the darkness. Green blades of grass, tall in the spring, wavered in front of her eyes, dividing her vision by oscillating degrees. Straining to see farther, using the yellow in her irises, she channeled her entire being into the canyon. The sounds of the outside world ceased. The sun was swallowed by blackness. She felt herself standing on the edge of a giant open maw—an abyss of incomprehensible depths into which all previous explorers had fallen. Moses's body shook as if he felt it, too. Only the dark of the canyon remained.

A shadow slid over another shadow. Ruthie froze. She gripped Moses. Something was moving.

The creature took shape slowly, awkwardly. A tall feathered thing, it lurched toward the creek on two long, spindly, double-jointed legs. Each step was tentative, as if it were just learning to walk. Its feathers were gray and slightly iridescent. Its body curved into a single, organ-like shape. A kidney. Misshapen and lumpy, frighteningly perched atop the thin legs—taller than the saplings on the shore. A monster, deviant in its unsteadiness. But what horrified Ruthie, what made her want to scream, was that it had no head.

Its chest continued roundly over its collar and back along the ridge of its spine. Nothing protruded. No way to see nor hear nor smell, no orifices at all. Yet it paused by the creek and leaned forward as if it wanted to drink.

Ruthie felt like she was caught in a dream, unable to run, seeing a future of death. She wondered how the creature had grown. She imagined it wriggling, maggot-like, from the mouth of a dying elk, before growing to its terrible size.

It reminded her of the tumor-ridden lamb that Len Law had shown off in front of her school, or the mold that grew around the drain of her shower.

Moses began to growl deep in his throat. His wiry hackles rose. The creature lifted one of its pronged feet and dipped it into the water. It stood like this helplessly. The current rushed around its thin ankle. Ruthie was sure it would be knocked over. She didn't see how it could get up again. Sudden pity mixed with the fear and revulsion in her chest.

The growl in Moses's throat crescendoed to a harsh, hysteric *yap*.

"No!" Ruthie hissed.

The creature twisted toward them. It faced Ruthie with its feathered mask. The feathers trembled. Sensing her. Knowing she was there. She wondered if it navigated through vibration, like a bat. She could feel trucks on the highway when she pressed her ear against the dirt. The creature shied backward, stumbled, straightened on its stilt-like legs, and shuddered away into the darkness.

The canyon was empty again. Ruthie parted her lips. No sound came out. Cold sweat ran down her neck. She felt a terrible importance, as if fate were for a moment balanced in her hands. Hers and her father's and that of all the others in the valley. What had she seen? Something ancient and new, helpless and dangerous. Moses looked up at her with the whites of his eyes showing, frightened and begging for a treat, the way he did when a truck horn scared him in the night.

4.

Rutherford lay shirtless on the couch in the trailer's narrow living room with the cartridge of a freshly oiled Glock on his belly. *Wheel of Fortune* played on the TV at full volume. Terry had gone. The carpet was filthy with crumbs, oil drips, and the wrappers of cheese singles, which Ruthie had planned to eat for dinner. An open beer stood on the table by her father's head. Two empties and a full can were keeled over beside it. Ruthie panted in the doorway, her reddish hair—chopped short to avoid the recurrence of lice—sticking up, her cheeks flushed from the sprint across the yard. Moses charged in past her and shook himself furiously.

“I saw something,” she said.

Rutherford's eyes rolled away from the TV but he made no move to sit up.

"A creature."

"A creature?"

She nodded rapidly. "It went up into the canyon."

"A canyon creature. Shoot it next time. We can sell it to the university." Rutherford pronounced all five syllables, as if it were a disease. Hair made a scraggly divide down the center of his belly, and his feet, propped on the couch arm, were frighteningly long and pale.

"It had feathers and no head."

"Sounds easy to shoot."

"*Dad.*" Ruthie hated being a child; no one listened to her.

"I'd do it myself except it's not headless creature hunting season. But you, you can't get in trouble for poaching when you're six."

More than once, Ruthie had seen the game warden's white truck pull into the driveway and heard the storm of cursing it elicited from her father. On the TV, a woman jumped up and down, screaming at a new car. Rutherford shook his head at the male contestant standing dejectedly behind her. "Damn fool could've kept the Wheel." He reached around on the carpet for his oil rag.

"*Dad!*" Ruthie yelled.

The TV made a brief static crackle when he muted the volume. He rose up on his elbow and turned toward her, jostling the cartridge to the floor. "Dammit, Ruthie, can't you see I'm busy?"

She clenched her fists in frustration, her heart pounding.

