

Elizabeth Brown

Title: Boy

Josi only knew him as Boy. Boy this and Boy that. She heard the stories, how he'd run off into the woods, naked, how mama was the only one able to coax him back, how mama got pregnant, bled out, and baby Eleanor wasn't supposed to live and came out blue, twisted in the chord, lived only to die a couple years later. It was a rare cold spell that lasted two weeks in Hickman County, when Eleanor crawled off Josi's bed and got outside and froze to death on the front porch, and it wasn't long after, Boy was sent away.

Mama and Eleanor were buried under the sycamore tree at the edge of the woods and Boy liked to go there, and before he got papa with his whittling knife, he'd loll in the dirt, his head resting on the two stone markers, running his hand along the etched out names and dates, and he'd lay there for hours, real still like he was dead too, and sometimes he stayed there all night. If anyone tried to coax him away, he'd growl and thrash. "At least he's not in the woods," papa said on occasion, to no one in particular, standing at the window dazed from drink. But Boy's fits got worse without mama to assuage him. It was after lunch, when papa tried to hold him down for a whipping after refusing to eat, keep his clothes on, and Boy got papa with his whittling knife and was sent to Jackson Residential Home for Boys. Josi recalled Boy crawling into her bed at night, the weight of him, the heat from his nakedness, stale mud, his breath in stop and starts—she felt his heart, tried to align her breaths with his, as if she could crawl inside his chest. She missed him when he was sent away, felt as if part of her had been excised, blamed papa, foresaw it, knew he shouldn't have been allowed to have the whittling knife, caught him with the tip of it up to his eyes a few times.

"It's not good for him," she had warned papa. "He puts it too close to his eyes."

"Mind your business, girl," he said to her. "You ain't making no sense."

They brought him home, and Josi watched from the porch, and the sun was a ball of fire when papa and Jed Devereaux took him into the barn, dragging him like a heifer to slaughter. He dug his heels in deep.

"Strong one," Jed Devereaux said, breathless, seeming weak-boned, diminished.

That night she sat on the stairs, eyes burning, tearing up, peered between the rails, waited for papa to bring him in.

"They won't keep him no more," papa said. His face scrunched like he was sad too—Josi hoped. Dottie Lord on his lap, blew out smoke fast, sensuous, red marks littering the filter. Josi glanced down from the step, furtively, listening in, close enough to see Dottie's ash drop; she searched, fitfully, scanning the dingy carpet for an ember, fearful of fire, hell, burning for eternity.

"You think I want him tied like that? I had to do it. I got the scar on my arm."

"I know, baby."

"He's that way. Running off, naked. He's like a rabid dog. I can't risk it."

"I know, baby, don't you worry."

"Got no choice."

"I know, baby. I know." Dottie, consolatory, cigarette up to her mouth, squinting, inhaling, raking her long red nails in papa's sparse hair.

"Give me some of that now," papa said, cupping his hand on one of Dottie's breasts; it jiggled like Jell-O over the top of her shirt, and then papa buried his head in it, and Dottie threw her head back and shook and yelped like Clementine or Daisy getting riled.

"You better stop, old man. I only got a half hour." She jumped off him then and papa grabbed her and pulled her back down and then she swatted at his hand and they stood up and kept at each other, and she screeching "Damn you, old man!" and he saying "Get on over here woman and give papa some sweet stuff," until papa cinched the deal, said "That's it woman" and picked her up and slung Dottie Lord over his shoulder the same way he did to her when she pitched a fit. He spanked Dottie Lord's bottom, too, in the same way he whipped her, and Dottie pummeled him with her fists, and her thick legs thrashed and Josi caught a glimpse of shimmering red satin and brown hairs poking out, just before the two disappeared into the adjoining room with the dark wood bedpost. "It belonged to your great grand pappy," he told her once, "...antique...mahogany wood," and he moved his hand up and down the length of the post, fondling the pinecone at the top, his gaze fixed, searchingly, in the same way he looked at her shin when she fell off her bike and he sat her on the porch steps, moved his fingertips along the length of it. "Hold still, now, let me see if there's a break," he had said, just before she fainted.

