

Bearskin

by James A. McLaughlin

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Introduction

Violence, the nebulousness of free will, man against nature—these are common threads present in the naturalist stories of Jack London and Stephen Crane. Naturalism was a literary movement that developed from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Characteristic stories and novels from this period involve characters’ attempts at exercising free will and agency despite their choices being determined by forces beyond their control.

Reminiscent of these themes is James A. McLaughlin’s “Bearskin,” a story that originally appeared in the Summer 2008 issue of *The Missouri Review* and later won the Peden Prize. At the core of “Bearskin” is the examination of one man’s relationship with nature and its inhabitants. Set during the autumnal equinox, a time when day and night balance together in perfect harmony, this is a story of one man finding his own balance, his own sense of order in a troubling landscape.

“Life seethed messily on the surface,” explains the protagonist Rice, the new caretaker of the Traver Preserve. This life is an unfamiliar one where animals infiltrate his cabin daily. At the start of the story, Rice has to remove a hive of European honeybees that have infested the paneled wood walls. Part of Rice’s job is to eradicate these intruders—not just the bees but spiders that have built webs in the corners, squirrels, possums, snakes, and even a bear who finds a way inside his home. When he first moved to the preserve he was someone whose heart would beat fast from just the sight of a vulture passing overhead, and now he’s been thrust into this new world where the boundaries between man and the environment have disappeared. No matter how hard Rice tries his efforts prove to be useless. He is a man attempting to make himself at home in the natural world around him, one where animals now dictate the rules.

Even the locals disregard the boundaries Rice attempts to create. A group of poachers roam the nearby Turk mountain. They illegally hunt bears to sell their gallbladders on the black market, afterwards leaving their skinned carcasses to rot. The people of the town don’t see Rice as an authority figure and instead treat him with condescension and disdain. They feel that the land belongs to them, not Rice, and they don’t like outsiders, especially those that tell them what to do and how to live. This is proven by what happened to the last caretaker, a woman with whose attempts at inflicting a sense of order on the rule-breakers of the town were met with brutal, disastrous results. While Rice desperately tries to escape his own past, everywhere there are remnants of the last caretaker, from her hair he sweeps up from underneath the furniture to the field works she left behind. These serve as haunting markers of the trouble she faced and couldn’t handle, trouble that Rice himself soon finds. Throughout the story, Rice remains consistently out of his element. As he struggles to blend into these new surroundings everywhere are reminders that he’s failing and despite his best intentions, he remains an outsider.

Bearskin

by James A. McLaughlin

ONE

The bees in the wall had been flying out in suicide pacts of two, three, five bees at once. They went for Rice’s face and he tried to brush them away with his work gloves, but he’d lost count of the stings. He was removing the last section of paneling when a lone bee stung him dead center on his forehead, which made his eyes water. He blinked hard and kept working, jammed the end of his crowbar under the thin, dusty panels and snapped them away from the studs, then again, moving from floor to ceiling and back down on the other side. When everything was loose he dropped the crowbar and reached back for the sledgehammer, smashed the whole section clattering to the floor.

He stepped away from the wall and rested the weight of the sledge on his boot. The doors and all the windows were open, and a breeze blew into the cabin from the meadow, stirring up dust. His eyes itched and his nose was running. Sweat ran down his cheeks. That last sting above his eyebrows felt like an ice-cream headache.

He’d started before dawn and now there was only the one last six-foot section where the hive between the studs had made stains on the paneling that looked like water damage. Several hundred bees crowded there in quivering lines and clusters that slowly shifted, broke apart, coalesced into new shapes. Part of his job up here was eradicating invasive species, but European honeybees weren’t on the termination list, probably because they’d been around for about five hundred years and were themselves dying off from some new parasite.

Rice blew his nose in a dusty paper towel and watched the bees on the wall. They moved like a marching band on mescaline—ranks and columns that circled, dissolved, reformed. He waited, wondering if they might eventually spell out some revelatory message just for him, but the patterns remained inscrutable, and he shut his eyes and exhaled. He should go outside, get away from the dust, this bee hostility. He tossed the paper towel in the direction of a plastic trash bag in the corner, turned and picked his way through the nail-studded boards littering the floor.

Out back, dragonflies swooped and hovered, hunting lesser insects over a waving non-native chaos of blue chicory flowers, tilting white Queen Anne’s lace, a few remaining purple-topped Scotch thistle. The long green wedge of Turk Mountain loomed above like a wave going away, breaking northward. There were crickets, always crickets, and from the trees at the forest edge the neurotic pulse and whirr of dog-day cicadas. Seven thousand acres of private nature preserve: Rice was its caretaker, the science tech, the guy with the Roundup. Construction wasn’t in his job description, but he’d agreed to do the work on the cabin so the owners wouldn’t hire a bunch of carpenters and plumbers to drive up in the mornings and ruin his solitude.

His neck ached, and when he took off a glove and reached up to touch below his ear he felt another sharp jab of pain, like getting stung again. Something came away under his fingernail. He peered at it—a tiny stinger attached to a bulb of bee guts. The bee had jammed her barbed stinger into Rice’s skin, then pulled

away, eviscerating herself, and flown off to die. What a system, he thought. The stinging bees were females, non-breeders, kamikazes all—apparently their individual survival meant little enough. He held the stinger-and-guts apparatus in the sunlight, close to his face, looking for his future there, extispicy in miniature.

A dark shape rushed out of the meadow and he jumped away as the vulture careened overhead, its big shadow sliding past his feet. His heart pulsed in the back of his throat, but the thing he refused to call fear—it always felt more like recognition: *there* it is, *here* it comes—passed quickly. He watched the bird glide above the meadow. When he’d first arrived here six months ago, a little scare like that would have rendered him more or less catatonic for the rest of the day.

“Goddamn buzzard,” he said, without malice.

Two more appeared, flying one behind the other in tight formation. They banked at the edge of the forest and beat the air with a dozen choppy wingbeats, then sailed past the cabin again, lifting like kites in the thermal boiling up from the sun-warmed meadow. They turned their naked black heads to look at him as they passed. He waved, imagining it was best to act friendly. They seemed impatient to be away and soaring, to put the world in proper perspective—four thousand feet up with the land unrolling like a map beneath them, a road atlas with thick, blood-red lines for the cornucopian highways, thin fuchsia for the secondaries. Certain pastures would be shaded pink for stillborn lambs or lightning-struck cows. These black vultures were smaller than the red-headed turkey vultures, and they tended to be less patient with the dying. Last month he’d seen a piece in the paper about a new suburb in northern Virginia where the local vultures were attacking house pets. A flock of the birds would spot a geriatric Pekingese hobbling too far from the house and descend on it like some dark incarnation of small-dog nightmares, pull it to pieces in its own back yard while the neighbors’ kids gaped from an upstairs window.

He watched until the birds were circling far overhead. The sun glared white on their black backs when they tilted their inside wings, turning to stay within the rising current of air.

After an early lunch, he sat on the back porch of the lodge, drinking a beer and watching bees shoot out of the cabin like sparks. Slumped back in the chair, he propped his bare heels on the porch rail, held his cold beer sweating against the bee-sting lump on his forehead. He’d scraped eight stingers from his flesh with a pocket knife, and his face had started to swell up, so he’d taken a Benadryl, and then another one for good measure, and now with the beer he was starting to feel loopy.

The day had turned hot, muggy after last night’s thunderstorm. Rice was used to the Sonoran desert and he found summer in the Virginia mountains surreal and enervating. The humid air here was more than just the space around objects—it was a palpable medium, animate and abuzz with insects, never completely silent, and day or night the slightest breeze carried some organic smell: wet grass, honeysuckle, putrefaction. Life seethed messily on every surface, and the deep soil itself was alive and breathing. Ever since the trees had leafed out in May, Rice had felt overwhelmed by biota, unbalanced and prone to spells of abstractedness. He would pause in his outside work—counting birds or spraying Roundup on multiflora rose or tacking up hundreds of *Posted No Trespassing* signs—and awaken later from a long daydream, vacant and disconcerted, his butt asleep in the dirt and several species of insect crawling on his skin, bites itching his ankles. He never remembered what he’d been dreaming about, had nothing but a vague sense of relentless motion, of buzzing and humming, grass vibrating in the air.

A shrill, clattering call burst from the forest nearby. Rice turned to look, thinking *pileated woodpecker*, but the bird didn’t appear. He knew most of the bird species now. His first log entries from back in March and April said things like *big-ass black woodpecker w/red crest*. While he watched, a fresh breeze passed over the meadow and brushed against the big poplars and maples. Heavy branches rose and fell in slow motion, and a million leaves twisted on their stems, showing silver underneath. The forest looked eerily animate, a gigantic green beast dreaming at the edge of the meadow, its skin twitching and rippling.

His feet began to itch, and he rubbed them together where they rested on the hard porch railing. His toes were dirty and seemed far away. A fat black ant crawled up his right heel, struggled through the sparse forest of black hair on top of his foot, then dropped to the railing on the other side and ran along like it was late for something. He thought of the way the bees had defended their hive. Their certainty and purposefulness fascinated him. There was no room for delusion in the mind of a bee—its actions were beyond question or reproach. He gulped his beer, nose tingling, and burped. He had to do something about the bee hive this afternoon; then he could clean up the mess in there and start on the wiring tomorrow.

He was still looking at his toes, puzzling what to do with the bees—insecticides were taboo up here—when a large animal walked out of the woods at the far end of the meadow. He watched it for a moment, framed in the misshapen hourglass between his feet. It was a quarter mile away, contorted by quivering heat waves, too big and dark to be a deer. He squinted, shaded his eyes against the glare.

He'd been seeing bears. At first it was just sign—tracks and piles of scat and overturned rocks and logs—but in the past few weeks the bears had been showing themselves. He had come upon a big female and two first-year cubs feeding in a blackberry thicket at the low end of the meadow. Several times he'd seen a young, sleek male with one scabby ear that had been split in a fight. And last week he'd found tracks in the dirt along the fire road not thirty yards from the lodge, the rear print like a barefoot man's, the front a big broad paw. He locked his garbage in the shed now and carted it to the dumpster every few days instead of letting it pile up.

The figure shimmered and shifted in the hot air, bearish but not quite, floating along like a wraith just above the meadow. It gradually took shape as it approached: a person, a man, a bearded man with a large rucksack on his back, walking on the fire road, his legs hidden in the tall grass. Rice stood. He would've been less surprised by a bear. He kept the gate at the entrance locked, and in six months he'd never seen anyone walk out of that forest. The man was loping purposefully toward the lodge in full daylight, and there was nothing surreptitious in the way he moved, though now Rice noticed something was wrong with his left arm—it was short, and it swung in a rhythm that didn't quite match his stride, like a child's arm that had been attached to a grown man.

Then the man was at the edge of the yard, crossing the arbitrary boundary between meadow and mowed grass, as if he'd leaped forward while Rice blinked. Rice wondered if he might have blacked out for a few moments, but he was still standing, his legs solid, feet flat on the rough floorboards. This strange man walking into the yard.

“Hey buddy,” Rice said. He raised his hand, palm out, like a cop halting traffic. “You lost?”

The man stopped and grimaced, bared his straight yellow teeth. He was hatless, his face tan and deeply lined above the dark beard. Probably in his forties, though guessing the age of mountain people was always chancy. His eyes were light blue disks, opaque and expressionless, and for an instant Rice wondered absurdly if he might be blind. He shrugged out of his pack, dropped it on the ground and stood there with his hips loose and his weight on one leg. The left arm was a stump, ending just above where the elbow should have been. He wore dusty black boots and tattered fatigue pants, a torn sleeveless shirt wet and sticking to his flat belly. A sheath knife hung from a leather belt just behind his right hip.