“The last thing I need is your nonsense.” He took a long drink, shook the last drops from the upside-down can onto his tongue, then tossed it aside. He located the full one behind his head and his mood immediately brightened. “Maybe it was an emu got loose from Del’s farm. Remember the one on top of your school last year?”

“Emus have heads,” Ruthie said. “And necks.”

“Still don’t know how it got up there. That beak looked sharp enough to skewer old Del.” Rutherford grinned at the memory. He sank back down and popped open the beer. “Fucking dumbass, chasing it around with a net. Supposedly they go for five thousand dollars a pop if you can breed them.” The gap of Rutherford’s missing incisor showed where a snowmobile had tossed him face-first onto a stump when he was in high school. “Don’t know why I’m mucking around with beetles.”

“It wasn’t an emu.”

“A deer with mange, then. They lose all their hair and look like demons.”

“Deer have heads, too!” Ruthie said.

“Keep your voice down. You’re making my goddamn head hurt. Hasn’t that fool teacher taught you what an imagination is? You don’t know what you see when you’re six.” He looked around the small, crummy room as if to prove his point. “You think you do, but you don’t. You’ll learn that as you get older. The world isn’t all you think it is.”

What did he know of the world? Ruthie wondered. Expired hunting tags were tacked to the wood panel wall by his scope and elk bugle. Envelopes from the bank accumulated on the kitchen table until he burnt them with the last wood of the season. The only food they ever had enough of was meat. He was angry at the rich, the government, and Ruthie’s departed mother in

varying order and intensity. The only cultivation he'd done of their barren acre was to install a meat freezer and gun safe along with his beetle bins in the storage shed, and erect plywood targets at twenty-five, fifty, and one hundred yards, to shred with bullets every summer. On rare visits to Missoula, Ruthie was amazed by the traffic, the restaurants, the children chasing each other across playgrounds. Rutherford only left the valley willingly once a year, to hunt pronghorn in the Big Hole with the Frenches. "You don't believe me," she said.

"I believe you saw something, but you didn't know what it was, so you made it up. Like the flying skeleton."

Ruthie found herself too angry to speak. She wished she could grow a hundred feet tall and kick Rutherford on his couch into the canyon. Then he'd see. She tried to imagine life with another family in another town. Going out to dinner, shopping at the mall. She stepped back onto the porch, grabbed the screen door with both hands, and slammed it as hard as she could. The hinges rattled. Her father's prone figure was lost behind the mesh.

"You're sleeping outside if you broke that door!" he yelled after her, the TV volume clicking back on. "Goddammit."

The creature remained in Ruthie's mind like a bruise, aching whenever her thoughts bumped against it. She was determined to see it again. Determined to prove to her father that it had been real. She picked a spot in the trees facing the canyon on the edge of their property and made Rutherford help her build a blind.

"Thank Christ you didn't ask for a dollhouse," he said.

They scavenged wood from the dump and nails from behind Whipple's Feed Store. Len Law watched them from beside his pickup. The bed was full of alfalfa hay for his sheep. A scrawny, decrepit man, he owned the town scrapyard and often appeared when Ruthie and Pip were playing on the shore of Lost Horse Creek. Once he'd knelt before her and said, "You know what the Indians used to do with little girls with yellow eyes?"

She shook her head.

"Send them off into the mountains."

Now he crossed his arms and called to her father across the lot. "Lean times?"

"We're getting by," Rutherford answered shortly.

"Must be hard on your own. No woman at home. . . ." Len's narrow eyes lingered on Ruthie as she climbed into her father's truck. She clenched the nails in her fists; the sharp points dug into her palms. Her father had told her that Len's grandfather Hark was Darby's first sheriff. Hark Law had done something so bad before he was fired that adults spoke of it only in whispers, and wouldn't tell Ruthie no matter how often she asked. Ruthie wondered if the creature could dispatch of a man like Len. The Montana Café and Sawmill Bar passed by.

Back on their property, with the mouth of No-Medicine Canyon before them, Rutherford built a two-by-four frame. Ruthie held the weathered front boards in place while he started the nails, then they switched so she could pound them home. She banged ferociously, holding the hammer with both hands, gritting her teeth, not satisfied until the nail head was snugged well below the dented wood. She hit one so hard on its edge that sparks shot out.

"That nail do you wrong?" Rutherford asked, grinning. It confused her that her anger always made him proud.

Ruthie glared up at him. She blinked the sweat from her eyes.

“Lord knows what’ll happen if you ever hit a knot. Might burn down the whole woods. Blind won’t do you any good then.” Rutherford nodded toward their cleared yard. The teal trailer was set at the same angle across the driveway where the delivery company had left it, up on cinder blocks. Ruthie’s mother had had grand plans for its placement, along with flower boxes, teal curtains, and a welcome mat. The plans disappeared along with her. The canyon loomed behind Rutherford. Dark and menacing even in the summer heat. He knelt to measure Ruthie’s height with his hands. “You’re getting big now. Longer than a rifle.”