Papa and Dottie Lord disappeared into the mahogany room, started in making noises. Boy was forgotten and Josi buried her head in her pillow and cried more, sucking the salt off the pillow case, soothingly, the way she remembered Boy did it, until she fell asleep.

It was a week later, after dinner, feeding time, and Josi stirred up Boy's scraps in the green ceramic bowl. "Enough," papa told her, grabbing it. "He barely eats it."

"You bringing him in tonight?" she asked, not expecting a response. Josi was not allowed near the barn, but this time she followed papa, furtively, skulking behind like Clementine on a morning hunt. The barn door creaked. Papa looked back, reproachful. "You'll get your whipping later, girl," he said. But then he gestured to her, distracted, gloating. "Get on over here next to your papa." Boy roused, made small, whimpering sounds like Clementine's puppies. Josi glanced over towards the noises, saw what looked like the prairie dog papa shot last week, the figure skulking forward, bedraggled, rabid, wild-haired, all fours. He seemed thinner and longer than she recalled. "No need to fret. He's tied," papa said, brows raised, expectantly, as he pulled her over to the chestnut mare. Papa took some sugar cubes out of her pocket. "You give her these, and then get out," he said. So she did. And that was that. On the way back to the house,

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she could hear a high pitched squeal coming from the barn. She tried to forget him. But Boy had crawled inside her, and his smells, his sounds, the way he crouched there, straw stuck to him, hiding in his cloaked robe, the essence of him, locked into her mind like a germ, looping, multiplying, replaying, feasting on her atoms, until she was parceled, fragmented.

A few days later, the air was sultry, damp, after a torrential rain, corn chowder, dishes. She begged papa to go to the barn to see Daisy, plait his mane, felt an unflagging desire to get in there, as if it might clear her head.

"You ain't doing no such thing, missy," papa reproved, slurring his words, and Dottie slapped his arm. "That's nice, honey. You leave her alone, meanie." Papa seemed malleable, on his third or fourth drink, teetering, cigar, thick vapor spewing out, Dottie Lord rubbing his leg, so when she asked again, he nodded, dismissively, along with "Look at that sun, baby." Smoke framed his face, hung there, vaporous, sinuous.

The heavy door stuck, creaked, and inside the sun shone heavy and leaden, in the manner after an August storm in Hickman County, or any landlocked mass for that matter, where moisture is displaced, pools, and cells of water intensify and just as quickly dissipate, only to leave behind dry whorls of dust swirling in the rafters, frenzied, unfettered, illumined in the last sun beams, setting obliquely on the haystacks like an unshorn alacrity.

She fixed on Daisy, in the far left corner, headed straight in, aware of a whimpering, the sugar cube piercing her palm, sticky, softening in the heat of her palm, and then Daisy, neighing, the soft ridge of her soft brown muzzle, hot air on her cheek, recalled last time, papa's voice, gravelly, thick, "No sudden moves, girl, palm out, just like this here." He held out his swollen palm, flushed, calloused, marred with grit and tobacco, trembling from age and drink.

Now papa was in the mahogany room, and he and Dottie were making those noises, and this same hand was on Dottie, rubbing her parts. Josi knew how it was done. She spied more than once.

Daisy nudged her with his nose so she rubbed it. She heard a scuffle of feet. Then quiet. Then a small guttural noise and she recalled papa's words. "Boy ain't no harm to you. He is good and tied to the post in the deep parts of the barn and no reason why you should be going there! You hear me now?" Papa spoke fast, fierce, scarlet faced, coughing out the last of his words, pained, hostile.