He asked something in a raspy voice. It sounded like “Yowl spear in the otter?”

“What?”

The man cupped his hand and tilted it to his mouth. The arm was long and tanned, with corded muscles working under the skin like snakes. High on the deltoid was the crude tattoo of a humanoid figure with the head of some carnivore, its mouth open and showing teeth.

Spare any water, Rice thought. He was supposed to keep trespassers off the property, but the day was hot and he was enough of a desert rat that he wasn't going to refuse anyone a drink of water.

“Sure,” he said. “Hang on a minute.” On the way inside he stopped, his hand on the door. His visitor hadn't moved from where he'd dropped his pack. “You want to get out of the sun?”

The man shook his head, and Rice went in and found an old army canteen in the kitchen closet, rinsed and filled it at the sink, watching the man through the screen window. He stood in the yard with his head tilted back, following a bird or insect flying overhead, but as Rice watched he dropped his gaze and stared hard at the window, just for a second, as if Rice had called out. Then he turned his attention to the meadow, intent for a moment, now relaxing, watching the horizon again. He reminded Rice of an alert dog, perceptive of invisible things, scents, phantasms.

The canteen filled and overflowed, wetting the felt cover, cool on Rice's hand. Sweat ran from under his arms, trickled down his sides to the waistband of his pants. He felt disoriented—objects across the room seemed at a great distance, the kitchen floor tilting under him. He wondered if he might be hallucinating or dreaming all this. Maybe it was the beer and Benadryl. Or maybe you've just been up here too long by yourself, he thought. Turning into a hermit. Greeting imaginary strangers. He wondered what would happen if he just stayed inside, whether the man would disappear or come knocking on the door, looking in all the windows. Rice could duck behind the counter or maybe hide in the shower, pull the curtain. Grinning, he screwed the top on the canteen and carried it outside.

He forgot about the arm and pitched the heavy canteen underhand from the top step, but the man caught it nonchalantly and then held it between his legs so he could unscrew the top. He drank in long gulps with his eyes closed. When he'd finished, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, nodded thanks and tossed the empty canteen back to Rice. He was completely unimpaired, his movements smooth and powerful, that Popeye arm more than adequate. He burped quietly and rocked back on his heels. He seemed to have something else on his mind but was restraining himself, perhaps out of politeness.

“What're you doing way back here?” Rice asked, a fake Stone County twang in his voice. The accent had been coming to him unbidden whenever he talked to locals.

“Pickin' mushrooms,” the man answered. He tapped a canvas satchel hanging from his belt. “Chanterelles, 'seng, bilberry.”

“Did you know this is private property?”

The man shook his head and said something Rice couldn't understand.

“What's that?”

He repeated himself exactly. but Rice caught it this time: “Din pick none hyar.” His drawl was way beyond anything Rice had heard in the county—the man swallowed all of his consonants, the syllables rich with inflection but hard to group into words.

“You got those mushrooms up in the National Forest and then walked all the way down here for a drink of water?”

“I *walked* al'way from Wes' *Virginny*.”

“Well, that's a lot of walking.” He paused. Here was his first trespasser, and he wasn't sure how to proceed. “Trouble is,” he began, “there's all those Posted signs I tacked up along the boundary line, and the owners don't—”

“They's somethin' to show ye,” the man interrupted. He jerked his head back the way he had come, back up the mountain. “S up thar.”

Want anyone on the property without permission, Rice finished his sentence silently. He huffed through his nose and glanced at the forested slope, as if he could see whatever the fellow wanted to show him from here.

“What is it?”

“Y’orta see’t y’self.”

Rice nodded slowly. He searched the man’s face for signs of criminal insanity: his forehead looked normal, rising straight and broad under a tangle of matted black hair, but there was that odd, blind man’s stare, and the patchy beard obscured a weak chin and thin red lips that barely moved when he spoke. This thing on the mountain he wanted Rice to see, it might be the face of Jesus on a lichen-covered boulder, an albino rattlesnake, a single-engine plane crash. Maybe a group of *compadres* waiting in ambush over the ridge.

“S your place, ain’t it?” The mushroom picker swept his arm in an arc that included the hewn-log lodge, the weathered shed, the freshly gutted frame summer cabin, the big meadow.

“I’m the caretaker.”

“Then y’orta see what I aim to show ye.” He nodded once in conclusion and hooked his thumb in his belt, waiting for a reply.

Rice leaned forward to peer up at the weather, the porch rail creaking with his weight. Above the mountain, hazy, indeterminate cumulus clouds crowded the sky but did little to block the sun. A clamor started in the forest, and a big red-tailed hawk shot out over the meadow on stiff wings, heckled by a gang of crows diving and dipping. When they reached the lodge, the crows all flared and scattered back into the trees, leaving the hawk to glide downhill unmolested. The mushroom picker had turned to watch, but now he stared up at Rice with those eyes like pale stones, standing in the heat without seeming to notice it.

“I don’t think you’re real,” Rice said, but the man didn’t reply. The crickets ticking in the grass made a pervasive sound that could have been coming from the air itself.

He had to jog through the meadow to keep up with the mushroom picker, and on the fourth switchback on the ridge he fell behind, gulping for air, his legs heavy. Sweat soaked his eyebrows and dripped into his eyes. The fire road was rough and overgrown with yellow pine saplings smelling of turpentine in the heat, their sharp needles pricking his skin as he pushed through them. At the crest of the ridge, where the road leveled out a bit and turned northward toward the peak of Turk Mountain, he caught a glimpse of the man waiting, watching to make sure he was still being followed. Then he vanished again.

Rice stopped to rest halfway to the peak, high on the exposed spine of the mountain where the forest was stunted and the road more open, unshaded, paved with shards of broken purple sandstone that slipped and rolled under his boots. The air smelled of hot rock, and fence lizards skittered into the dry leaves beside the road. His throat felt raw and was so dry it threatened to close up every time he swallowed. His head throbbed. He wished he’d brought the canteen. Suddenly dizzy, he bent over with his hands on his knees, watching his sweat drip from his nose and chin onto the sandstone, darkening it from purple to blue-black. He had thought he was in shape.

“She ain’t far now.”

He stood too quickly, almost blacking out. The mushroom picker hunkered on the side of the road not twenty feet away. Before Rice could speak, he walked off the trail, due west into a trackless thicket, and Rice shook his head and followed. They moved more slowly, headed downslope into the big remote gorge west of Turk Mountain, pushing through a scrubby oak forest tangled with mountain laurel and huge

scaly-barked rhododendron. Laurel branches tugged at Rice’s thighs, and cat’s-claw vines ripped his shins, but his guide with his bulky pack moved as though the brush barely touched him. Vultures flushed from a grove of big yellow pines, and the mushroom picker hurried to the base of one of the trees to kneel beside something lying in the pine tags. Rice approached, wading through noisy, twirling swarms of bluebottle and greenbottle flies that smacked like BBs into his legs. He smelled the rich, coppery smell of blood.

The mushroom picker rose and stepped away from a headless body lying on its side. At first Rice thought it was a man.

“Done skint this’n,” the mushroom picker said. “Ah seen more’n a dozen. Don’t take nothin’ but they hands and they galls.”

He began to pace back and forth under the tree, muttering to himself. The creature was skinned naked, its muscles red and wrinkled where the fascia had started to dry. The abdomen had been slit, and the vultures had pulled out pale, ropy loops of intestine. All four limbs ended in polished white condyles at the wrist and ankle joints. Rice stared, struck by the human resemblance.

“Is it a bear?” he asked.

The man started, as if he had forgotten about Rice.

“S’bar,” he said through his teeth, his voice strange, lower and harsher than before. He seemed suddenly angry. “She-bar.”

He kept his head down, mumbling gibberish, and he wouldn’t meet Rice’s eyes. He hunched his shoulders against the weight of his pack and shifted from foot to foot, stepping forward, then back, almost dancing, his movements jerky and powerful. Rice backed away. He was about to ask the man if he was all right when he turned and ducked and vanished into the rhododendron hell.

TWO

Rice spun the round, padded seats of the old bar stools as he walked past, all of them tottering and squeaking in the near silence, one by one coming to a stop as he sat at the end of the bar. A game show flickered on the mute television perched on a makeshift plywood shelf above the bar. From where he sat he could see the whole room, which was deserted except for the bartender and an elderly couple he hadn’t noticed before. They sat immobile as mannequins at a table by the front window, where the simple neon sign that gave the place its name wasn’t turned on yet: *Beer and Eat*.

He waved to the bartender, a dirty-blonde, broadly built woman probably about Rice’s age, thirtyish, mid-thirties maybe. The sewn script on her blue blouse said “Karla.” She walked over and Rice ordered a Rolling Rock, but she hesitated, staring, maybe deciding whether to serve him. He remembered the bees and reached up to feel the diminishing lumps on his cheeks, his forehead, leaned forward to peer at himself in the dim mirror behind the bar.

“Bee stings,” he said, settling back on his stool, shrugging. “Got into a hive today.”

She shook her head at his explanation. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

He smiled and spread his hands palm-down on the cool oak bar top. He had been in the Beer and Eat only once before, back in the spring.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She shook her head again and walked to the cooler, stopping to draw once on the cigarette she’d left lit in an ashtray on the cash register. On the television, an advertisement showed a shiny black SUV with its

lights on, swinging fast around the curves on a cliffside highway in California. Smoke rose from the ashtray in a thin stream and curled and dispersed in front of the picture. Karla pushed the bottle toward Rice without a word and retreated to a chair beside the cash register. He tilted the beer and drank about half of it at once. He'd been warned when he took the job, but the occasional flash of local hostility still surprised him. As the caretaker of the Traver Preserve, he represented wealthy outsiders and a preservation ethic that seemed nonsensical and elitist to the locals. Apparently it had turned into a real problem for his predecessor.

Melissa Shore—he knew her name from the junk mail that still came to the mailbox—was a real biologist, a Ph.D. candidate who was doing field research on a rare species of skink Rice had never heard of. She had moved out by the time he arrived, but he'd lived with her lingering citrus scent in the bedroom, her handwriting in the field logs, long blonde strands in the dust balls he swept out from under the furniture. He knew from her notes in the log that she had a particular and unscientific fondness for chickadees; he knew what kind of detergent and soap and toothpaste she used. The woman who had interviewed Rice for the job had only said that the former caretaker had run into some bad trouble with the locals and had to move back to Blacksburg.

It was January when he'd driven up to Phoenix for his interview with Ms. Starr Traver-Pinkerton, who was on the board of the foundation that owned the place. She met him at the door of her sprawling desert hacienda—a rich old hippie, x-ray skinny in a flowered cotton dress, salt-and-pepper hair, clear blue eyes—and led him to a sandstone-paved courtyard where she'd set out iced tea. Her great-grandfather, she said, was a reformed industrialist who had swooped down from Pittsburgh and bought up the Turk Mountain property in the late 1800's. He founded the *Stone News Leader*, which back then was cutting-edge progressive, and built a paper mill to feed it, cut most of the softwoods off the southern part of the property before he got the idea to turn it into a nature preserve. He was a preservationist in the old patrician style, and he never sold an acre or cut down another living tree except to build the lodge and cabin. After his death, his sons moved west and went on to build a sprawling media empire, but the family had hung on to the property and placed it in a charitable foundation in the seventies. Ms. Traver-Pinkerton warned him about the isolation, that most of the time the place was deserted, though now it turned out the foundation planned to start giving fellowships to graduate students who could live there for a semester or two and just do science. Which was why Rice had to fix up the cabin. Talk about ruining the solitude, though he would cross that bridge if he ever came to it.