Ruthie refused to be flattered. She gave the edge of the blind a final hard whack with the hammer. It was a ramshackle box with a plywood roof and floor, but she was proud of it—her first idea to become reality. Her father straightened and hitched up his jeans. “You’ll be hunting on your own in no time.”

“I’m not going to hunt anything,” Ruthie said.

“Oh no?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m going to spring all the traps in the woods.”

Rutherford smiled. “All of them? You’ll find yourself pulling butterflies out of spiderwebs.” His missing incisor, chapped lips, scraggly red beard, and sun-weathered cheeks made him look older than his twenty-five years. She never knew what to say when her teachers asked what he did. She always lied about his beetle business, claiming he was a builder, and imagining a fridge full of vegetables and chicken nuggets. She wished he were like the fathers of the other girls in her class, who squeezed their wide bellies behind the steering wheels of shiny new trucks.

Mosquitoes whined up from the water. The creek was high with snowmelt from the mountains. Whenever Rutherford was out—working or using whiskey to get properly drunk—Ruthie would sneak into his room. She'd get down on her knees and look at the guns underneath his bed, including the CMMG Banshee, his pride and joy. A \$1,400 piece of machinery with a silenced suppressor and .300 Blackout ammo that shot through walls. He'd bought it with his small severance from the shuttered mill. Some nights he'd sit on the couch with the barrel across his lap, oiled to a high shine, staring at the door as if he hoped for an intruder, so he might prove what the beast could do. A showgirl in gold lingerie was superimposed over the glittering Strip on the poster of Las Vegas above his bed. It reminded Ruthie of the night sky erupting from the ground. A place where man had built the stars. As different from the dilapidated trailer parks and potholes of Darby as the sun was from the moon. "I'm coming," she'd whisper, before returning the gun to its place and tiptoeing out from Rutherford's room.

He took the hammer from her and walked across the yard to the shed where the wolf had hung. Along with the beetles, meat freezer, and gun safe, it held all manner of tools, antlers, shoeboxes full of bones and feathers, wildcat drawings he'd made as a boy, and Indian artifacts he'd found. You could hardly move inside. The rotten smell was enough to keep Ruthie out most of the time. One of his hand-drawn flyers for Bitterroot Beetle Works was nailed to the door. The rest were on bulletin boards across the valley. Ruthie slapped a mosquito on her neck. She looked down at her own blood in the mangled legs on her palm. She imagined splattering the creature like this, squashing it against the face of a rock, then immediately felt ashamed.

Her father returned with his circular saw, trailing a long orange extension cord. He had a plunging, downhill gait when on his own property, with none of the careful alertness he carried

in the outside world. Moses snapped at the cord, then barked outright when Rutherford powered on the saw. Loud noises always made him aggressive. He flung his small body into the air at the blade and Ruthie feared he might get cut in half. “Git!” her father said, and stomped the ground. Moses reluctantly backed away. Using Ruthie’s measurement, Rutherford cut a slit for her eyes in the front planks. Sawdust gusted out on the breeze. The blisters on his hands were turning to calluses, rough white patches outlining the ghost of a haft. “There,” he said. “Now you can learn how to look.”

“I know how to look,” Ruthie said.

He shook his head. “All the chain stores and gas stations where everything is the same make your eyes go dull. The mall you’re always going on about. You’ve got to teach yourself how to see again. A tree isn’t just a tree. It’s a certain tree, with certain sap and certain needles and a certain height. Certain parts, like a person. Some you can eat, or use to stanch a wound. They might save your life.” Sawdust clung to his beard. One shoulder was slightly lower than the other—exaggerated by how he held the saw—from the same snowmobile accident that had taken his tooth. “You thought you saw a creature but you couldn’t tell me what it was. Nothing in the wild is ever the same. If you think a rock looks like another rock, you’re not looking hard enough.”

“It wasn’t a deer,” Ruthie said. “And it wasn’t a goddamn rock.”

Rutherford spat in the dirt. “Learn how to look, then you can cuss at me all you want.”

A crow peered down at them from the top of the tall ponderosa in their neighbor’s yard. It opened and closed its black beak, then raised its eyes to look out over the valley to the river.

Ruthie felt sure that the next time she saw the creature, she’d know what to do.

5.

