

River Through Broken Things

by Michael Channing

1

Daniel fished the river with his best friend Randy. Their poles rested on Y-shaped sticks stabbed into the ground. Bobbers drifted lazy with the current. They ate cookies, yellow with lemon cream. Spread the cookies open and licked the cream and thought teenage thoughts about what else might taste like this. The wind shifted and pushed the scent of rotting meat into their lungs. A deer, shot out of season, lay slit, gutted and abandoned in the weeds. It stank, but they didn't want to leave. The sun touched their skin with a warm kiss. It was an easy Saturday with school two endless afternoons away. And they already pulled five, fist-sized brim from the water. So Randy tested a theory and breathed through his mouth. Choked and gagged and vomited in the dirt. "I tasted it. Goddamn, I tasted it." They reeled in and packed their gear, breathed in short bursts through their noses. When they reached the top of the bank, Daniel faced the wind and pulled the flavor of carcass across his tongue. Just to see.

2

He sat up in bed. Sweat formed a second skin. Fingers through the sheets like hooks. Daniel listened. The air was thick and shivered with his mother's voice, trembled with the flash and bray of his father's fists. She hit the wall. Her ceramic plate of Jesus, gilded in gold around the edge, hanging on a nail, bounced against the wall, tapped out something in a language he wished he could decipher. He felt the blow. The impact traveled like a bass throb from their room at one side of the mobile home to his at the other and slammed into his throat. He slipped out of bed, crouched with his hands on the carpet, fingers spread. The floor spoke. His mother's collapse, the stomp of his father's boot, her arm between it and the floor. The heavy exit of his father, down the hall, out the door that brushed across the carpet and sounded like a weary sigh. Daniel opened the closet and got ready.

3

He and Randy hunted snakes with a lighter and a can of WD-40 on an island of rocks in the river. A copperhead slithered between the cracks of stone, into holes, under

their feet. They stomped. They prodded with sticks. They threw rocks and curses. The serpent teased them with a dart of its tail across the corners of their eyes, the fork of its tongue, the flick of a sun spear from its back, then darkness and silence. The river whispered to them, over there, under here, always it lied, always it laughed. Randy spied the snake between two rocks and soaked the crevasse with the spray. It spoke a long, sharp hiss. Rock glistened, scales shimmered wet. Randy pressed the nozzle and struck the lighter. Flame burst forth, a roiling cloud of black and orange. The rock caught. Fire streaked through the crevasse, forked through the narrow pinch of stone. Heat stroked their eyeballs. The snake danced, writhed, crackled. Soon it stilled, smoldered, a blackened stick. Daniel touched it. Snake flaked off on his finger.

4

His mother shrieked when his father showed her the jar. "Get that ugly thing outta here." Father laughed. "It's a just a baby." "Take it outta here." "Want me to kill it?" "No, let it go." "Bet you think it's cute." Father began to open the jar. "Don't let it loose in here." "Want me to let it go outside?" Mother's nose

wrinkled. "Not in the yard. Take it to the river."
"Come on son." Daniel followed his father outside. "The serpent used to have feet. Says so right in the Bible, son. Could talk, too." They watched from a distance as the baby snake coiled in circles at the bottom of the jar. The lid was off. "Then the serpent got the woman to eat the apple. That was the first sin. Eve wanted to know what she had no business knowing. God punished them both. Eve and the serpent." The snake slid up the glass, poked its head over the edge, tested the wind with its tongue. Father lowered the barrel of the pellet rifle. "And you shall be the enemy of all men." Pulled the trigger. The rifle huffed a gasp of air. The snake's head exploded. "You shall bruise his heel, and he shall break your back."

All he could see of his father was the ember glow of his cigarette. It pulsed in the darkness. Father sat in his car. Daniel watched from the porch, jaw clinched. Mother moaned through the walls. She only fell, hit her arm just so, and it broke. Broke, just like that. Funny, ain't it? Daniel covered the ember with his palm, squeezed his fingers to a fist, released, and the red

light was gone. A breeze wafted in, dragged the smell of the river. Sewage and mud, the decay of melting fish meat. Flame flickered. Again his father breathed through an ember eye. Daniel went back inside, closed the door to his room. He removed his shoes, undressed slowly, and put the baseball bat back in the corner of the closet. In his dreams, he was the river, large and elastic. Stretched mile over mile of mud and rock. Seeking and slicing shores he never knew, that elastic self searching for another amid the shreds and splinters of wooden lives.