Rice had exaggerated his carpentry experience on the job application, which, he realized, was probably the main reason a guy with his record had gotten the position. That and the fact that he was a biological science technician who looked like he could take care of himself. It was a strange job interview: Ms. Traver-Pinkerton's eyes lit up when he disclosed his legal problems, but then she seemed disappointed by his rather mundane offense, muling on the border for the Juarez cartel, using his Forest Service job as cover. Nevertheless, she gave him the job on the spot, so he drove home and sold or gave away what he couldn't fit in his truck and hung around in his apartment until his court date. He was a first offender, and by then he'd already done his probation, so after subjecting him to an hour of questions from a nervous junior prosecutor just out of law school, the DEA cut him loose. His girlfriend, Apryl, had been the one in real trouble, but she was dead by then. Supposedly the DEA had built a case that would take down the second biggest cartel in Mexico and probably trigger a government scandal of some sort, but their case imploded as key witnesses recanted or disappeared one by one. Rice's testimony had become irrelevant, simply confirming that his girlfriend would have been a good witness if she were still alive, and the charges against him were minor—the agent he dealt with even used the phrase “slap on the wrist.” He'd made the mistake of asking about some sort of witness protection, and the agent laughed at him. “Nobody's looking for you,” he'd said.

Rice drained his beer, and after several tries he got Karla's attention and ordered another. When the next beer disappeared pretty fast he ordered one more, with a glass of water. Two cold ones on an empty stomach quelled his nervousness but left him mildly stupefied, and for a while he was content to watch television. He tried to guess the answers to the trivia questions on the screen.

At six o'clock, sawmill workers started drifting into the bar in groups of three and four, and Rice remembered it was Friday. They crowded the tables, ordering food and pitchers of beer, and the air began to smell of sawdust and turpentine, creosote and sweat, the Merriewood sawmill. Three young women stepped through the door with exaggerated bravado and descended on a table as though they'd rehearsed outside, gathering their nerve. The only female customers, they were dressed for the dance hall up in Clifford—tight jeans, cowboy boots, sculpted hairdos. The tall one with red hair stared hard at Rice, but when he grinned she turned away.

The kitchen in the back was bustling now, and a cloud of greasy-smelling steam surged out the swinging door each time the waitress hurried through. Rice ordered a hamburger and leaned back against the bar to watch the people in the room, middle-aged men in jeans, heavy boots, T-shirts. Most had beards or some sort of mustache. They were dirty and tired, and they talked quietly in their small groups. The sharp clack of a break announced a pool game in the back room. Nashville country music drawled from a jukebox. He hated top-forty, but this was the old stuff.

Karla gave him a bland glance when he spun around on his stool to face the bar again. She seemed only moderately disappointed that she hadn't run him off with her gratuitous hostility. Rice yawned and checked the TV. The news was on, a curvaceous brunette in a beige suit moving her lips and pointing to a map of Virginia and West Virginia: “Weekend Weather.” It would be clear and hot, more of the same, the drought dragging into its sixth week despite a few scattered thunderstorms. He saw in the dingy mirror that most of the faces had turned toward the television: men with gardens to water, maybe some skinny cattle to worry about, a meager second cutting of hay on the ground. Fishing trips to the reservoir over the weekend. They were regular folks with regular lives. He wondered how their days went, what they talked about at home over the kitchen table on Sunday morning. It occurred to him that he might be a little drunk.

He slid off the stool and found the bathroom, which smelled of the usual disinfectant and deodorizer, ammonia of old piss. There were uncomplicated slurs and accusations on the walls. *Suzy is a whore. Johnny D. is a queer.* All with phone numbers to call. He reached to flush and there, printed in pencil on the wall next to the handle: *Will buy bear galls, paws Also jinsang Call 263-4547.* He pulled a ballpoint from his pocket and wrote the number on his wrist.

When he returned, his hamburger had arrived, and two men were sitting nearby at the bar. Rice nodded and said “Evenin’” to the closer one, a gigantic lummoX with a shaved head. He wore bottle-thick glasses, jeans, and a tent-sized plaid shirt he must have bought at a Big and Tall store. He ignored Rice and conversed with Karla about the long week, the hot weather. His voice was absurdly high-pitched for such a big man, almost a falsetto. The jukebox was playing a song about someone sitting in a bar listening to a jukebox. *Brother jukebox, Sister wine, Mother freedom, Father of time.* Halfway through his hamburger, Rice turned again to the giant sitting next to him.

“Y'all do any bear hunting around here?” he asked.

The man, whom Karla had called Roy, swiveled around in no hurry, aimed his pale moon face at Rice like a satellite dish. His left eyeball—oversized already and magnified by the glasses to the size of a fist—rolled up to stare at the ceiling, then back down, finally coming to rest in the outside corner of his eye, where it trembled as if frightened by something it had seen. Rice switched to the right eye, fighting the impulse to look up at the ceiling himself. “You do any hunting?” he repeated.

“Nope,” Roy said, his good eye fixed on Rice with a mild, almost kind expression.

“You know anybody who does? I'm looking to do some bear hunting, but I don't know much about it.”

Roy nodded, pursing his lips. “Some folks like to hunt bar. They got dogs. Got to have dogs.” He paused, and the lazy eye swung into place, staring at Rice for emphasis. “Right?”

“I reckon so,” Rice said.

Roy turned to the man he had come in with, raised his voice to such a tenor screech that Rice wondered if he were being mocked. “Dempsey Boger keeps hounds, don’t he? This feller’s lookin’ to buy him a dog for huntin’ bar.”

The room quieted, and a palpable wave of public attention washed over them. Rice turned his face away from the room, the skin at the back of his neck tingling. The caretaker of the Traver Preserve, a presumed eco-fascist, was going bear hunting—it was interesting, but only for a moment. As the hubbub behind them resumed, the fellow beside Roy just shrugged without looking over.

“Yep, you go over see Dempsey,” Roy said to Rice. “Last place up Sycamore Holla fore the turnaround. Bunch a honeybee boxes and a big old war kennel back a the house. He’s got all kinda dogs.” He nodded once and swiveled back to the bar.

Rice signaled Karla and ordered more beers for the three of them. When the bottles arrived, Roy lifted his beer by the neck with thumb and forefinger, tipped it back to drink, smacked his lips and gave a noncommittal grunt, but not a word acknowledging Rice’s gesture of camaraderie. The other man seemed to ignore his bottle entirely. Free beer, Rice speculated, must magically appear on the bar in front of these two gentlemen on a regular basis. They must live charmed lives.

Watching the mirror again, he noticed three men slouched in a booth across the room, staring at him as they smoked cigarettes and nursed their beers. Probably in their early twenties, they were mill workers like the rest, but they lacked the poise of the older men. Rice recognized two of them, big, thick-chested fellows with freckled faces and wispy red hair—brothers, he thought, Stiller boys—part of the surly crowd that hung out weekends at their father’s general store in Swope, where Rice bought beer and milk and canned tuna when he didn’t feel like driving to the Harris Teeter out near the interstate. The store was a game-check station with animal heads on the walls, pickup trucks with kennels parked outside, and the conversation—sometimes halted abruptly when Rice walked in—reliably about dogs and hunting.

Rice had never seen the third man before. He was small and pale, with a hard, thin-lipped mouth framed by an unfortunate attempt to grow facial hair. Rice turned, raised his beer in salute, but the three just fixed him with half-lidded, empty stares, mouths turned down at the corners, a practiced look of utter disdain. He shrugged, grinned, drank from the beer as if he’d made a toast. He watched in the mirror, and when they finished their beers and got up to leave, Rice asked for his tab.

Outside, a streetlight over the parking lot had come on early, low hum and blue-flicker in the warm, still evening. The boys were climbing into a huge pickup truck, a new-looking F-350 crew cab with bloated tires and bright yellow shock absorbers you were supposed to notice. When Rice called out, they hesitated; then the smaller one said something, and they slammed the doors and drove off, the big tires spinning in the gravel until they hit pavement with a short screech and the truck roared down the one street in Merriewood.

On the narrow road through Dutch Pass, Rice rolled down his window to feel the cool, wet air, smell the adelgid-doomed hemlocks that grew near the river. When he crossed the little bridge over Sycamore Creek, he slowed down, thinking hell, it’s still early, and turned right onto Sycamore Creek Road, a dead-end gravel tertiary winding through a steep-sided hollow into the mountains. Along the road, tiny family compounds had sprouted like mushrooms in the damp blue air, always a weathered frame house close to the road, a clutch of trailer homes behind, a Brobdingnagian satellite dish aimed at the slot of sky overhead, fixer-up muscle cars and four-bys on blocks. After a few miles, the valley opened up a bit, and dirty Charolais grazed in the narrow floodplain pastures. The slopes of the mountain above were marked with a skein of zigzag logging roads through third-growth hardwoods and patchy clear-cuts coming up in rows of white pine.

Dempsey Boger’s place was as Roy had described it, sitting at the end of the road in a half-moon lot bitten from the forest, a double-wide trailer home and three corrugated-metal sheds, a couple dozen white bee boxes arranged in a neat rectangle behind the trailer. The lawn was tidy, ornamented with a hopeful

mélange: concrete sculptures of capering deer and bear, bird baths, and whitewashed tractor-tire planters spewing marigolds, chrysanthemums, violets. A driveway—two parallel lines of coarse gravel crunching under the tires—led to a kind of courtyard behind the trailer lit by two mercury vapor floodlights. As Rice pulled in, a big woven-wire kennel tucked up against the overhanging forest exploded with leaping, howling dogs of mixed sizes and shapes. Next to the kennel were parked a black Dodge pickup, a dented International log truck, and two yellow log skidders, one with a big articulated grapple and the other with metal kennel boxes welded on the back where the winch was supposed to go.

A man answered the door, frowning. He was medium height, with a compact paunch and a face so darkly tanned that Rice thought he must be Native American. Behind him a thin, dark-haired woman sat in a chair with a child in her lap, looking to see who it was, two faces blue and shiny-eyed in the light of a television screen. As Rice introduced himself, the man stepped out and shut the door behind him.

“You’re Dempsey Boger?” Rice finished.

The man nodded, peering at Rice in the dim light from the sky and the humming bulbs overhead. Rice was about to ask if he knew anything about folks killing a bunch of bears out of season when a fight erupted in the kennel and the commotion set all the dogs to howling and barking again. Both men turned to look, since the noise prevented conversation. Boger yelled, “Shut the hell up!” but the dogs ignored him. Rice followed him out to the driveway, where he picked up a handful of gravel behind Rice’s truck to hurl at the kennel. When the dogs finally settled down, Boger turned to Rice. He looked amused, a grin twitching at the right side of his mouth.

“You got you a bee problem.”

Rice paused, nodded, reaching up to touch his lumpy face again. “I was doing some remodel work. There’s a big hive in the wall.”

“Sure they ain’t yellow jackets? I can’t use yellow jackets.”

“They’re honeybees.”

“Ain’t many wild bees left. Varroa mites done killed ’em off. The ones still around got a resistance to mites, I believe. You want me to come up there?”

This is serendipity, Rice thought, happening right before my eyes. “You know where I’m talking about? The Traver Preserve?”

Boger nodded, patting his breast pocket for cigarettes. Finding none, he folded his arms over his chest. There was a finality to the gesture, so Rice opened the door to his truck. Several cows lowed together somewhere down in the sycamores, a hollow sound, melancholy and far away.