Ever since John Owen's first white settlement at the fort, the valley's inhabitants had done everything they could to domesticate its hillsides and riverbanks. Fence it into squares and pave roads between those squares. Slaughter the bears and wolves and mountain lions and bison. Drive out the Salish. Nail crosses to the hilltops. Yet still the wildness encroached, running in flames down the mountainsides each summer and pushing up in tree roots to crack the sidewalks each spring.

After the closing of the mill, the Rocky Mountain Laboratories became the valley's largest employer. Founded to fight the scourge of spotted fever, it housed a maximum containment facility, one of the most secure bio labs in the country. The former mill workers hated the scientists for their arrogance and job security; the scientists looked down on the uneducated rednecks who bought new machine guns while living in trailers.

With no mother, no church, and no interest in what she was taught in school, Ruthie devised her own morality based on the behavior of animals she saw from her blind. In the passage of deer, coyote, beaver, muskrat, and raccoon, she noted life pared down to the core of instinct. Free from the twin anxieties of past and future. She took no sides in the valley's conflicts, wanting only a house deep in the woods, another dog, a trip to Las Vegas, Len Law's accidental death, and to prove to her father that the creature was real.

To the blind's southeast, Ruthie looked into the mouth of No-Medicine Canyon. The creature taunted her from its depths. Every fern-rustle was a hint. Every moving shadow suggested it would reappear. When her eyes tired of their futile search, she turned her attention

north, where the blind looked over the creek into the yard of June and Reed Breed. Trapper Creek swelled suddenly after leaving No-Medicine Canyon and ran along their property line. The water itself was entirely on the Breeds' side, making their land, which was lower, verdant with native grasses and wildflowers, their pine trees taller and more bountifully needled, and their air noticeably sweeter. Their house was an actual house; their truck replaced itself every two years. Rutherford considered them rich, and took every opportunity to urinate on their side of the bank.

On top of this, it was said softly among the older girls at Ruthie's school that June Breed was adventurous and Reed Breed a cuckold. That she enjoyed her adventurousness as frequently as possible, and that he lingered on it in the most intimate, humiliating ways. When Ruthie heard her father howling over the engine of his miter saw, she assumed it was the fault of such dark, incomprehensible aspects of adulthood.

On her second day within the blind, instead of a mysterious headless being, Ruthie saw June Breed strip naked on a beach towel in the shade of her garden shed. Mosquitoes whined lazily above her breasts in the early summer warmth. There were lessons in the parting of her lips, the lowering of her eyelids to crocodile slits, and the slow arching of her back, but they were not what Ruthie had expected to learn. She was frightened and enthralled. She wondered if she could become this kind of woman, half melting in the sun. She hoped so. The future took on a new and dangerous light.

Later in the afternoon, when the sun had finally begun to drop into the Bitterroots, Mr. Breed came out from his office. He looked at his wife, asleep now beneath a horsehair blanket, then punched the trunk of the large ponderosa by their deck. Hard. Twice.

Ruthie was fascinated. She forgot the creature completely as Mr. Breed rubbed his knuckles and returned inside through the sliding glass door. What had brought on his violence? Ruthie was sure there was a lesson in the two dull *thocks* his fist had made against the bark. One she'd need to learn before long. She had a vision of her father and his friends standing in front of a fire, kicking at the logs until sparks whirled up around their faces. Kicking harder so the sparks shot higher, showering their heads as they caught at them with open hands.

Darkness reached down into the valley from the Sapphires. Ruthie left the blind and walked through the yard. She passed furniture that had once lived inside the trailer and now lived outside, including a rickety card table beside the bullet-riddled washing machine, a brown recliner, and a sodden yellow mattress. On summer nights when it was too hot to sleep, she and her father used the mattress to watch the stars. Rutherford's rare moments of creativity were spurred by the cosmos and the nearness of wild, killable game. As they were lying on their backs, he told Ruthie stories of planets with forty-point elk the size of school buses. "You hunt them with rocket launchers," he said. "If you miss, they'll skewer you on their antlers and toss you out into space."

How did I end up here? Ruthie wondered. She imagined the giant elk watching the winged skeleton pass overhead. The tines of the elks' antlers so numerous they were like the branches of a willow tree.

As the long hot August days passed in the blind, Ruthie was disturbed to find contradictions within herself. Places of illogic that animals lacked. Just as she had imagined shooting her father in the icy pond, she saw herself dying for him, too. Leaping into the water and heaving him onto the shore with her last breath. Pulling his body from his burning truck only

to be engulfed in flames herself. Stepping into the path of a charging bear and beckoning for him to run. Some days she was determined to never hunt an animal as her father did. On others she fashioned guns from sticks and aimed them through the eye slit, massacring every squirrel in the Breeds' big ponderosa.