But this time he allowed her to go. Maybe because Dottie was on his lap and the bottle was half finished. Maybe he wanted to be rid of her. Josi felt sinful, as if she encouraged them to go into the mahogany room and do those things. But then there was Daisy stomping, wanting her, and the solitude and being away from papa and Dorrie Lord in the faint light, straw dust billowing up, swirling in a haze, smells of cedar, sounds of low, sonorous grunts. And then there was her curiosity and tenacity and he being her brother, after all, so she stayed. She looked over at him in the corner of the barn, tied to the post, clad in a robe with a cowl of some sort, where the air was vaporous, amidst the cobwebs and spiders and mice, the black beetles funneling below. "Boy?" Her voice was soft, quivering. She felt, in that one moment, a multitude of things, unsettled, roused, im-

mured in a certain moroseness. She felt faint, too, having not eaten. She was not much to speak of herself--fair, malnourished, bruised, bedraggled, blackened soles, naïve. "Boy?" she said it again, still a faint timber, due to nerves and hunger; she thought to pray, just in case, said a Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer, the way Father Theobald taught her, and she prayed for Emile and papa and mama and Eleanor, that baby girl who came out blue and made her mama bleed to death; she prayed her nightly ritual. She looked back towards the barn door, opened a crack, how she could leave, how Boy wouldn't even notice, and she could still catch the final rays of sun, walk to Emile's, or find him at the creek fishing. She imagined his expression when she told him about Boy, how she got close to him, how they needed to get him out of there, how it was only right. Emile would tell her what to do. Emile was perfect that way. Emile knew.

The door creaked and she glanced over her shoulder, hoping for Emile. She needed Emile. She couldn't do this alone, she decided. She waited, watched. She was patient. But then Boy whimpered, scuffled in the dirt, as if to remind her. "Boy? I'm here," she told him. He stopped squirming, craned his neck, as if he had trouble seeing. But then after a slight pause, he started up with grunts and growls and bony limbs thrashing, as if her voice made him excitable. The barn beamed, and slants of sun measured him, resting obliquely on parts of his body, threadbare and meek. In the deepest and darkest corner of the barn where Boy cowered, she could make out long arms and legs, his nakedness, his striped cloak, open in front. Her natural inclination to see gripped her and she crept forward. Daisy stomped and dust billowed up. The sugar cube's sharp corners pierced. "What are you doing in here?" She asked knowing full well why he was tied to the post. He was sick papa had said and he was dangerous to himself, and run off too much, he had told her.

"I damn near broke my hand on that boy," she overheard papa say to Lloyd Barnes, the butcher at Bubba's Meats, a few days after he came home. "That boy got the devil in him. Bad seeds just get worse and worse and you never can train him. I had to tie him up."

"I had a daughter like that too," Lloyd Barnes said. "That girl's behind was raw as this meat." He laughed, coughed, wrapped the bloody meat in crisp white paper, his hands wide, nimble. Dottie Lord stood next to papa, her own hands folded, red thumb nails visible, smiling, demurely, deep wrinkles framing her mouth and eyes, and when she lifted her hand to her mouth, loose flesh jiggled under her arms. Josi backed herself up to the far corner of the store, where the wallpaper peeled, next to the short splintered door leading to the cellar, and she imagined the descent, the precipitous stairs, menacingly narrow, shelves of food and rats trouncing; she backed up against the wainscot, and she felt him then, a familiar kinship to Boy, and she cringed at the two men, their jocular manner, the way Lloyd Barnes kept eyeing Dottie Lord and winked when papa was distracted. Boy is better than all of you, she thought.

"I tied him up. I'll admit it. That boy is worse than a rabid dog. I had no choice, you know? I mean, the boy stabbed me. Lord, I said, what's next? I got my girl to protect."

"Sure, of course we know," Lloyd Barnes said, winking again at Dottie Lord.

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These times, she felt pity for papa. Maybe Boy was dangerous, like he said.

"Get over here," Lloyd Barnes called to her, holding out a piece of what looked like salami, glancing over at Dottie Lord as he said it. "She needs some food, that one, eh?"

Josi hated him then, shook her head, vehemently, scrunched tighter into the corner, as if she might vanish. Josi rarely ate, not since Boy came home. The least she could do was to starve with him.