“You leave that gate unlocked,” Boger said. “I’ll drive up in the morning.”

Rice hooked the chain on the post to hold the heavy pole gate open and drove through without stopping to close and lock it behind him, acutely aware that this was the first time he’d done that since he’d moved here in March. The rearview image of the open gate lit red in his taillights nagged him on the long drive up the mountain, and he considered going back to shut it—he could run down in the morning to open it for Boger—but he resisted. This would be a good opportunity to start working through the paranoia. The notion that the Juarez cartel would track a nobody like him across the continent had come to seem ludicrous even to Rice, but he still had the reflexes.

Once upon a time, he’d thought he would be a good criminal, in a casual, moonlighting sort of way. His much-younger anarchist girlfriend, dreadlocked Apryl—also a part-time Forest Service employee—had got him into it, and muling for the cartel meshed well with his job as a biological science technician: crisscrossing the deserts of southern Arizona and New Mexico, collecting field data, doing inventories on

species, leading habitat improvement work crews, and carrying the odd packet of drugs or money to or from the border. The thrill had appealed to him, and he was good at it—he had nerve, and he could travel through remote desert safely and undetected, avoiding both law enforcement and the pirates and coyotes who flooded the region after the border town crossings had been shut down. Also, he had to admit he was doing his best to impress the high-octane Apryl.

His naïveté had been cured in a matter of days last summer, beginning with Apryl’s near-breakdown after being approached by undercover DEA agents demanding her cooperation, followed by Rice’s own arrest. While he was waiting for someone to bail him out, Apryl had been found on a dirt track south of Arivaca in the driver’s seat of her USDA Forest Service Jeep Cherokee with a bullet through the head. Officially it was a probable suicide, but the entry wound was in her left temple, and Apryl had been right-handed.

He pulled into the yard and cut the engine, reached down to shut off his headlights but froze when a bear shambled out the open door of the cabin, a bear coming out the door like a big hound dog rousing himself to see who’d just driven up for a visit.

Rice said, “Hello, bear.” It was the young male he’d seen a few times, the one he suspected had been sniffing around the lodge at night. The illusion of domesticity passed quickly, and for a long moment the bear stood in the headlights, its eyes two bright green coins against the black hump of its body, a thousand bees orbiting its head like electrons, the split ear twitching until, no dog, it suddenly wheeled and galloped around the side of the cabin into the shadows.

Rice left the lights on and stepped into the cabin to assess the damage, but the bees drove him out before he could see much. A lump of honeycomb the size of Rice’s hand lay on the stoop where the bear had dropped it, a few angry confused bees still buzzing around. He lifted it, and, seeing no bear slobber, he pushed in with his finger, crushing the little wax hexagons, and licked a dollop of the viscous liquid from his finger. It was a stronger taste than store-bought but still undeniably honey. He took a bite from the honeycomb, sucking out the honey and chewing the wax into a ball that he spit in the grass.

The bear’s intrusion didn’t surprise him—it was just a new level of permeability in the usual boundaries, something he had come to accept while living up here. Yesterday, for example, he’d almost stepped on a snake lying in the doorway to his bedroom. It was a corn snake, a lustrous ornamental-looking creature with a chain of rich orange and yellow ovals outlined in black along its length. He’d waited until it calmed, and he eased his hands under it, lifted it a few inches off the floor, cool and firm, sliding mysteriously across his skin. It moved and was gone, behind a door, into the dark hall, hunting the field mice, squirrels, chipmunks and baby opossums that also found their way indoors. The lodge had been assimilated into the meadow over the decades, and despite his efforts to keep the place up, a kind of osmosis was constantly occurring, the life outside striving to fill the space inside. Rice kept the screen doors shut, and the windows were screened, but flies and moths and hornets got in anyway. In rainy weather he found big toads sitting inexplicably on the kitchen floor. Large wolf spiders prowled the walls, and orb spiders spun webs in every corner, the ones closest to the lamps growing fat and minatory by late summer. Tiny stab-winged swifts flew down the chimney and vectored from windowpane to windowpane until they were so punch-drunk he could pick them up and carry them outside, light and fragile, coal-gray and smelling like stale ashes. When he opened his hands the birds would revive, rise and slide away in the air as if made of smoke.

He shut off the headlights and slammed the truck door. The moon was dark, and only the brightest stars glowed indistinctly overhead. Blinking fireflies drifted past, and a powerful cacophony emanated from the trees at the edge of the forest—lonesome trills and chirps, amphibian screams, the rhythmic shake-shake of katydids—a busy night in late summer, all the little creatures trying to have sex with each other before the season ended.

Inside the lodge, Rice plugged the old rotary phone into the wall socket and dialed the number he’d written on his wrist. He’d finished the honey the bear had dropped, and all that sugar in his blood was making him feel a bit manic. A man answered on the fourth ring, and Rice put on his local accent.

“You the fella wants to buy bear galls?”

There was a silence, and Rice could hear country radio in the background.

“You got some?”

“I might.”

“You might.”

“Yep. You wan’ talk?”

“You call me back when you got something you sonofabitch.” The man hung up, and Rice stared at the receiver for a moment before he hung up, too.

THREE

The chatter of a diesel outside, tires in the gravel, Rice waking abruptly from a vague, pointless dream of walking in the desert. He’d left the gate open last night on his way in; he was expecting the bee guy. He settled back into his pillow, rolled to face the window. Crows cawed, and a light breeze drifted through the screen, stirring the curtain. He reached and slid it aside, and the morning sun came in like a shout. Too bright to see. He hadn’t slept past sunrise in years. His dream was slipping away from him: a sandy wash, moonlight, thickets of cholla cactus making him careful; he was looking for someone.

A car horn honked three times. Locals did this, and it wasn’t rudeness but a safer and more discreet alternative to walking up and knocking on the door of an isolated house. A door slammed. His eyes had adjusted now, and through the window he saw a black Dodge pickup had pulled up beside his little Japanese truck. Dempsey Boger in a red Stihl cap reaching back through the open window to honk the horn again.

He found his watch on the windowsill. It was stuck at one-seventeen but started up again when he rapped it on the heel of his hand. He reset it, guessing seven o’clock, and put it back on the sill. When he moved his hand away, the sunlight reflecting from the metallic face projected a clear mirror-image of his watch on the white wood sill: the marks without numbers, the hour and minute hands, the sweep-second hand revolving counterclockwise. He watched, mesmerized, as it made one full rotation, a whole minute regained. It was a convincing hallucination of time going backward, and Rice felt an odd, weightless sense of relief, until a cloud passed in front of the sun and the reflection disappeared. He shrugged and swung his feet out of bed onto the cold wood floor. Impossible fantasies could drive a person crazy. He dressed and carried his boots out to the porch and sat on the top step to put them on.

“You want some coffee?” he called to Boger, who was leaning into the bed of his truck, sliding boxes onto the open tailgate.

“Is it made?”

“Wouldn’t take long.”

“Nope, I got to get back. You a late sleeper, Mr. Moore?”

“Not usually. I went for a walk on the mountain last night.”

Boger nodded as if that was an acceptable explanation. Rice yawned, tying his boots, still wet from the night’s dew. He’d fallen into bed only a couple of hours ago. It was the honey, he figured, eating all that wild honey so late, that made it seem like a good idea to go looking for bear poachers in the middle of the night. He’d walked up the fire road, all the way to the top of the mountain, and sat on a rock outcrop overlooking the deep gorge that separated Turk and Serrett Mountains, the old forest down there one of the last big tracts of virgin timber in the state, passed over by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century loggers because of its inaccessibility and protected by the Traver family ever since. He’d waited for a long time, just listening, his sweat cooling and the night air washing his skin like water, screech owls calling to each other in high, quavering wails. Waterfalls hissed deep in the gorge, and from the south came the faint but insistent roar of the big rapids in Dutch Pass, where the gorge emptied into the river. Once in the pre-dawn he thought he heard the baying of hounds behind him, but it was just the distant echo of farm dogs, waking up the cows on Jericho Creek.

Rice carried Boger’s white wooden bee box into the cabin while Boger stuffed dry grass into his smoker and lit it with a cigarette lighter. The bear had continued Rice’s demolition work, ripping a torso-sized hole in the paneling to get at the hive. He’d worried the bear might’ve driven away the bees, but hundreds were still buzzing around the damaged comb. He heard Boger’s steps behind him.

“Bear got into it last night,” Rice explained. “He ran out of here when I drove up.”

Boger didn’t reply for a moment, fussing with the lid to his smoker, which looked like a big tin can with a spout pointing forward and a bellows attached to the back. Then he glanced up.

“A bear broke in here and did that?”

“I guess I left the door open.”

“Set that box down here. We’ll put the brood comb in it if he left us any.” Boger was frowning, and Rice could tell he was restraining himself from commenting on the bear-in-the-cabin story.

“I saw the bear come out of here when I drove up last night.”

“I believe you. When a bear acts like that it means something. It’s no good when bears forget their place.”

Rice cleared a spot on the floor, shoving broken paneling aside with his boot, and stood the bee box upright. He thought of the bear walking out of the cabin last night and standing there in the headlights, eyes glowing green.

“I’m not feeding them or anything.”

“You don’t have to. They just know. Bears are a lot like people, just wilder. Sometimes these back-to-nature types forget bears are wild animals, they want ’em to be like pets. And the bears, they’re no better, you leave the door open they’ll come right in and make themselves at home, but it always turns out bad for everyone. The Indians knew about all that, every tribe had a story about what happened when bears and people mated, and the tragedy that come of it.”

Rice wondered if Boger thought of him as a back-to-nature type. “I don’t think he wants to mate with me,” he said. “Maybe he was hiding out from the bear hunters.”

Boger snorted as he finally snapped shut the lid on his smoker. “There ain’t no hunting allowed on the Traver Preserve. That’s part of your problem, bears up here are half tame.”

“Maybe, but this guy came by yesterday and showed me a dead bear he’d found up on the mountain. Somebody killed her and cut off the paws and took out the gall bladder, left the carcass to rot.”

“You call Zach Hamric about that?”

Rice shrugged. Hamric was the game warden. “I don’t have much use for law enforcement.”

“I called him,” Boger said. He stepped up close to the hive and pumped the bellows, smoke pouring out of the spout, filling the ragged hole the bear had made in the paneling. “I been finding bears, too. He told me it’s happening all over. Said the Chinese pay two thousand dollars for one gall on the black market, use it for medicine. He thinks the mafia’s getting into it now.”

“The mafia?” Rice imagined Italian guys in dark suits prowling the woods for bears. Toting their Tommy guns. Lurking in moonshadows, smoking cigarettes and cracking their knuckles. Boger saw his grin.

“Some folks say Zach Hamric ain’t all there.”

“It just sounds funny. The mafia. So it wasn’t you killing those bears.”

“Did you think it was? I don’t kill no bears till they’ve done fattening up, ’round November.”

“When the season’s open.”

“Meat’s better then.”

Rice nodded. The legal season was a coincidence.

“I only kill one a year,” Boger continued. “Put up a lot more’n I shoot.”

“What about the galls?”

“Like the man said, price has come up, here recently.” He raised an eyebrow. “But we use it ourselves. Mix it in with a glass of whiskey, cure what ails you.”

“I’ll have to try it someday.” Rice couldn’t tell if Boger was putting him on.

Boger handed him the smoker. “You keep the smoke coming. Just pump it real gentle, don’t want the fire to get too hot.”

