

I used to work at a dam. Bull shoals dam, on the White River. People would come to fish there. It's funny, working there the draw was the nature. There's nothing natural about it. The fish that lived there naturally were warm water species, bass and bream and the like, but because the cold water from the bottom of the lake was pulled through the dam it created this artificially cold environment where those fish couldn't survive, where they would dump truckloads of cold-water adapted trout and let people catch them instead. But I can't say anything. Working at the dam I would often go fishing myself. The flavor of fish is influenced by the water they're found in. The trout were generally flavorless, having lived in hatcheries all their lives, fed on pellets. But you could taste something else in them, too. The river itself, the mud and anything filtered into their gills.

They used to make me give this little speech at work, to the visitors to the dam, about the history of it, how before the dam, the surrounding community didn't even have electricity, or cars, or anything, it was all just this rocky, dusty ozark alfisols. Difficult to farm, the river periodically flooding to devastating effect and drowning countless people, then receding. When they put in the dam it changed the place, made these new possibilities. Like the river was this untamed creature that we had forced into domesticity, given a kinder soul. The part that I didn't tell people, is that they'd had to seize the land forcibly from a lot of those farmers through use of eminent domain. People's families had lived there generations and they weren't keen on damming up the river at their places of residence. The town is still at the bottom of the lake. If you swam down deep you could see houses, preserved in the cold water. If I believed in ghosts I would say it was deeply haunted, all that history buried in the still-standing houses, exactly as they were when the place was alive, and moving. Now, it's still, and covered in dark, like there was a last call and the lights shut off to leave the old place behind. But I don't believe in ghosts. Still, I heard plenty of stories during my time working at the reservoir.

There's this woman Kendra, a ranger and former police officer, who told me this story. There was a girl, just fourteen, and her stepfather had taken her out to the river to rape her, and then he'd killed her. Then, he had driven a little further down and killed himself. He had been raping her for years, they'd been called about it, but nothing had been done. But they looked for the body urgently. The police found his body quickly, but they searched for the body of the girl, and didn't find it. There's this rule police go by, that if someone commits a murder-suicide, the second body is usually within a mile radius or so of the first. They knew she must be nearby but they just couldn't find her. They called in a psychic. I didn't actually know they did that in real life, not until she told me this, I guess they thought it couldn't hurt to try. They worked hard to find the body. The psychic they had called, she took out a map, and pointed out this bend in the river, said you'll find the body right... here. They searched there where she said, at the bend, and they didn't find anything. A month goes by and there's this big storm that swells the river, and all the things from the bottom come up, and there it was. Her body was tangled up in this tree. Right where the psychic had said it would be. I've wondered about it ever since I heard the story. Maybe the psychic knew that mile rule, maybe she had just deduced the most likely place for a body to catch, for a secluded spot, somewhere no one would think to look. I don't know. Kendra

thought it was the girls spirit, like it was some act after death, something calling out. But like I said, I don't believe in ghosts.

When I was a really little kid I thought all things had souls. It wasn't something I believed consciously per se, it was more innate, sort of an automatic reflex. My stuffed animals and my toys, sometimes the walls, I would feel this sort of presence there, a guilt when I mistreated anything. Because I thought everything could feel. And I thought someone was watching. I told my parents that once, and they told me it was my guardian angel, but it wasn't that. See, the walls in my grandmothers house were wood panel, and throughout the house are these identical knots in the woodgrain. There was this warped area in the paneling that looked like a goat, or maybe a dog, or a pig, but not quite, just this strange, long and formless animal that defied classification. It's in the bathroom, and the kitchen. But the place I noticed it most, this creature, was over the bedroom window, framing the view like it was watching over.

There's a skinning shed outside that window, where we would bring deer and other animals to butcher them during hunting season. I think it was probably used for pigs, back when the place was a real farm. There's a gambrel hanging on a rope, where the animals pierced legs would be situated to hold the weight of the body, allowing the skin to be peeled off easily and meat harvested. The first deer I ever killed was a doe. The females meat is more tender, my dad explained with pride, though in older females less so. It had been a soul, I thought. An innocent soul, all cut up into pieces.

I sliced the tissue between her metatarsals so I could hang her upside down from the hooks. Then I began to skin her. This part was the easiest, all I had to do was peel downward, gripping under the skin, and it came right off, the fascia thin like web. It's startling how easy it all peels apart, like bodies are meant for it, to be dismantled piece by piece. When the skin was peeled past the stomach, I thought the deer looked like a woman hanging upside down with her skin skirt falling over her head. It was sort of a morbid thought, I know. It's just that animals really do look just like people on the inside. I slit the stomach and let the organs hang out, dangling in the air. The blood had a thick stench, dripping onto the dust floor, and I held my breath. Finally, I was done, and I removed her from the hooks to fall to the ground. She was unrecognizable, no longer a deer but a collection of abstract remains, chopped down to her barest parts dangling from thin sinew. I threw the last piece of meat in the ice box and took her body down. I dragged it off to the woods edge, knowing some animal would take it in the night.

I went inside, to the bedroom. I tried to to sleep but couldn't, just sat up awake and looked at the skinning shed from the window. The inside of the shed is totally dark at night, but outside it has a single light illuminating the gambrel and a small patch of dead grass below the door, which at night gives an effect like a spotlight on a stage. The knot in the wood just stared and stared. I had this idea that the animal--the real one, that is, whatever actual animal the wood grain image was a depiction of-- was, indeed looking out over the shed. That it saw each and every time we would peel an animal and take from its flesh, that it has been watching for generations as each animal was slaughtered and drained and cut up, every wooden ring counting a bloody skin. I knew it was, one day, going to come out of the skinning shed.