Now was the time. It was a revelation, providence, the kind Father Theobald talked about in his sermons. I could get closer she decided--no harm. The sugar cube was sticky in her hand. She heard whining, the way Clementine does when he wants to go out on the morning hunt with papa or gets a hit in the nose for begging. Are you okay, she wanted to ask. But she was wary, recalling how papa said she was bull-headed and willful, too much lately, and papa whipped her for it. And if he caught her now, he'd whip her, and it was worse with hairs sprouting down there, and she felt more shame, or maybe it was the way he did it, the preparation, the way he took her into the bedroom, the way he took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow, the way he closed the door, gently, furtively, "Take down your pants now," his voice melodic, eerie. "You know how it's done, girl." She obeyed, recumbent, and initially it felt good, her nakedness on the coverlet, exposed, the same way it felt to take her shoes and socks off the first warm day--naked toes splayed, the grass and dirt squishing between, dipping her toes into the creek, Emile casting his line. And she'd lay there, in the idle air, time suspended, until the razor sharp swish of the leather. Other times, he just used his hand, and the belt hurt worse, but she preferred it over his calloused hand. And she didn't mind the pain so much, just the waiting for it, papa's breathing-- gravelly and gross--and her bare bottom, and papa staring at it. He liked to do it, she felt, and she never believed him when he said otherwise, how it hurt him more than it hurt her to do it. She wished she had no awareness, like Boy, tied to a post, subjugated, nonverbal, snarling for food and territory. Those times, she tried hard to lose herself, but once she returned, she was stuck, her hips flat against the coverlet, finding comfort where she could, knowing any whipping she got was better than Boy had it, tied up in a dark corner of the barn, bereft of any sense, the darkest spot, spiders lurking, dropping eggs.

The grunts stopped. A foreign urge vibrated inside of her and she knew there was no turning back. "Boy?" The name lifted off her lips naturally, fated.

Boy's head turned, slight, unaffected, so that if she had turned away for a second, she might have missed it. She saw the faded yellow rope, the kind used for old ships, thick and frayed, dragging in the dust, and Boy's face, melancholic, the sores on his arms and legs like a blistered plague, some medieval curse. "Boy?" she whispered again, and he glanced at her, sullen and staring. He was hunched, too still, too much so, as if he were petrified like the Pompeii images she was peremptorily shown at school, fettered, stone-like, poised in a primal stillness, and she knew these ways to make herself less visible. Upon closer inspection, he seemed frantic, unwound, as if he ached to bolt, as if his own skin made him crawl. Mean-

while, Daisy stomped her hooves, snorted like a forewarning. Even Daisy gets the sun, Josi considered, and she turned to Daisy when she stomped again, "Shush" she rebuked. She felt a rage building, adrenaline, hot, the kind one needs to act, the kind she felt after a whipping, forced to think about it, smells of pheasant or some other meat stewing on the stove wafting under her door, and she was left there, fuming, her face as hot as her backside, imagined escaping, hoisting her body up and over the window sill, grabbing hold of the thick vine outside her window, shimmying down, stripping off her clothes like Boy, cutting through the woods, picking up the path to 23 Modock Hollow Road, Emile Devereaux's log house, finding refuge in the curls of smoke from the pot belly stove and Jed Devereaux's pipe, babies slung, bread baking, laughter, fecundity, sanguinely mottled cheeks. Emile had said one time he'd teach papa a lesson for whipping me, and he knew how to use a rifle.

"How do you know?"

"I'm a hunter," he told her, smirking, cutely, flushed cheeks and ears, and she was convinced these times he was important, something bigger than papa, bigger than herself, and she felt good, knowing she could count on Emile.

"We could just give him a scare."

She nodded, absentmindedly, and a stick bug moved in close to her hand, shuttling on willowy legs. "Look, Emile." He glanced at it, indifferently. The sticky pad of its leg touched the side of her thumb. "I'm breaking it off."