He went back out to his truck and returned with a beat-up Shop-Vac, plugged it into an orange extension cord Rice had run from the breaker box outside and began sucking up all the bees he could reach. The bees ended up in a shoebox-sized plastic container he’d duct-taped into the hose near the motor housing. Rice figured there had to be a screen in there to keep them from getting sucked into the machine.

“That’s damned ingenious,” Rice said over the noise.

Boger indicated that there was enough smoke for now. “Why don’t you pull the rest of that paneling off, and we’ll see what we got. Who was this fella showed you the bear?”

“He didn’t tell me his name.” Rice realized he’d never thought to ask. “He didn’t seem to live anywhere around here, said he picked mushrooms, ginseng, that kind of stuff. One of his arms was cut off at the elbow.”

Boger shook his head, frowning again. “Don’t know him.” He was waiting for Rice to start on the wall, vacuuming the bees as they flew out from the hive. He had produced nothing resembling the heavy bee suits Rice had seen beekeepers wear in Arizona—not so much as a head net or a pair of gloves for either of them. Rice grabbed his crowbar and started prying away the paneling.

“Don’t squash any. They’ll get mean.”

“They’re not going to mind me crowbarring the wall off their hive?”

“They won’t like that much either. But the smoke’s took their minds off it, makes ’em think the forest’s on fire and most of ’em are in there gobbling up honey so it don’t go to waste. If you kill one, it makes a smell that puts ’em all in a fighting mood instead.”

By the time he had pulled off the rest of the paneling, Rice had been stung six or seven times, and he thought it might be time for some more smoke, but Boger just kept sucking up the bees with the Shop-Vac. The hive filled the space between the studs and stood about five feet high, covered with unhappy bees.

Rice laid down the crowbar and started pumping smoke again. Boger nodded approval, and when it seemed most of the bees were safely ensconced in the plastic container on the Shop-Vac, he shut off the machine. He seemed pleased.

“That’s a lot of honey in here. I’ll take enough for them to eat this winter, fill up the box, but the rest is yours. We can put it in that crate over there. What are you tearing this place up for, anyway?”

Rice fetched the old wooden soft-drink crate and dumped out a pile of hand tools. “The owners want a place where scientists can stay when they come up here to study the forest,” he said. “I’ll put in electricity, plumbing, a little kitchen. Insulate the walls. It’s not exactly my job, but I’ll figure it out. I worked as a carpenter summers when I was in school.”

“You’re from out West?” Boger had produced a kitchen knife and was cutting the comb away from the studs, slicing pieces that he then would rubber-band into frames that fit vertically in the hive box. He moved in an exaggerated slow motion, not brushing away the stray bees that landed on his arms and face.

“Southwest. Arizona, mainly. My dad was in the Air Force.”

“You came here to get away from something.” It wasn’t a question. The brood comb, filled with capped cells containing pupae, was heavy and fragile, and Boger lifted it tenderly. “Usually it’s the other way around, people head west to get away.”

He handed Rice a roll of wax paper and told him to line his crate with it. Then he cut a large slab of what looked like pure capped honeycomb, and when Rice took it from him, a bee caught inside Rice’s elbow stung him. He flinched but laid the comb in the crate without dropping it.

“Here she is.” Boger held up a long, fat bee, a giantess with an abdomen extending far behind her wings. “You got to come with me, girl. Mr. Moore here is fixing up a fancy guest house.” He pulled a plastic case from his pocket, a Rapala fishing lure box with tiny air holes drilled in the top, and shut the queen inside.

“I’m not sure how fancy it’ll be.”

“Fancy enough. If you’re a scientist from the university they’ll put you up on the place, but if you’re a deer hunter from down the road you ain’t welcome. You got Mr. Moore on your ass. They hired the muscle this time.”

“That’s me. Deppity Dawg, just doing my job.” He wasn’t sure about the sudden turn in the conversation. Boger’s tone was light, but this was undeniably a sore subject. “You know anything about what happened to the last caretaker, the woman who was here before me?”

“Nobody told you?” He handed Rice another heavy rectangle of honeycomb, and Rice laid it in his crate on top of the first, with another layer of wax paper in between.

“They just said she didn’t get along with the neighbors.”

“I guess you could say that. She didn’t make many friends around here. She lawed a bunch of fellas come on the property last couple deer seasons. She wrote letters in the paper about how the Board of Supervisors are ruining the county, and she’d show up at Forest Service hearings and go on about saving the trees from the loggers, that kinda thing. Nice enough gal, but she’s an extremist and folks didn’t like that. Not that anyone wanted what happened.”

“Which was what?”

“Some boys jumped her at that dumpster on Route 212, took her up in the woods off the dirt road in Panther Holler. Beat her up and raped her and left her there. Damn near killed her, but she walked out—crawled, probably, and somebody picked her up on 212.” The hive box was full now, and he fitted a wooden lid on top and stood up to look at Rice.

“Damn.” Rice hadn’t expected this. The people from the foundation had never let on. “They know who did it?”

Boger shook his head. He seemed grimly satisfied with the effect this news was having on Rice. “Police are still lookin’ into that.” He motioned for Rice to grab the other handle on the hive box. They lifted it together and carried it out to Boger’s truck. Boger climbed into the bed and slid the hive box forward and began to secure it against the toolbox with bungee cords.

“So it’s just out of the frying pan and into the fire, ain’t it? You comin’ here from out West, I mean.”

Rice shrugged. There was no way Boger could have any information about Rice’s past, but his guesses were uncanny. And that poor woman. Rice had constructed a fairly complete identity for the former caretaker in his imagination, and to hear what had happened to her felt like a punch in the stomach. Still, he had never had any romantic notions about the Appalachians as some sort of green paradise, and he’d take rapist bear-poaching rednecks over Mexican drug lords any day. “You reckon I’m likely to get raped? That’s what they do to the Traver Preserve caretaker?”

Boger smirked but didn’t reply. He hopped out of the truck bed, and they walked back into the cabin. “I’ll tell you a story about the frying pan,” Rice said. He gathered up the smoker and other items Boger had brought with him while Boger detached the bee-filled catch-box from the Shop-Vac.

“When I was in jail last year everyone was talking about this guy Miguel García; he was a big-time drug dealer, got caught by the DEA and was going to testify against the Juárez cartel.”

“Friend of yours?”

“No.” Rice grinned. It was clear Boger had Rice pegged as some thug the Travers had hired. “I never actually met him. Some of the guys in jail knew him.” The same undercover work that had tagged Rice and his girlfriend had isolated García, a much bigger fish several levels above them. Rice hadn’t talked to anyone about this, and he wondered why he was telling Boger.

“García’s testimony was the lynchpin of a huge case the DEA and Mexican authorities were collaborating on. They hid him at some state safe house up in the hills near Phoenix, but the cartel kidnapped him right away—killed a half dozen agents doing it. Nobody heard anything for a couple of days, then the guy turned up at Phoenix Memorial, dumped at the emergency room entrance. Security cameras picked up a couple of guys in gray hooded sweatshirts helping him onto a bench. His head was completely bandaged like the Invisible Man’s, and he almost died of shock before someone noticed him and got him into intensive care. They found sutures all around his face and head, but nothing was missing, and the stitching was expert, obviously done by a good surgeon. García remembered nothing; apparently he’d been drugged the whole time. Nobody knew what it meant until the manila envelopes with glossy 8x10s started showing up in the hospital room and at the García family hacienda in Scottsdale: crisp, well-lit pictures of García’s bloody grinning skull, the slack bag of his face in someone’s hands.”

“They skinned his damn face?”

“And then sewed it back on.”

“What the hell for?”

“The point was that they could do whatever they wanted. That they were holding back, being merciful. That nobody could imagine what else they could and would do. At the end of six months, there was hardly enough left of the DEA’s case to prosecute.”

They were standing beside the truck now, and Boger had placed the catch box with the bees on the passenger’s seat. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then reached for a pack of cigarettes on the dashboard. “I better get on home before these critters start dying on me.”

Rice reached for his wallet. He had an expense account with the foundation. “I thank you kindly,” he said. “What do we owe you?”

“Hell, you owe me these bees. I told you they got a resistance to the varroa mite, and I’m damn glad to have em. Ain’t no other charge. But I wish you hadn’t told me about that fellow’s face. It’s goddamn disturbing.”

“It’s no worse than what your local boys did to poor Melissa Shore.

“The hell it’s not.” He held an unlit cigarette in his mouth, talking around it and making no move to light it. He seemed agitated and eager to leave. “Those punks are mean and stupid and they should have their nuts cut off and spend the rest of their lives in jail, but what you’re talking about is—what’s the word?—diabolical. I can’t believe anybody would even think that up.”

After Boger left, Rice made two peanut-butter-and-honey sandwiches for lunch, feeling once more the crazy sugar rush, a powerful need to run up on the mountain again. Instead he drove into town and rented a power washer. Boger had said to seal the hole in the wall and be sure he removed all the honey, or the bees that were still left would keep coming back. After he washed the walls, he hauled all the debris to the dumpster and swept the floor, power washed that, left the doors and windows open so the place could dry. Finding nothing else to blast clean with the power washer, he decided to mow the lawn.

The lawnmower was kept in a storeroom under the front porch. The sturdy plank door complained on its hinges as he pulled it open—it had been more than a week, he figured, the grass not growing much in this dry weather. He brushed away a spider’s web and was about to step into the hot yellow rectangle of light on the floor when motion there stopped him—a copperhead uncoiling like a spring, striking three times in quick succession.

There was the usual electric shiver of adrenalin but he resisted the urge to jump back. The snake didn’t try to get away either, just lay there in the block of sunlight, neck cocked in a tight S with its neat little viper’s head pointed up at Rice. The strikes had looked more like a warning than a serious attempt to bite him. Its eyes were cloudy and its skin dull and dusty-looking, almost ready to shed, which made it nearly blind, vulnerable, and therefore truculent. It struck again as soon as his shadow fell on it. He leaned into the doorway and reached around to where the shovels and rakes were stacked and pulled out a big snow shovel. He could chop the snake in half but decided to catch it instead, carry it out to the woods with the shovel and let it go.

When he slid the blade up close, the snake struck, pinging its head on the metal, then changed tactics and slid away into the storeroom. Rice reached over with the shovel to head it off, but the snake turned abruptly away from the blade and darted toward the door, toward Rice’s feet. This time he couldn’t help himself, and when he stepped backward the snake reversed direction once more and disappeared into the shadows.

“Shit.” He picked up the shovel and started in pursuit, but after ten minutes of reckless searching among the old lumber and yard equipment, talking to the admittedly deaf snake, calling and cajoling, finally cursing, he conceded that it had probably retreated into the dirt-floored crawl space under the lodge. “Great,” he said aloud, kneeling to peer into the shadowed and now-dangerous cellar. “There is a fucking pit viper under the house.”

The mowing didn’t take long. Each time he cut the grass, he let the meadow encroach a little further, and the squared-off acre he’d started with in April had shrunk to an irregular quarter-acre barely encompassing the lodge and the outbuildings. Afterward, he pulled off his boots and lay in the yard. A vulture appeared overhead, rising on the transparent thermal. The bird flew in circles, unreeling into the blue-white sky, until it reached soaring height and headed south to cruise the interstate. The gnats disappeared, and the air above was empty, without depth. A hot, quiet September morning, crickets in the tall grass.

FOUR

The skeleton had been picked nearly clean, its bones dark red, brown, and yellow, the spine intact and ribs arcing up from a drift of fallen leaves. The remnant of some viscera even the vultures wouldn’t eat hung desiccated from the rack of the ribcage like foul jerky.