As time passed, the watcher continued to creep along beside me. Anytime I would move, I would find it, that same face, the animal in the tile. I would see that sloping body move across the table from the corner of my eye like a predator. It seemed to keep to the edges, the corners and cracks and the walls and the floors. Nowhere out in the open. So I moved to the city, in an apartment with roommates, and left no empty corners for such a thing to dwell. And I forgot, for some time. I tried to explain it, just once, to a friend, and he couldn't understand, called it a feeling of paranoia. He didn't know what it meant to be hunted.

The way Kendra had talked about that girl— seeing this dead body, the meat bloated by then, a deep gray. I can see it in my mind. It's hair is falling out. The body is no longer a girl, just a thing, no longer anything capable of shame. An it, not a she. It wasn't raped, you can't rape meat, you can only rape people. It wasn't sad to be dead, it wasn't anything. In death, it only existed. Like the river, or the tree it hung in, pieces sagging over the stuff branches. Kendra talked about looking the body in the eye. She said she felt like she had this duty to do it, to honor the girl by looking. I've never seen a dead person outside the funeral home, so maybe it's really different. But when I look at the dead eye of an animal it doesn't seem so different than a living one. There's no moment the soul fades out, leaving a husk. Sometimes they look like they could just stand right back up and walk away. No clear moment to distinguish the "she" from the "it." I thought, when she was telling the story, about the trout, and their flavor, from the river water and the pellets, and I wondered, just a little flicker, just a sick instruction before it was discarded, what she would taste like.

I've long shed the thought that all things have souls. There are people who can strip each other apart and feel nothing at all. I'm not a good person. I put on my good person skin and wear it to be a part of polite society. But I've caught fish and watched them suffocate right there on the surface, thrashing occasionally, mouth opening and closing in supplication until I took a rock and I smashed its head in. People talk about the indomitable human spirit. It's not a spirit. It's a biological incentive to hunt. To wait, and move, and wait, and move, until the prey is caught. There's no will in the behavior, it's only the instinct wired into our flesh. I knew an old man as a kid, the one who showed me how to fish. He always said, "It's about the location and the waiting. You have to sink it to where the fish are, and you have to be ready to wait." And he would give me this look, this undeniable look that meant in his mind he was waiting, and that I, too, was only cuts of meat still assembled. I would look away, and pretend, politely, that I hadn't seen. That I didn't know what I knew.

I actually knew the spot Kendra was talking about when she told me where they found the body. It was this unassuming oak tree, stood over the river, vigilant and gray. It was a tract I liked to fish. For a fishing park, I didn't have much luck within the park, so I would drive out to the places I knew the larger, more acclimated trout would gather. I would eat the fish and go to bed and have strange dreams, the blanket rising and falling beside me, this wet smell, as if I weren't alone. I could feel it there besides me, the same terrible animal that I've never seen anywhere else but the walls, in the corners. And in my dreams it was eating little slivers, snapping the

tendons with its strange, long mouth. In the dreams I felt no pain, my body stiff and unmoving, and I would wake and lay still for some time, as if I were still dead.

There was this one night. It was on one of my last evenings at the dam, and I fished out by that little tract of land by the bend. The rocky, desolate little area, patches of grass sprouting out like errant hairs. The unnatural cold of the river, filtered through the tops of old houses, filtered over the stony lime bottom. The oak, its arms reaching out over the river, fingers twisted to the sky. It grew dark out and little by little The sounds of the birds slowed and stopped, leaving this empty silence that rang in my ears, the hollow sky opening up to nowhere. I was close to packing up when I saw some movement from the corner of my eye, and out of the pooled kind of shadows in the water there was this animal. It came up out of the water like a little rising hill, all sleek and dark, more like a continuation of the shadows than anything real. At first I thought it was an otter, but as it moved into the faint light I knew with this chilled clarity what it was. It was the thing from the woodgrain. It turned, and looked at me, right at me, like I was already dead, its teeth glinting in the lowlight, and then it sank back into the edge, only its eyes visible over the darkening water. Just watching. Not moving, just watching.

I was too afraid to move, afraid that it would strike at me if I so much as twitched, so I stood there, the pole in my hand, totally still, as if, if I just stood still, it would forget I was there. I stood there for what must have been an hour, and I glanced down into the darkness, and it was still there, eyes illuminated white in the dim moonlight. My hands were shaking by then with the cold and the effort of holding myself still, and I slowly, carefully set the pole down and backed up a step. The animal followed, inching forward just slightly, the water rippling around it as it moved. I took another step backwards, and again, it followed, rising slightly out of the water. I walked backward, afraid to break eye contact, and it followed step by step, through the black woods surrounding the river. I lost its eyes as we walked under the dark cover of the trees, and there was only the thick blanket of blackness. I could hear the quiet crunching of the leaves, and I knew it was still following. I walked that way all the way back to my car. I unlocked it and saw a final flash of those eyes in the red tail lights before I drove home, speeding, my heart racing as I went. I slept that night with the lights on, feeling like my nine year old self, unable to fall asleep. Feeling dead.

These days I live far from the dam, in an apartment, surrounded by neighbors who's incessant noise brings me comfort. But the apartment doesn't feel like my space. It feels occupied, somehow, as if the territory had been claimed and I was the intruder. Everything feels subtly contaminated, the animal scent sitting on the air, warm and stale, ever present. It waits in the corner where only I can see, when the faint light catches it on my peripheral.

It waits. Always. It's probably waiting now, in the dark. You might hear a little crunch of leaves or what sounds like quiet breath in the silence, and that's it, out there. Waiting. I don't know what it's waiting for. But I know that when it's done waiting, when it comes up close and strips me apart, there won't be any soul inside. Only meat.