

The Tender Branch

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For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Job 14:7

Since I was eight years old, I have begun each day with catalogues of my life. Before that, I began each day with a prayer that was a swift murmuring, a litany, of everything an insecure and terrified child might seek, a litany that I believed only the saying of it could prevent my mother's death before I went to bed again that night, only the saying of it could make sure my brothers got more than the school's free lunch that day as food to sustain them and let their bones grow right. The catalogues, the lists, took the place of that near hysterical prayer. So now I lie here in this hospital bed, with my head sore on the pillow, and I continue to make my lists:

Number of colleges attended: two

Number of degrees: zero

Number of alcoholic drinks I've had in my life: zero

Number of times I've smoked dope: around twenty

Number of times it made me feel better to any measurable degree: three

Number of babies I've delivered: two

Number of still born babies delivered: one

Number of babies that survived five minutes past the delivery: zero

Number that were mine: zero

Number of guns held to my head: one

Number of times shot: zero

Number of siblings still living: five, maybe

Number I started with: seven, counting the stillborn and the other

Number of tulip poplars on my three acres: 407

Number of dogwoods: 163

Number of sourwoods: forty-seven

Number of men I've loved: one

Number I still love: one

Number of men I married: zero

Number of men in my life now: zero, unless you count the cop

The lists make everything tidy and organized and true, and tidiness, if not organization and truth, is a trait that every Corliss, even my father in his messed up life, always believed in. The counting that goes into my lists is so clean, and it gives me distance, and if I were in any way normal, the lists would keep me from having what my father called a "pity party," a phrase he picked up that had been a pitiful enough refrain in Jimmy Swaggart's sermons on TV. My father and mother, when he wasn't too hung over or she wasn't too beat up, the good Sundays, liked to

listen to the Reverend Swaggart on the little TV someone had given us. They listened to Swaggart in lieu of going to church, and Dad liked that phrase, I know, from the way he said it kind of like ass backwards encouragement. My parents were both big believers. My dad liked to quote the Bible when he was drunk, especially about Jesus consorting with the tax collectors and publicans. Somehow in Dad's mind, they were all big drinkers. He was probably right.

Mom, on the other hand, believed in using scripture like incantations. Since she didn't say much to anybody, it was of interest to me when she rebuked Dad's drinking and violence in Jesus's name (not to Dad's face, of course), "claimed" that God would soon put an end to her sufferings and restore her marriage (to what I don't know, since I only knew it to be hell from my very first memories); and her favorite scripture, because it was the only one she ever quoted, was Matthew 7:7 : "Ask and it will be given to you... ."

Before I was in Head Start and only four years old, she taught spell-casting from the Bible to me, too, but before I was in third grade I already knew that words were only worth as much as the action you put behind them. I quit my desperate listing under the guise of prayer all the things that God could change if he would just be true to his word. I quit pleading that he would grant me a mother and brothers who were safe and fed and a father who was always like he was those few good Sundays.

It was because my mother kept getting up most mornings and putting on clean clothes and telling me and my brothers good-bye when we went to catch the bus and was there to say hello and was still there, though sometimes bruised or bandaged, when we got off the bus, that I continued to believe there might be a god who listened, but since I also knew he didn't respond, I decided at some point that my faith would be better served if I left the future out of mine and God's shared time frame. I learned to only tell him what *had been*. I decided only to clue God in on what *was*, the truth in the present, because I had noticed that he left what *might be* up to someone or something else, some power that seemed, at best, arbitrary and detached.

Beyond that, and beyond the little bit of control I had over events, it seemed to me that life, at its worst, was under the direction of something predictably mean, (perhaps there was simply another half to that well-intentioned but ineffectual deity my mother called on), and whose random cruelties might be incurred by a near nothing,. So I talked to the less powerful one, the weak good one, only about my life thus far at any given moment in time. I was afraid to do more than that, to ask for anything that hadn't already happened, afraid of suddenly being attended to by his other, darker self.

My father probably only said "Now let's don't have a pity party" three or four times when he was joking, and since those times were so rare, they stuck in my memory. I remember them like I do the sounds of the veery singing its dusk song from the buckeyes and oaks and poplars thick behind the trailer, the sound of hope, if hope has a sound, out there in the growing dark.

My mother was always careful even in her speaking with Dad, even when times were good, even those few times, because it never mattered whether dad was drinking or not. Anything Mom did could set him off. I think she liked his saying "pity party" for that part of her that still loved something outside the magician god she managed to believe in. Maybe she even loved words like I do. We never knew each other in a way that allowed conversations about that kind of thing. Dad liked the phrase because he liked cleverness, and liked having a way to tell Mom not to feel sorry

for herself, though being a martyr for no justifiable cause was a big part of who she was for the fifteen years that it took for me to do something so monstrous it jerked her out of it.

I read once that bullies are the most frightened people of all, and as I get older, I see it is always true. I see it's true still while I'm laid up in this hospital bed. The man—boy, really—that put me here was trembling the whole time he was emptying the cash register, and not from adrenalin, trembling when he shoved me to the floor, and trembling, (I could feel it in his knee that pressed into the back of my rib cage), when he had the pistol—a small .22, the kind women put in their purses-- hard against my skull.

But anyway, Jimmy Swaggart was probably a lot of unpleasant things, but I don't believe he ever was a bully. I think if anything he just wanted to get people worked up with what he had to say— maybe for the Lord, maybe not, . Of course, I guess he liked a little sado-masochism, too, plus he must've been real fond of all the money people sent in to get prayed over.

