

With Coyotes Watching

Nick Alti

It's hard to climb a maple tree with a .22 rifle and no shirt under your suspenders. Mandalas manifest on my forearms and chest, beads of red swim fields of pale flesh. The rifle, suspenders, and the plastic yellow visor I borrow from my parents' storage closet. They were in a pile, a throwaway bunch of items I gathered in harmony. My parents hired me to watch their vacant home for a week while they fish and drink cabernet and try to love one another in a cabin up north. I'm 28. In the distance, quiet coyotes surround a fawn.

My parents live on an acre of modified grass surrounded by soybeans. Some corn stalks linger and loom like reapers. A topless jeep drives by on the dirt road, an elderly couple, both bald with glasses. I trace them with the rifle. These are people I can kill. Something has to die, right now, because I want to visit labyrinths in Greece, take mushrooms and paint on leaves with a woman who loves me.

This is my sacrament. I'm a boy who lost his toys, all of them. I'm often sick, my shadow limps. I hate how quietly I answer the phone, how I used to eat pages from books. In my dreams, I do laundry or place my palms and forehead against a wall. I stand too long in showers too warm, I'm melodramatic and frightened, steal candy bars from mom & pop dime shops, break windows at night with bricks.

They drive away. I do nothing but watch and quietly beg them to slow down, to give me a minute to think about what I'm doing. These people have fine skin and teeth, nothing like moles. The thought of doing something for myself makes me sore.

A squirrel crawls up to my branch and sits beside me. I aim the rifle at his heart. His reddish testicles gyrate. He eats a battery. I lower the gun. "Psst. Don't eat that, little idiot."

He lodges a tooth in the battery, struggles to yank free. He says, "Look, I need lithium to treat my mania. Do you know the feeling of existing one moment as a Valhalla war hero with mead and revelry and the next moment feeling like a maggot in the wound of a boy soldier? Do you have any idea how hard it is to be me?"

I cradle the gun in my lap, scratch the wooden butt with my fingernail. "I didn't know."

"Never do. Never have." He finishes the battery and drops it on the lawn. "Don't mow that over."

He jumps from the branch. A hawk grabs him midair and soars away.

Tree bark rips my skin as I descend. Spinning, I gain momentum and launch the gun into the crop field. I strip from my suspenders, sit in the grass and look toward the sun for the hawk.

Nick Alti is a senior at Western Michigan University. He comes from Stevensville, a quiet place in Michigan, and is currently waiting impatiently until he has enough money to move somewhere near mountains.