"Don't," Emile said, disgustedly, the way she knew he might. She knew him that well. He was too kind, she knew that, and she tried to get to him, tap into some darker source, some flaw of his.

The bug inched backwards, prescient, ancient, and she felt a remorse, a self-loathing, while Emile stabbed the carp, indifferently, and he was noble, statuesque, the way he cast his line, flaxen haired, shirtless, smooth skinned, save for swells from horse flies and mosquitoes, and scarlet scratch marks in crisscross patterns. She had an urge to touch him, taste his skin, so unlike papa's thickly creased and rough. Josi kept her eyes peeled on him, willed him to notice her, and when he didn't, she felt abandoned, a yearning for him, ferocious and unflagging.

Boy was grunting again, chewing on a piece of straw. She had gotten too close now to go back, so she crept closer, ignored the trembling. If Emile were here, he'd tell her what to do. She conjured him, prayed for him in soft whispers, "Lord, send Emile to me now." She repeated it, eyes burning, and with each incantation, and each step, she felt revived, a buoyance, a reverence, Emile's presence enveloping her. She relied on him that much.

Boy, as if he knew it, and wanted her for himself, growled, and it weighted her down, the guttural sounds, voracious, primal and hungry, and she felt Emile diminishing into the recesses of her mind, while Boy emerged unholy-like in parts, from beneath the obliquely laid shadows, and she could make out the raw-boned physique, his gaunt cheekbones smeared with soil; he glanced at her sideways, and Josi gasped, thought

she had never seen anyone so emaciated, not even the dusty stone figures of Pompeii, curled up into each other, melded. She was close enough now to see he wore a striped brown and red robe like a shepherd, or a cowed monk. She decided it was Daisy's old saddle blanket. She paused, felt a deep sadness for him, a type of mourning, unfamiliar, not even when papa told her daddy went to the store for tobacco and was never returning. "He'll burn in hell for it," papa liked to say, and added "That boy got his eyes." And she imagined her father in nightmares, howling, holding out scorched hands and arms, reaching out from the flames, for her, as if she might save him. But she knew she could not, that she was made of those materials, so she, too, must be born with a malevolence and maybe Boy suspected it and ignited it, almost like a hotness in her core, as if she were the earth burning on the inside. "It's okay" she whispered, as if to assure herself. He stared blankly and hollowly like a manikin suddenly aware of its likeness to humanity. She was close enough now to see his eyes, wide, but not vacant like papa said; instead, there were pools of prescient, something wise stewing in them. The wind gusted, leaves swished, swirled and scraped the floor of the barn. Daisy, spooked, whinnied. "Shush" she said again, louder this time. She thought to offer the sugar cube, mostly melted. But she had a couple more in her pocket. She could certainly just place it down. Clementine warmed up quick to someone offering her a treat, unlike Daisy who nipped and bucked at anyone, even papa. She was getting worse, papa told Jed Devereux, and threatened to sell him to the butcher. She was the only one Daisy allowed to get close, the horse sensing some kind of malevolence in people, whinnied, and there was Boy, oblivious, unseemly, head bobbing up and down like Clementine to a bone, as if he were gnawing the rope. "It's okay" she said, sensitively, and Daisy stomped. She had rounded the bend, four feet away, she estimated. She could no longer see Daisy's stall. Boy was gnawing, and she saw the shreds, the discoloration, darkish in hue, which she decided was blood. It calms him, she thought, reminded of Clementine and the hours he spent chewing his knotted rope. Boy's hair was dirty blonde, same color as her own, tangled, stiff, viscous, having rarely been washed, straw stuck to the ends. "Boy, it's me," she said, louder this time, extending her hand. She heard a thudding and looked over her shoulder for Emile, decided it was the weather, a shift, a front encroaching. Emile talked of omens, dervishes.

"What's a dervish?" Josi had asked.

"Dervishes? Don't you know? They swirl around you, put you in a trance."

"Why?"

