

*HATCHET*

To kill a turkey, you have to catch it first.

You enter the pen. The turkeys shuffle into one corner and then the other, always with their heads turned to the side, watching you with one bright black eye. There are large brown ones and small grey ones, all tense and alert, with tail feathers up. They have ugly heads, sparsely feathered, like a man going bald in patches, and blood-purple gizzards. They make a collective sound that is like pennies shaken in a coffee can, a muffled clatter.

They are not attractive but you feel tenderly towards them. You remember when they came out of their eggs, devil-red under the incubator lights, breath moving through their tiny, damp bodies—in and out, in and out.

You wade into the birds and when one tries to dart past you, you turn, bend, and wrap your arms around its body from behind, pinning its wings, hugging it close like a child. You lift the turkey, and as you do it folds its legs and kicks, hard, against your hands. Long toes, pale blue and smooth as the skin of a lizard, wrap around your hand, your wrist, and cling tightly. Mud and shit all over your hands and your clothes.

Your grandfather is out by the stand of blue pines, adjusting the flame of a propane burner under a large metal garbage can. The can is the kind you might put out on the curb, and is mostly full of steaming water. Large clouds of steam build, build, build, and are pushed away by a low breeze. There is a loop of stiff orange twine hanging from the rafter of the sawmill, and as you walk towards him your grandfather says, Go ahead there, baby, put her up on the block.

He unscrews a metal thermos the shape of a bullet, upends the cap, and pours black coffee out. His beard and mustache are not neatly trimmed, and are tinted brown above his upper lip when he takes the first sip. You have watched your grandfather kill many different kinds of animals with the same detached contentment that a cook might crack an egg or slice into a green pepper. When it is time, he slaughters them quickly with knives, or guns, or axes, then cleans the implements, the animal, then puts them away.

You have done this thousands and thousands of times. The first time you were five, and all you did was watch. When you were six you were allowed to pluck the feathers. When you turned seven, he let you swing the hatchet. That day, he had done three already with the axe, but then he looked at you and put the axe down. He got a smaller tool, a hatchet out from the shed, and wiped some dirt and loose rust off the blade. There was a spinning stone in the sawmill with a pedal to make it go, and he pressed the

pedal with his foot, put the blade against the stone and shaved off the rest of the rust until the blade shone pale and flashed the white of the sky, just like a mirror.

He put it in your hand and when he let go, the hatchet dropped to the ground.

He laughed and picked it back up. It's heavy, baby, he said, and wrapped your fingers back around the handle. He said, Use your big guns, and squeezed your bicep playfully with his hand, which was covered with a stiff canvas glove. The glove was gray, with dark stains on it.

He got a turkey from the pen and brought it over. It kicked and struggled until he flipped it upside down, and then it was calm. He put its blue snake-feet through the loop of twine so that it hung from the rafters, head and neck resting on the block, the round of wood that had once been a section of the trunk of a big leaf maple growing in the back lot. The cut surface of the block, about the size of a dinner plate, was dark with blood and weather and sunshine and full of cut marks and missing slices, but through it all you could still see the rings representing every year the tree had lived. There were two nails pounded into the block. Your grandfather took the turkey's head and placed it between the two nails, gently.

The turkey was calm, quiet, and blinking, and looked around at you and your grandfather and the axe and the hatchet and the flat white cloudy sky.

It's just like swinging a baseball bat, your grandfather said. You've got to swing through, like the block isn't there at all.

Papa, but what if I miss.

You won't miss, he said. He put his thumb into the light, airy feathers on the turkey's neck. He said, You just watch this spot right here when you swing and you swing through, don't stop.

He took his hand away but stayed there, standing very close, and you raised the hatchet in both hands. You put your eyes on the spot where his thumb had been and tried not to see the turkey's eyelids opening and closing, or the turkey's breast rising and falling. You brought the hatchet down and swung through just like a baseball bat, but lost your nerve all of a sudden and didn't swing through, after all. The hatchet stopped only halfway through the turkey's neck but before the blood even started coming out your grandfather's hand came down like he was ready for it all along and he leaned all of his body weight on the head of the hatchet and the blade went through the spine with a soft sucking and a crunch and the body swung free. The wings started to flap, even though there was no head anymore, and the body spun wildly on the long rope of twine. On the block, the head lay there with its eyes open, the beak opening and closing, opening and closing.

Your grandfather said, Good job, baby, but you were disappointed. I didn't do it right, you said, but he put his heavy gloved hand on the back of your neck and said, You'll get it right the next time.

The turkey's body hung there in front of you with no head, losing all its blood out

*Sou'wester*

the long tube of its neck. You could see two large purple veins slipping from the cut neck, spraying the grass below with the most brilliant, unusual color red.

Now you are eleven, almost twelve, and you are strong enough to use the bigger axe, but you choose to continue using the hatchet. It is a compact tool, and by now it feels like another part of your body, as if there are nerve endings that run down your arm, through your fingers, and all the way to the paper-thin cutting edge of the blade. When you take it up in your hand, you feel confidence, and relief. [continued]