

## *Hi, I'm Carter*

Chelsea Hogue

During the day our fathers lived in the woods where there was plenty to eat: grubs, clay-carrying water dripped from oak. Our fathers relaxed in shawls of dead leaves; there was proof in the pine straw, whorled by their bodies. While we slept in our warm beds, they collected leaves from our yards in black trash bags. With fishing line our fathers sewed the leaves into a dense fabric and huddled underneath, linking arms. The tops of their heads were polished by sun, but the hair that grew down their necks and backs was long and coarse. Their long and coarse hair, which grew down their necks and backs, matted with the hair of all our fathers in one snuggle. When one of our fathers raised an arm, another was forced to do the same. They felt itches under one another's chins.

Stand in the middle of our town and do a 360-degree turn; stand in the middle of our lawns and do it again. From our front doors, we saw our town's overgrown park, abandoned school, places people used to go; to our backs, there was the woods; and through the woods, there was the river. This is how it was: our thighs showed between clumps of bee balm; birds screamed *glug, glug, glee* all the time; if anyone drove by, we waved like maniacs; now and again, we were young men who offered a hand with that; we were young women who smelled of orange oil behind the neck.

We thought it was because of our fathers that we hoped to one day leave in secret. On nights when it rained, with the ground still hot sponge, our fathers marched toward their old houses, dragging damp leaves and branches. When our fathers made the sounds of boots on the ground, our mothers held us up to the window so our fathers could have a look at how we had grown—the size of our right-shaped fingers and toes; we learned at an early age to hate the sensation of our faces pressed to a cool window. Our fathers waved their sticks and shovels. Our mothers blew kisses with their free hand before our fathers retreated to their soft spots. At night our fathers giggled, told stories about the words heard through the sounds of storm and thick glass; they did this until we were too old to fit within the window's frame, until we grew up and forgot.

But what we couldn't forget was looking down from the roof on a rich March day, seeing Princess Biloxi and falling in love. We couldn't help it. Princess Biloxi rode through our town, sitting on the back of a top-down Oldsmobile. We saw her again, all alone, spread out under the sun, naked on a large pink quilt. We climbed our roofs so we could see her and shoot doves while our mothers sideran through our back yards with baskets. Every morsel of our mothers' bodies moved beneath their dresses. To kill a dove flying by, we exaggerated the lead by six feet or more. When doves approached in a group, we focused on one bird, stayed there until it fell.

At Christmas time Princess Biloxi and her friends made fire in front of the old school. It was the first loud night. Princess Biloxi tied small bells to her panties, played "Jingle Bells" with her bouncing butt while we watched. Her friends chanted *Panty Claus, Panty Claus, Panty Claus*—so we did the same.

To kill a dove flying away, we aimed a few inches below it. We envisioned floating that dove on the barrel of our guns. Our mothers clapped and caught the fallen birds, plucked their feathers starting at the base and never broke the delicate skin. At night, the gizzards and lung slivers went in plastic bags and those bags to the dirt. We poked at the rosemary bundles pressing under our dove's crispy-cooked skin, and over our beds hung their shriveled feet.

For Princess Biloxi, we said, and kissed them once or twice.

We knew our mothers would chisel our town, our lawns, right out of the earth's crust if they could. We were present for one another's births.

If you weren't our babies, you'd be babies born in a jar, our mothers said, kissing our necks. If they could, we would all float in space together, all alone. Our mothers were young when our fathers were old. Our mothers wore pointy Egyptian beards carved by our fathers from tree trunks. Our mothers sometimes told us about their pain, but because they were young, they mainly told us about the pain of their mothers.

Our mothers survived famine, they said. And war. Famine and war!

For dinner, our mothers' mothers shifted ample hips on spidery legs to descend from their attic apartments. Our mothers' mothers have experienced so much life. During the famine they stuck soldiers with switchblades for a handful of butter.

They moved with eel spirits, our mothers said, kept themselves alive using only their teeth. During the famine they made one sandwich in the morning and cut it in fourths. One quarter for breakfast, one for lunch, one for dinner, and the last for the moment when their stomachs itched their skin.

Our mothers' mothers served us bowls of boiled fruits and our mothers served us radishes soft as sleeping bags.

This is why we were forceful and flush. This is why we had excellent memories. We remembered a time one of us fell with the doves, hit a tree branch on the way, and died. We remembered the pink our mothers put on the dead child's lips.

You will forget, our mothers said, and our fathers agreed by waving branches bent into hearts. You will forget because—

But our mothers didn't understand that despite our being young, we knew everything we knew, and were confident in this. When we found roaches near the coffin, flipped on their backs, showing oat-patterned bellies, we helped our mothers bury the child where the grass met treeline. Our fathers clapped rocks and our mothers nodded.

See? Our mothers said.

We did.

They began to tell stories about our forgotten fathers, but we weren't interested; we wanted to watch from the roof. They pointed to dark blurs and said, There. Do you see?

We did.

Our mothers told us that a long time ago our forgotten fathers drank out of green thermoses and told the same stories about a squirrel dropping nuts down the chimney and our forgotten fathers' mothers burning them all on one cold night.

But we didn't care. We looked down at our mothers from the roof. What are they saying? Nothing, our mothers' mouths moved with the sun.

We're looking for someone, we said.

Our mothers tell us nothing we didn't know already. That the sun ends and begins and is desperate for us. And from up there we could track its arc. We could see where it rose over our town's streets and ended in the forest wall where our forgotten fathers watched and waited.

Our forgotten fathers waited and waited and grew more jealous every day as we climbed the roof and kept watch for Princess Biloxi. *What did you expect?* We yelled down to our forgotten fathers. *Try your hand at loving all the time.* We spied Princess Biloxi in a cluster of trees, relighting cigarette butts from the ground. We threw down false indigo for her. We behaved poorly; we called out her

name. She looked for us. She stared at the sun without sunglasses. What is she telling us? Nothing if she cannot see.

Our mothers warned us. We cut off our hair, and our forgotten fathers cut theirs, too. They followed Princess Biloxi to the river, and one rowed her out to its middle. We had never seen our fathers' pale bodies. They stood in cold mud and trembled; their eyes pinched by reflected light. When Princess Biloxi looked down at the water, leaning half her body toward its surface, one of our fathers pushed her over, while the others on shore grimaced and nodded. Princess Biloxi tried to grab the boat's side, but one of our fathers cut her fingers with an axe.

From the fallen trees on no man's land, where handfuls of garter snakes cluster in mating balls every spring, we watched her sink.

And our forgotten fathers returned to the forest wall.

We found her near the bottom, where the water blackened. This is how it was: instead of fingers, she waved ten of a balloon's open end. A few of us began to float toward the top, so we pulled them back down, sticking our feet to mud. We sisters and brothers in silk shirts and silk skirts with stone buttons were desperate for her. We blinked at our drowsy princess. *Let us look at you!* We smiled. We touched her hair, her skirt—*Let us look at you without the light!*—and one by one, we nodded toward her. We said hello. And for the very first time, we politely told her our names.