Rice squatted on his heels with his back against the pine tree and tried to remember how long it had been. Working mornings in the cabin, he had torn out the ceiling, patched the roof, framed the bathroom and finally started on the wiring. Three, four weeks? He wasn’t sleeping much, and the passage of time had become dream-like.

The days were still warm but the sun had drifted to the south, and even at noon the light was watery and autumnal. Leaves were yellowing in the laurel jungle. All around him, the dusty carpet of pine tags glowed in sunlit patches. A high-pressure system had settled in and for days the sky had stood inky blue, with cottony puffs of cumulus decorating the western horizon. The nights sparkled and threatened frost, the moon waxing, gibbous.

He’d been walking the mountain day and night but had seen no trace of bear poachers or anyone else: no boot prints, cigarette butts, sardine tins, ATV tracks, nothing. He had come to the pine grove today partly to make sure his afternoon with the mushroom picker hadn’t been a hallucination. He reached out and tugged on a rib. The bones were still knit together, and the whole rib cage rocked toward him, surprisingly light and releasing a weak stench of putrefaction. He considered snapping off one of the ribs to carry back with him. One of his new obsessions was collecting found objects, fetishes. At the lodge, he’d cleared the bookshelves to make room for them: a defunct hornets’ nest the size of a watermelon, the translucent, six-foot-long shed skin of a blacksnake, skulls of deer and foxes, Indian spear and arrow points, quartz crystals, deer antlers, turtle shells, mollusc fossils, feathers of turkey, hawk, owl, vulture.

With all the walking in the past few weeks he had grown lean and strong, and he’d learned how to stalk through the dry forest, his footsteps arrhythmic, like squirrels leaping in last year’s leaves. He’d seen the adolescent bear with the cut ear twice more near the lodge, and the sow with her two cubs down near the river, and over on Serrett Mountain he’d jumped another huge adult bear that ran with a limp. He’d watched chortling flocks of turkeys chase grasshoppers in the meadow, and in the crepuscular hours deer would thread like fugitives along their secret trails, the bucks thrusting their antlers at low branches, scraping off dead velvet. When he was thirsty, he drank from the few springs still seeping out of the mountain, and when the peanut-butter-and-wild-honey sandwich he had brought for lunch wasn’t enough, he ate bitter-banana pawpaws and handfuls of tiny wild grapes. He napped supine in the carpet of dry leaves and dreamed of motion, of flying, of running through forests he’d never seen. From Turk Mountain’s peak he would swing west across the saddle and into the National Forest, over to the high eastern slopes of Serrett Mountain, sometimes covering twenty-five miles in a big loop around the perimeter of the gorge, descending to the Dutch River at sunset, strolling along downstream as the last bullfrogs began to thrum and great blue herons rose in slow motion from the shallows. He would strip off

his sweaty clothes and lie in the water, sliding with the current over smooth stones, watching bats feed overhead as the afterglow dimmed.

Last week, the former caretaker had driven up to retrieve a few boxes of books and papers she'd left at the lodge. Rice knew he should have recognized his imaginary intimacy with this woman for what it was, should have been prepared for his own reaction upon meeting her, upon seeing her in the flesh, on the front porch, knocking, waiting for him to open what surely felt to her like her own door: a slightly heavy, very pretty blonde woman, medium height, thirtyish, shoulder-length hair and light blue eyes, freckles, a Southern accent—maybe Georgia, or Alabama. She looked him in the eyes and held out her hand and said, “I’m Melissa.” He said hello and shook her hand and got about halfway through his own introduction when his throat constricted and he had a disconcerting moment when he wasn’t sure whether to embrace her like a lost sister or rage through the lodge breaking things. It must’ve shown on his face because the look she gave him was one of understanding but not invitation—she’d seen this before—so he turned and resumed speaking in an overloud voice about the weather, the unusual number of bear sightings, anything to fill the air as he led her to the office and lifted all four boxes in his arms at once, guiltily desperate for her to leave ASAP.

A sound like a distant scream drifted up out of the gorge. He caught his breath and listened, cupped his hands behind his ears. The ancient forest down there was invisible but tangible, a breeze coming up the slope like the exhalation of a god, low and sad and almost lucid in the pine boughs, smelling of moss and decaying leaves, astringent pine and hemlock. There was a far-off hiss from the waterfalls, like the sea in a conch shell. Then, a hound’s mournful bay, its high falsetto modulating into a second, deeper syllable. Then another, farther away. Rice stood and jogged downhill.

He tripped once on a cat’s claw vine, but the laurel broke his fall and he rolled to his feet and ran on. The slope steepened, the thicket giving way to open pine and oak forest, and now without the springy laurel at his shins he took longer strides and soon he was running too fast, nearly out of control. Each step jarred him through his knee, hips, lower back, all the way to his molars, but he couldn’t slow down and instead was accelerating. He knew he should stop, lean against a tree, take a breath and reimpose his will over his body, but he couldn’t quite see how to do it. His legs seemed to have achieved independent volition, as if he’d grown a secondary, sauropod brain in his lower back that had chosen today to stage its coup and now the rest of him had to go along, come what might.

A fallen log appeared in his path, and he stutter-stepped and leaped over it, sailing fifteen feet in the air before he touched down again, sliding in the soft loam and fallen leaves, and when he regained his balance he stutter-stepped and jumped again, flying another ten feet, sliding, and then again. He found he had more control this way, skipping rather than simply running, shifting his weight on each touch-down to turn, contorting his body in midair to avoid the tree trunks that flashed past his face. He flew like this, deep into a part of the gorge he’d never explored before. The hounds’ voices were louder here, and over the crash of his feet in the leaves they echoed like sirens, screams of agony, now an underwater sound like whales singing. He must have covered a mile or more when his right foot landed on a slick root hidden in the leaves and slid out from under him. He went down hard on his butt, skidding then tumbling over and over until he slammed into the trunk of a hemlock.

He lay still for a moment, knocked breathless. His side hurt where he had hit the tree, but nothing seemed to be broken. He sat up and hyperventilated until his head stopped spinning. The light here was dim and the air moist, earthy. The stream gurgled somewhere below. Huge hemlocks, oaks, hickories, and white pines stood all around, their trunks like the columns of a gigantic temple; chestnut logs dead since the blight rotted into chest-high berms; broad poplars loomed among the other trees, gnarled and bent like old men, hollowed out by rot, lightning, ancient fires.

His knees ached, and his thighs quivered as he stood, but then he saw the sudden leaping green distance just a few yards downhill, a cliff, sheer limestone dropping a hundred feet to the stream bed, where clear water trickled in silvery skeins among moss-covered boulders. Butterfly nausea swept him, and he sat back down in the leaves. A breeze sighed in the hemlock, and a red squirrel chattered nearby. He laughed out loud, surprising himself with a queer mania. Really, if he hadn’t fallen when he did.... He

pictured himself running off the edge like a character in a cartoon, legs kicking and arms spinning windmills as he fell in a graceful arc. He might never have been found way down here. He would have died, broken on the rocks, and his carcass would have polluted the water for months, probably sickening the trout downstream.

His pulse gradually quieted in his ears, but another rhythmic sound, off-kilter with his heartbeat, was coming from the slope behind him. He turned. A dog peered at him from behind a tree trunk, panting with its tongue out and lips drawn back in a dog smile. It barked twice and started downslope toward Rice. A female, she had a long wavy white-and-liver coat and looked more like a setter than a hound. Two other dogs appeared from the right, hounds, running with their noses close to the ground. All three wore collars with red, fist-sized cylinders wagging short wire antennas. They shied when they noticed Rice, then sat down to watch him. “Com’ere boys,” he said. They wagged their tails. One bayed suddenly as though his heart would break. Three more hounds loped fast across the slope, nearly falling over the first two; then the rest of the pack appeared among the trees to the right, a dozen or so hounds of various breeds and sizes, at their head a huge, fawn-colored male that looked as big as a steer. He had the heavy skull and jowls of a mastiff cross. When he noticed Rice, he woofed and stood glaring with his black head low, heavy lips pulled away from his thick yellow canines. He growled in a voice so deep and portentous that the back of Rice’s neck actually tingled. They stared at each other until one of the other hounds scurried downhill past Rice toward the cliff and the mastiff followed, walking stiff-legged and eyeing Rice. The setter crept over to Rice and rested her head on his leg consolingly. He stroked her neck, her soft white coat splashed with brown. While he examined her collar and the transmitter, she sniffed daintily at his hands, his pants. The brass tag said *Dempsey Boger, 221 Sycamore Creek Road, Merriewood, VA*. There was a phone number. Rice unbuckled her collar, not sure what he planned to do with it. Some of the other hounds slunk to Rice for attention, whining and rolling over on their backs, sliding downslope in the dry leaves. He scratched their bellies and removed their collars. Some of the dogs were Dempsey Boger’s; most wore no tag at all. They all smelled faintly of skunk.

Collars in hand, he followed the mastiff down a steep chimney to the stream, where a few of the dogs were already drinking. He joined them, lay on a flat boulder at the edge to dip his face in the current and slurp, his teeth nearly shattering from the cold. Thick moss felt soft and cool on his belly, and the air was wet with spray from a small waterfall plunging a dozen yards upstream. All of the hounds had followed and were drinking with him now. He rolled over on his back and stared up into the thick, dark tangles of hemlock reaching over the stream and, far above, green-gold poplar leaves brushing the blue roof of sky. The leaves up there seemed remote, incidental to the massive trunks and branches supporting them. The setter curled up next to him, and the others settled in pockets of hemlock needles among the rocks. It was easy to lie there without thinking—the world was cool rock, rushing water, dogs panting.

FIVE

In the early evening, Rice sat with a beer in one of the uncomfortable, unpainted Adirondack chairs on the front porch of the lodge, keeping an eye on the driveway. The setter and five of the hounds lay in the shade, the others having run off with the mastiff on the way home. Rice had put out a bucket of water and fed each of the dogs an old can of Vienna sausages from the pantry. Fifteen radio collars lay interlocked in a pile at the top of the steps, silently transmitting their whereabouts.

To his right, the sun hung close above the flank of Turk Mountain, shooting out tiny rays like quills when he squinted. A distant roar sounded and he searched the sky until he found the jet passing high in the south. The noise was nondirectional, connected only by logical inference with the tiny bright dart disappearing into the glare at the horizon, remote as a meteor. He imagined the people inside pecking at laptops, reading novels, sleeping. The hiss of circulating air and the drone of the engines. Rice hated flying in cramped commercial airliners but he always sat at the window because he enjoyed the surreal, or perhaps hyper-real, perspective from thirty thousand feet.

The sun had reached the horizon, and the crickets slowed their chirping as the air began to cool. Sunset and sunrise, he thought, the edges of the day, were the only times you could see the sun move. It touched the top of the ridge and began to disappear. He reminded himself that it was the earth’s rotation, that the

sun itself only seemed to move, but what difference did that make? He felt he was watching time itself pass. The last bright quarter shrank to an eighth, a sixteenth, a point and then nothing, the sun’s dark negative lingering on his retina.

Jesus, did it move that fast all day long? He imagined the sun rushing across the sky, trailing a tail of fire like a gigantic comet, and no one looking up, no one noticing. Out in the valley, the mountain’s shadow crept inexorably toward the Blue Ridge, a spreading blue shade that consumed the geometric patchwork of rolling farmland and woodlots. A crow he couldn’t see called from the woods in couplets. Caw-caw, caw-caw, caw-caw. Like some kind of code. Wispy cirrus clouds glowed yellow against the blue sky. The resident flock of chimney swifts began to whirl in a twittering gyre above the lodge, faster and faster—Rice imagined they were gathering the centrifugal force necessary to hurl them seven thousand miles south to the Amazon basin. They would be leaving soon. Fall was coming. The calendar said tomorrow would be the autumnal equinox, day and night in nearly perfect balance as this part of the world tilted farther away from the sun, ending the fecund riot of summer.