"So you won't resist when they take you!" And he wrapped his long arms around her and she was surprised how strong, and she started to tug and wiggle away, wanting to stay, feeling safe.

After that, when it got stormy, they both looked at each other and uttered "dervish" and they'd grow excitable, tangled in each other's eyes, hands and arms. She could have kissed him then. One time, he looked like he might but then he stopped. She knew her first kiss would be Emile; her first everything.

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Gusts and vacuous thudding of the door followed. Boy stared fixedly, enchanted.

"What do you see?" Josi asked him.

He gazed back, both prosaic and mystical; she could not decipher.

"I'm your sister, Josi, remember me?"

He was fickle, unpredictable, and first his utterances became darker, more sonorous, more than the previous guttural sounds, but what followed was paradoxically distinct to the precursory noises, a slight and delicate utterance like gossamer, faint, translucent even. She crept in closer, now, putting her hand to her ear, reckless, imbibed by the weather front, the howling wind. Maybe he can read. He's like me, she considered, hopeful, not realizing how near she was to him, her eyes downcast and fixed on the sullied rope, his soiled feet, so when he stirred and the dirt kicked up in puffs, she gasped, took a few steps back, as if awakened from a dream.

"I'm sorry," she said to him when she saw the sudden pained look in his face, almost apologetic. "I'll get you help. I promise, Boy. It's not right. It's not fair. My feet are dirty too, see?" and she held one out to show him she was like him.

"Josi?" he spoke then, suddenly, prophetically, and the air turned pristine, and she felt a stirring inside of her, at the base of her spine, a slowing of the air, her blood, the barn dimming, save for one sharp beam of light piercing through a crack in the roof, casting a shadow on Boy's face. Daisy whinnied and stomped his hoof like a forewarning.

"It can't be," she muttered, barely audible.

"Josi" he said again, and she was sure this time, as she saw his lips part, and he deflected his voice as if to answer his own question, as if to say Josi, save me. His voice was not feral or vile. It could have been Emile's voice, except it was more distinguished, precise, as if he had been waiting his whole life to utter her name. She was convinced of it, felt he was harmless, needed her, and that they shared a bond like the one she had with Emile. She could not waste any more time. He knew her like Emile knew her. He remembers, she decided, our time, he understood now. It was an unspoken understanding. "Yes, it's me. It's me," she said, and then the tears and hot and she saw him, then, and nothing else, and sounds echoed which were the barn door thudding, and Daisy neighing, and Emile's shout, deep and exigent.

"Josi! Back away, Josi!"

Why should she? Not now. Not when she was so close, so close she could see his eyes, her father's eyes, the bloodied scratch on his left cheek bone. "I'm Josi," she said again, just before she touched his hand, saw the slight change in countenance, from pained to primitive. Still she was not afraid, and she got closer, believing it was her duty to be the good Samaritan, to help those suffering, everything Father Theobald preached, everything papa whipped into her. Even though Boy's face, at times, appeared placid and serene, and he didn't appear to be distraught, she imagined the torture of being tied out in the barn. She was near enough now to

smell the sour stench of vomit and bodily fluids, see the gnats circling Boy's head, remains of food unrecognizable; he reached out then, and his arm was bone thin like Emile's fishing rod. Emile? She thought she heard him, somewhere back there, but then she forgot, saw Boy, only Boy, and maybe that was him, his voice calling to her, maybe Emile, but not now, not in these extraordinary times, when she was so close, when waves of energy were searing, bursting, poured out of her like lava. Boy had her arm and his hand was hot and burning, and she felt it turning her insides out, and she felt the heat like an unbraiding, a stirring of senses. She felt her brother, closer now, moving inside her, as if the two were meshing. My soul, she thought, and nothing could dissuade her from him, Boy's desire, which had become hers. So when he sunk his teeth into his arm she never noticed the blood, the furrowed brow, his eyes downcast, and his expression when he glanced up at her, wild, maniacal. "No, no." she remonstrated, the way she might to Clementine if he nipped or pawed her arm for food at the table. But then he pulled her in and she noticed he was strong, stronger than Emile or papa or any one she knew. And then he was on her, like an eagle to prey. She was pinned, convinced of it, felt the feathers, the flutter of lofty wings.