The dogs all leaped up at once as if the ground were suddenly electrified and stood in the fire road baying in the direction of the mountain. When they paused for breath Rice heard the throaty putt-putt-putt of two-stroke engines, several ATV’s making their slow way down the overgrown switchbacks. For an instant he wished he still had a gun. He used to carry his grandfather’s worn, blueblack Colt .45 auto in the desert, mostly because of the tactile pleasure of the thing: he’d found the cold heft of the gun comforting, like a well-balanced hammer, and the tubby cartridges were proportioned like little round-topped beer cans of shiny brass and copper. They’d thunked together in his hand with a specific heaviness that had made them seem precious. When he’d lived in Tucson, Rice used to take the Colt out and shoot holes in rusty kitchen appliances at an old dump in the desert, a place where someone—he imagined gang members working on their drive-by marksmanship—had cut down every saguaro in sight with what looked like machine-gun fire.

He had fired the pistol only once in a fight, near the end of his adventures in the Sonoran Desert. He was carrying a satchel of cash for his employers; he never knew how much. He was making his way by moonlight in a wash he knew well—the banks on either side were fifteen or twenty feet high, so the wash provided a trench through which he could pass invisible to anyone watching the surrounding country—when he ran into two or three *coyotes* coming the other way, bringing in a bunch of illegals. They had just come around a bend in the wash, and for a moment everyone was too stunned by the sudden apparition of the other to do anything, but then one of the *coyotes* took a shot at Rice and he dove behind a boulder and shot back and it turned into a typical nighttime firefight, all flash and ricochet, everyone terrified and shooting at nothing. Eventually the *coyotes* seemed to run out of bullets, and they took their charges up out of the wash and Rice didn’t see them again.

He’d sold the pistol before he left Tucson, but now here came a passel of armed bear hunters, and he wondered about the wisdom of disarming himself. His terms of employment prohibited him from carrying a firearm, probably because the trustees were afraid he would shoot someone and they’d get sued. And the theory, at least, was that most of the time you were better off unarmed if you were dealing with everyday armed rednecks who, while still infected with residual Confederate bellicosity and likely to welcome the escalation of a shouting match into a shootin’ fight, were not going to simply murder you if you were unable to produce a firearm and defend yourself.

Three four-wheelers slowed as they pulled up to where the dogs stood, still baying, declaring their new allegiance to Rice Moore, caretaker of the Traver Preserve and provider of canned lunch meat. One of the big red-faced Stiller boys—Rice thought his name was DeWayne, pronounced Dee-Wayne—drove the first machine, and the pale fellow who’d driven the truck that night in Merriewood—Dempsey Boger had said his name was something Hostetler—drove another, three hounds trotting along behind on leashes. Two older men rode double on the third ATV. They wore baseball caps embroidered with “Black & Tan” and the figures of hounds. They looked like twins, with bloodshot blue eyes and identical short beards, grizzled and tobacco-stained. The one sitting behind the driver had a lever-action carbine propped absurdly on his hip.

DeWayne dismounted and caught one of the hounds by the scruff of his neck. No one seemed to have noticed Rice yet, standing on the porch. The exhaust from the three ATVs stank of burning oil.

“Where’s ‘is fuckin’ collar?” DeWayne complained. He turned and said, “Hey, Jesse, didn’t they...” but stopped when the other pointed at Rice on the porch.

Rice picked up the collars, all strapped together at the top of the stairs, and tossed them out into the yard toward DeWayne. He retrieved his beer from the chair arm and set it on the flat top of the railing, leaned forward. The others shut off their idling machines. DeWayne dragged the hound over to the collars, picked through and discarded several of them and buckled one around the hound’s neck. He hooked the dog to a line on the back of his machine, stuffed the rest of the collars into a bin behind his seat and then he, too, shut off his motor.

In the sudden silence, DeWayne said something under his breath and Jesse’s face broke into a brief, horrifying smile, showing a row of crooked brown lower teeth.

“I reckon you fellows know you’re trespassing,” Rice said.

“We got a legal right, asshole.” DeWayne spat juice from the snuff swelling his lower lip. “We can come on anybody’s land to get our hounds.”

“Section eighteen point two dash thirty-six of the Code of Virginia.” Rice smiled. “But you can’t have a firearm with you when you go after your dogs, and you can’t use vehicles without the permission of the landowner. And since this is only the hound practice season, you’re not supposed to have a firearm with you anyway.”

Hostetler smirked but DeWayne ignored Rice’s recitation entirely. “Where the rest at?” he asked.

Rice shrugged. “They ran off with the big yellow sonofagun. You might find ’em with your radios—that big one wouldn’t let me take his collar off.”

The two old men, still sitting double on their machine, laughed at this in ridiculous, high-pitched voices, and Rice wondered if they might be simple. DeWayne glared at them and they quieted, but the one in back frowned and slowly shouldered his rifle, aimed it at DeWayne’s head. “Pow,” he said, quietly.

“How much y’all want for these ones that followed me home?” Rice asked.

“Ain’t but one ourn,” DeWayne said. He watched as Hostetler, who still hadn’t said a word to Rice, fiddled with a radio receiver and climbed up on the seat of his vehicle, reaching overhead with an H-shaped wire antenna. DeWayne turned back to Rice and added, “And he ain’t for sale.”

“What about the others?”

“They Dempsey Boger’s dogs. Sumbitch ain’t huntin with us. You call him if you want to.”

Jesse was waving the antenna back and forth in a wide, diminishing arc, listening to the receiver’s high-pitched beeps, as if he were dowsing for water. When the waving stopped, the beeps coming fast and regular, the antenna pointed south, toward the Dutch River. He picked up a walkie-talkie and spoke with someone, but Rice couldn’t hear what was said. He turned to Rice.

“You gone let us out that goddamn gate of yourn or you gone make us cut the lock?” He had small, close-set grey eyes and skin so pale Rice could see the blue veins branching in his temple.

DeWayne had walked closer to the porch, and now he stood in the grass directly below Rice, glaring up at him. He spoke before Rice had the chance to answer.

“You shouldn’t of messed with them collars, motherfuck.”

A few tendrils of fine red hair stuck flat with dried sweat to the flushed, freckled skin of his wide, frowning forehead. He reminded Rice of a snapping turtle, dim and single-minded, pale greenish eyes underwater, looking up from the bottom of a murky pond.

“Come on, DeWayne.” Hostetler had started the engine of his four-wheeler, but DeWayne wasn’t finished yet.

“We hunt up on that mountain whenever we want. There ain’t nothin’ you can do.”

“Is that what you told the last caretaker?” Rice wasn’t quite sure why that came out, a hunch, maybe, just fishing for a reaction. What he got was pretty ambiguous: a pause, a flash of surprise, maybe, or DeWayne’s guard coming down for an instant.

“We never run into her,” he said after a moment. “She didn’t ever steal no fuckin’ collars.”

“Well I’m up there all the time.” Rice was on his way down the stairs, not sure what he was planning. He hadn’t called the game warden or the sheriff, and there really wasn’t much he could do about these people. “Up there on the mountain. I’ll catch you. You’re not going to like me.”

The older men cackled at this. “Thar’s a neeuw sharf in town!” the one with the rifle screeched. But DeWayne didn’t smile. As Rice moved into his space he tensed, clenching and unclenching his thick, red-freckled fists. He was heavier than Rice, though not as tall. Funny him being so nervous. From what Rice had heard about these boys, beating people up was pretty much standard practice.

“We got to go, DeWayne,” Hostetler called. “The dogs are down by the fuckin’ river.”

DeWayne seemed to know what Rice was doing before Rice himself, and he moved to meet him. He spoke, then shouted, spittle gathering in the corners of his mouth, but Rice couldn’t hear what he said. He couldn’t hear anything but a high-pitched whine, a sound like the beehive had made as he broke away the paneling in the cabin. DeWayne shouted again silently, and when he raised his right fist to his ear, elbow cocked up high behind it, Rice feinted to the left, then stepped right and pulled a left hook from down low beside his hip. The punch had all his weight behind it, and when his fist hit the center of DeWayne’s face, in Rice’s imagination it seemed to pass through and out the back of the man’s skull. DeWayne’s eyes snapped open wide as his nose broke, and he took a step back and sat down hard on the ground.

Rice glanced at the old man with the rifle. He and his twin were both grinning and nodding their heads as if this were all a farce Rice had staged for their entertainment. Rice walked to DeWayne’s machine and unclipped the leash from the hound, who wagged his tail and panted. Rice’s left hand wasn’t working very well. Was he stealing bear hounds now? There were three more to free, but when he headed over to Hostetler’s ATV the hounds tethered there crouched back on their haunches and barked at him. They had big, angry voices that drove into his head like steel spikes. He looked up at Hostetler, who backed away, holding his radio receiver out in front of him like a shield. Rice shrugged and turned just as one of the old men—still grinning—came down on his forehead with an oak branch from the firewood pile.

When he regained consciousness it was nearly full dark and he was still lying in the gravel drive. He had a screaming headache, and the four-wheelers had disappeared, along with the rest of the dogs. His left hand was swollen, the first and second knuckles throbbing, dried blood in his eyes, ears ringing. He washed down six aspirin with a beer and lay on the sofa, passing out again almost instantly.

SIX

He dreamed of snakes: arrogant vipers in the lodge, coiled listlessly on the furniture, under the bed, on the kitchen counters. Their heads were grinning ceramic snake skulls and they seemed deadly and invincible as gods, ignoring him as he crept about, trying to live in the place which had never belonged to

him. Gradually he realized they ignored him because he was already dead, had been for a long time, he was just a ghost and the snakes were waiting patiently for something that had nothing to do with him. The realization woke him up and he lay for a while on the sofa in the grey pre-dawn, wondering how much his head was going to hurt when he sat up. He'd been having these death dreams pretty often of late, and while they didn't really bother him, sometimes he felt like he was rehearsing, as if his subconscious had decided he needed practice, as if we learn how to die in our dreams.

Boger showed up around seven and leaned on his horn once, long and angry. Rice's friends on the ATVs must've made good on their threat to cut the lock on the gate. Bolt cutters would be standard equipment for a bear hunter. When he peered out the screen door, Boger had backed his black truck beside Rice's Toyota and was walking around to the bed. Rice checked the cab, but there wasn't anyone with him. With his back to the porch, Dempsey lowered the tailgate and reached in, pulled the stiff carcass of a dog toward him to rest on the tailgate. Two other hounds watched through the wire doors of their wooden box kennels in the truck's bed.

Rice hooked his left thumb through Boger's radio collars on the kitchen table—the hand was too swollen to actually hold anything—and walked out on the front porch barefoot. He shivered. It was only September, but the crisp morning had the feel of autumn rushing into winter. He'd bandaged his head, which probably needed stitches, and he was nearly out of aspirin. The pain and blood loss left him mildly nauseated and lightheaded. He felt permeable, uncontained; the breeze blew right through him. “Dempsey.” The man turned at Rice's voice.

“I brought you somethin’.” He lifted the carcass and laid it on the ground at his feet. “We called this one Monroe, on account of his high, lonesome voice.”

Rice looked at the dead dog lying in the gravel with its mouth slightly open. *Monroe*, with the emphasis on the first syllable. Its coat was muddy and spotted with blood.

“What happened?”

“Well now, Monroe here,” Boger said, “looks like he done got hisself run over after you took the goddamn collars. Found him this mornin’ on the road through the Pass. Vet called and said somebody'd dropped off another'n that got hit, a little setter cross. A couple were wanderin' along the river.” He paused, staring at the carcass. He had a smoker's rasp, but the modulation of his voice was smooth and rhythmic, a storyteller's voice. “One's still missin'. They ain't used to cars, roads. I try to keep 'em away from roads.”

Rice decided he couldn't stay on the porch. He wondered how much Boger knew about what had happened with Stiller and the others. Walking down the steps, he felt none of the anger, none of the eerie power that had propelled him yesterday. The breeze was chilly, but the sun felt warm on his face. The grass dry and cool on his feet. Far down at the south edge of the meadow, a grove of fencepost locusts shed tiny leaves winking soundlessly to the ground like rain.

He squatted to examine Boger's dog, which he recognized now—it was one of the males that had followed him home and then run off with the setter. He ran his fingers along its rib cage, feeling the peaks and valleys of its ribs, the cold, wet fur. The dog had been lean, fit. He looked up at Boger, who was close enough that Rice could smell the cigarette smoke on him. He wanted to say he was sorry, that if the old man hadn't knocked him out he'd have hung on to Boger's dogs until he came to get them, and that he hoped the setter would be okay, and that he would pay her vet bill, but he choked all that back.

With his hand still on the dog's chest, he said, “Your dogs were on this property, and you knew it, and everyone knows bear hunting hasn't been allowed here for about a hundred years. You can't run your dogs on Turk Mountain *without* them coming on this property, and I won't put up with that.” He stood and laid Boger's collars on the truck's tailgate.

“So if I start my dogs up on the National Forest, and they run on the Traver property, you're gonna steal the collars?”

“Yes.”

Boger reached inside his jeans jacket, fished a pack of Camels from a shirt pocket. He knocked the pack twice on the heel of his hand, shook out a cigarette and lit it with a wood match, turning to shield his face from the fresh breeze in the lee of the cab. “And that don’t seem unreasonable to you?”

“It’s completely unreasonable. It’s my job.

“Your job’s gonna get you killed you keep beatin’ up Stiller boys.”

Rice imagined he saw the slightest twinkle in Boger’s eyes when he said this. There seemed to be no love lost between Boger and the Stillers. Might be the only reason Boger was speaking to him at all.

“Nearly got me killed yesterday.”

Boger seemed to remember something. He lifted his dead dog and placed it back in the truck’s bed. He hauled himself into the cab, shut the door and spoke through the open window. “You and them folks own the place got to remember there’s families around here been hunting bear up on that mountain ever since their great-great granddaddies run off the Cherokee two hundred fifty years ago, and there ain’t a thing in the world you or anyone else can do to stop ’em from keeping on doing it.”

“I was told pretty much the same thing yesterday,” Rice said. “I don’t believe it’s true.” He was cold, and he crossed his arms over his chest for warmth. Boger seemed to be contemplating his speedometer. He snorted and turned the key in the ignition. He put his truck in gear and drove slowly down the driveway.

Rice made coffee and poured it into a big plastic convenience store mug. He felt like walking, so he put his boots on. He could walk down the driveway, put a new padlock on the gate, fetch yesterday’s mail. The driveway curved down through the meadow and into the woods, between tall ramparts of dusty foliage, the treetops reaching out and up from both sides but not touching overhead. The day was quiet except for a weak breeze that rose occasionally to a gust, shuffling branches. His shoes crunching in the gravel. The ubiquitous crickets, crows cawing in the distance. A few dead leaves came off and blew overhead, translucent, backlit and glowing briefly like tiny moons against the hard blue column of sky.

The lock had been destroyed and the gate was wide open. He hesitated before opening the mailbox, half-expecting the Stillers might have put a live rattlesnake inside, but all he found were a couple of mass-mailings and a bank statement. He had turned and was in the middle of the road when a dusty red pickup with oversized tires roared around the sharp turn just past the driveway. The driver’s eyes locked with his as Rice leaped out of the way and the driver gunned it down the straightaway, headed for town. A mud-splattered ATV hunkered in the truck’s bed. The passenger turned to look out the back window between the scoped rifles in the gun rack, laughing. No one Rice recognized. A translucent sticker across the top of the window read FEAR THIS in bold letters, a twist on the NO FEAR stickers the local teenagers seemed to like. Rice wondered if those boys could know anything about fear. He wondered if they had any idea what their stupid stickers were saying.

He pulled the gate shut, re-padlocked the chain, and jogged up the driveway with the mail and his empty coffee mug. When he reached the meadow he took off his sweaty shirt and tied it around his waist, turned south to walk along the edge of the forest, eventually coming to the open locust grove that was visible from the front porch of the lodge. The trees sheltered an old livestock graveyard, where someone years ago had dragged dead cows to rot, the bleached white cattle bones partly hidden in the grass, glowing in the sun like the remains of some ruined miniature city. He’d found the bones a few weeks ago, and he had no idea where they had come from or how long they’d been here. He would be surprised if anyone had ever run cattle in the meadow.

He reached down and picked up a cow skull, gazed into the shaded eye sockets lined with green lichen. The eggshell bone at its nose was chipped and cracked. He replaced the skull and pulled a pelvis bone

away from the tangle of grass, turned it over in his hands. Bleached clean in the sun, it was intact, symmetrical, curved gracefully and shaped like a helmet. In the front were two oval holes that seemed to stare. He tried to fit the thing over his head, but several fused vertebrae at the sacrum got in the way. He laid the pelvis on the ground and broke off part of the sacrum with a rock, and this time it fit, resting on his crown. He could see through the holes.

He continued into the sunstruck field, stooped to pick up a rib from among the other bones, two feet long and curved like a sickle, square-stemmed at its base where a knob came out at a right angle. The edge of the rib was surprisingly sharp, and he grasped the knob in his fingers and swung the rib hard at a two-foot high thistle. It cut cleanly, and he swung the rib again to cut the thistle closer to its base.

He knew he was falling into one of his trances and he didn't care. His senses seemed to sharpen, the bright sunlight clanging around him, a breeze bending the hairs on his skin. He stalked through the meadow in his cow-pelvis helmet, careless as a child. He found a copse of twelve-foot-tall pokeweed and lay about with the rib. Soft, juicy stalks heeled over and fell in slow motion, the purple berries raining down. He tripped on a bootlace and the pelvis bone fell forward, the lower front edge smacking into his mouth. A taste of his own blood—he felt with his tongue a small cut on the inside of his upper lip. His head began to throb again. In the shelter of a small rise he found four oval impressions in the grass where deer had bedded. He curled up in one, squirming around and brushing the grass with his hands until no thorns or sticks poked into his flesh. The pelvis dug into his head, so he took it off and set it aside. The meager warmth from the sun was not enough to offset the chill of the breeze that puffed over his skin, raising goosebumps.

His dream was a nondream—he simply seemed to be aware of his surroundings as he slept: he clearly perceived the slow, inexorable movement of the sun, the wind's swish in the grass, the smell of warm soil. He saw three deer approach him, stamping their front hooves and snorting gently until their nerve broke and they bounded away, tails floating white over their backs. A silent raven circled him once and flew on over the forest. Ants crawled on his legs, mosquitoes bit his arms.

Violent shivering woke him and he sat up, chilled but feeling his strength had returned. The sun was well past its zenith now, and he stared at it for a while, trying to see it move as he had in his dream and temporarily blinding himself. He walked back to the locust grove for his coffee mug and the mail, but he couldn't carry everything, so the cow pelvis went back on his head. His lip was sore and a little swollen; his forehead throbbed, and the cut from where the old man hit him had seeped blood to dry in the hair over his temple while he slept. He stank of old sweat.

Halfway through the meadow, he stopped to rest. The view was better from up here, and he rotated slowly, panning like a camera, the world reduced to two oval windows. Turk Mountain leaning over the lodge like an old threat, the valley bright in the sun, the Blue Ridge edging the eastern horizon. All this light. Equinox. From now on, the nights would be longer than the days.

He turned his back to the sun and saw in the grass his own grotesque shadow, the shadow of a man wearing a bone helmet. A massive-headed monster with short, thick horns. A minotaur. *Fear this*, he thought. His heart moved in his chest, the usual rhythm. *Fear me*. A roar in the trees on the mountain: the wind reaching the meadow in a moment, harder and colder than before, ending the afternoon. He waited, and felt the sun's light slowly enter his body. He had nothing; he was made of light and air, water and earth. He shivered again, shivered over his whole body like a bear.

James A. McLaughlin is a native of Virginia who lives in the Wasatch Range east of Salt Lake City, Utah. He holds law and MFA degrees from the University of Virginia. His essays and fiction have appeared in *River Teeth*, *Camas*, *Portland Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, and elsewhere. His novella “Bearskin” appeared Summer 2008 in *The Missouri Review* and won the 2009 William Peden Prize in fiction. His writing and photography can be found on the Internet at jamesamclaughlin.com.

Questions

- 1) What do you think is the symbolism behind the moment at the end of the story when Rice wears the cow skull? How does this moment compare to his actions at the beginning of the story? What causes the change at the end?
- 2) After the altercation with the men Rice has a dream of snakes, saying about the dream that “he realized they ignored him because he was already dead, had been for a long time, he was just a ghost and the snakes were waiting patiently for something that had nothing to do with him.” What do you think the significance of the dream is? What are the snakes waiting for?
- 3) In what ways does McLaughlin show Rice being treated as an outsider? What explanations can you give to suggest the reasons why Rice is treated this way by the locals?
- 4) “I don't think you're real,” Rice says to the mushroom picker who wanders into his yard looking for water. There are moments where we're not sure if the man is real or a figment of Rice's imagination, and then after their conversation, the mushroom picker mysteriously disappears. Do you think the mushroom picker was a hallucination? What purpose does his character serve in the context of the greater narrative?
- 5) How does Rice's backstory with his girlfriend Apryl serve to illuminate aspects of his character?
- 6) Consider the acts of violence done to Melissa Shore and Miguel Garcia? In what ways were the perpetrators' actions the same? How were they different?
- 7) “Bears are a lot like people,” Dempsey Boger tells Rice. In what ways could you compare not just the bears' actions to people's actions but the way people act toward the bears to the way people act toward each other?
- 8) One common theme in naturalist stories is the concept of determinism—that actions are determined by environmental forces and not by free will. In what ways has the environment played a role in shaping these characters' lives and their actions toward each other? Do you think the characters have free will? Are there moments where they seem not to have free will?

Writing Prompts

- 1) Write a scene featuring dialogue between two or more characters that uses the vernacular and dialect of a group of people from a particular place.
- 2) Write a story from the point of view of someone who's an outsider. Maybe, like in “Bearskin,” a stranger has moved to a new town, or the character could be an outsider for other reasons. Maybe the character comes from a different cultural or religious tradition from those around him or her. Maybe the character has been marked by life experiences in a way that separates him or her from other people. Maybe the character has three arms.

- 3) “Bearskin” originated as an anecdote James A. McLaughlin heard and couldn't forget. Think of memorable anecdotes that have been told to you by friends, family, or even strangers. Write a story based on one of these anecdotes.
- 4) Write a story wherein the central conflict is a human fighting against nature. Look to Jack London's “To Build A Fire” or Stephen Crane's “An Open Boat” for examples.