"Josi! For God's sake! No!"

Emile was commanding. She was sure of it now. And she might have heeded the warning, but Boy's saliva on her cheek like an unction, and the vibrations, the guttural emissions, the familiar smell, the stale mud and sweat and sweet, an ancient goodness she wanted to conjure, salvage, divine, and all this and more, so much so that she ignored Emile. But then there was a sound she could not ignore, jarring, harsh and finite, the kind she heard pre-dawn, in the distant woods, close to Yellow Creek, foreign and muffled, but now it was close, inside her, a reverberating, a dismal cacophony, a dolor echo, iron, icy, with drops of cold, a flow of blood, and a spattering, a blast of bone-rattling unearthing, maligned, a grave buoyancy, an unleashing of life. And Boy's eyes widening, his svelte frame slipping, falling back and forward all at once, flaccidly; his legs and arms splayed, for a brief moment, only to curl into himself like a blossom furling, and he lay there sallow, still, and she waited for a flutter, a movement, jarred only by Emile's hand on hers, cast iron-warm, allaying, taking her away from the lifeless form on the straw. "Don't look back, Josi," his voice strangely calming, the rifle resting on his shoulder, the way he did after shooting a pheasant, and she traipsed behind him, imagined the rifle was a fishing rod, anything but a rifle, and it was a Sunday afternoon, after Peter Claver's, after Father Theobald's sermon, after all that, and they reached the path to yellow creek, where it opened obliquely, and then deeper in, closer to the rush of water, the umbrella shaped leaves, creeping pink and lavender phlox, red buckeye and white asters, the blood red fruit of ginseng, and when he looked back at her, the sun beamed in his eye, illumining, disrobing.

"I thought..." she started but stopped, shushed by a look.

At some point, she brought him there, to the sycamore tree, to Eleanor and mama's markers, and Emile gave her whisky from a flask, and she gulped it down, despite the burning, and Emile sidled up next to her. "I'm never leaving," she muttered, "never."

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"Okay," he said, dabbing her cheek with his hand.

Josi woke to commotion near the barn, pre-dawn dense fog, and she freed herself carefully from Emile's arms, skulked off, crawled underneath the porch through a hole in the lattice, and crouched there where the roots and rich rot wafted and mixed with Boy's dry blood spattered on her pink plaid shirt's sleeve and pearl snap buttons. She felt better now, close to the earth, inhaling him. "I'm with you," she whispered. She peered out at the two men who appeared shrunken and wasted.

"Heavy one," Jed Devereux said, lugging a corner of the blue tarp, the one papa used to cover the dingy on the side of the barn. Papa, cussed and grunted, heaving the other end. Josi couldn't understand how it could be so heavy, knowing Boy was in there, rolled up in it, how frail he had seemed, timorous like a mouse, tied up, nibbling on rope and straw. She looked over to the dingy, unmasked, recalled the last time they took it out to Yellow Creek, last summer, a week before papa brought Boy home, Emile's ebullience, reeling in a bass, its mouth a wide bloody horror. "It's at least a 5 pounder!" he had said. The sun glimmered off the creek, a deep cyan where the light got it and mottled olive over by the banks shaded by the black haw brush and crab apple trees.

When the tarp was loaded in the bed of papa's truck, she recalled him, viscerally, as if he sent her the memory of himself, Boy in the barn, tied, humming some familiar hymn, gusts of wind, strong as the night Emile shot him, rattling the beams, whipping the door open and shut, and Boy indifferent, serene and smirking, eyes filled with prescience, rolling back and forth, straw entwined in his hair, one in his mouth, pieces stuck to his feet, under his nails, straw dust in whorls spinning overhead, and Boy reaching up, cupped hands, to capture it, twinkling specs of golden light in the air, and in his eyes, souls borne from him--returning.