Speaking of Jimmy, even though his little minute of fame is long over, he wasn't so bad; he was no worse than his cousin, Jerry Lee. But we can forgive Jerry Lee for having a few sexual quirks, like marrying an underaged cousin. A rock and roll sinner is primarily under the direction of a dark god, so he is expected to do weird shit. An evangelist probably is, too, especially one with a TV show and a pompadour, but something in us, something crazy and trusting, or something theologians say we're born with, still tries to hold Christians on TV and elsewhere to a higher standard, at least a higher standard than that of hiring a hooker to make you crawl around on the floor with a collar on. I don't know that Jesus would mind letting somebody back in the fold for that. I can think of worse.

If I were going to add this very minute, where I am now, to the catalogue, it would be something like this:

Number of ribs that were broken in the robbery: two

Number of lungs punctured: one

Number of smells I could identify with my cheek pressed onto the 7-11's cement floor: four

Number of people in the store with me when ski mask boy came in: one

Number who are still alive besides me: zero

Number of minutes it took the police to get there after I pushed the alarm button: seven

Number who asked me questions like I was the one with the gun: three

Number of visitors I've had in three days: zero, except for the cop

Number of my two broken and one missing teeth that my 7-11 optional you-pay-\$27.98-yourself-each-month insurance will pay to replace: zero.

But I already had one tooth knocked out when I fought a long time ago, just once, with the man I loved more than anybody, Sully, who worked the same shift as me in the elastic factory when I was in my twenties taking classes at night and working days running a saw out on the floor. Lucky for me I guess, that tooth was on the bottom and didn't show so bad. But Sullivan Wilnoty got a chipped tooth, stitches up the side of his face, and a broken shinbone from that fight, and he

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learned I'd never let a man do to me what one did to my mom, not even if I brought it on myself through my own cold heart. Sully was laid up several weeks and had to pay in money, too, for the doctor. Sully was the one I would've married.

I usually give a little better than I get, more like my grandma than my mother. My grandma was mean, but I'm not mean like her, just vengeful like her, vengeful like a cat you've left locked in the house all day and thinking everything is fine until you come home and there's a pile of shit right on your pillow.

The last time Dad threw mom out in the yard, I had just turned fifteen, and it was only a month after she had had the last baby. Like the baby before, I was the only one there, out of school to help if I could. The phone had been disconnected both times. For the whole month since that last delivery, Mom had been even more quiet than usual, as had I, neither of us talking about it after the men in the ambulance placed the form wrapped in a small sheet of white cloth on a stretcher that made it look smaller still and carried it out to where they took unwanted bodies. "Their second stillborn," I heard one of them say, "and it's lucky in that family, just like the last one that woman and her girl were crazy enough to deliver at home."

Mom always smoked whether we could afford cigarettes or not, and she had been smoking a lot more since that day. She was just lighting up a cigarette when Dad lost it with her, this time, he said, for stinking up the house with her smoke, the house he almost knew how to behave in when he was sober and not at all when he was drunk, the house where the best memories he created for his kids were from the dregs of a stupid TV preacher's sermon on self-pity, which was not exactly John Donne, (a preacher and poet I learned about in one of my college classes). Dad's sense of justice was a mystery-- he cried when he ran over the neighbor's dog out on the highway, once came in with a homeless bum in February and let him stay two days in the warm, and then beat my mother for smoking indoors or whatever infraction he could cook up. At that time I told myself it was that beating and being flung out the door that made her call it quits, but I know now, and I knew then, just couldn't say the words even in my head, that it was what I had done that made her finally put an end to the evil that had become the everyday for all of us.

So after all those pregnancies and ten times as many beatings, Mom called a taxi that had to come twelve miles from town to get her, took all the money, mostly pennies, that was in jars she used to say was for us to get some kind of education someday, went back to Dark Branch as far west in the state as you could get without being in Tennessee, and knocked on her mother's door and asked if she and the three youngest children--aged three, four and five--could stay there until she found a place for all of us to go. I was the oldest so I stayed at the house with two of my brothers to scrounge meals for them and send them to school.

Another mystery was that Dad never raised a finger against any of us kids.

Number of my brothers named alphabetically after Old Testament patriarchs: three; Adam Seth Corliss, Balaam Eber Corliss, and Caleb Shem Corliss

Number named after characters in Clint Eastwood Westerns: two; Rowdy Yates Corliss and William Munny Corliss (they stayed with me after Mom left that time)

Number of girls named by my dad after an aunt that ran liquor in a dry county when she was young and preached when she was old, and not even her real name, though it's mine on my birth

certificate: one; my name is Nerve

Mom later told me that my grandma came out on the porch, (and she must have been in her sixties by then), and she hadn't seen my mother in a long time, maybe years. When Mom told me the story, she said Grandmother looked at her without answering, took in the split lip, the bald, not quite scabbed over patch on the side of her head where she had tried to brush her hair to hide it, at the three year old hanging on her hip and the two in the cab that was still running, because Mom knew better than to count on anything, and my grandmother said, "You made your bed a long time ago, Vennie Lee. Now you have to keep on layin' in it." And that was that. Mom walked back down the steps, and I like to think that she had enough sand in her that she stood straight. I know she didn't cry. She told me she got back in the taxi and made the three hour trip home to Canton that took most of the rest of the jar money and went straight to the courthouse and straight into the police offices where she started the process of getting a divorce by pressing charges for assault. But I've often thought that she could've just as honestly pressed charges for murder, though not her own.

We didn't see her at the house for a week, and I asked later where she was, but she never told me. There wasn't a women's shelter in town then, so it's yet another mystery among those that sometimes create a fog in my head about as acid as the fog full of sulfites that hangs on the Balsams of mornings. The next time we saw her, a week later, she came with a policeman and another taxi right behind the police car. It was an evening in May, and the air was all filled up with the fragrance of multi-flora roses covering up the edge of the woods and choking the dogwoods and redbuds that were trying to bloom there. Dad hadn't been around more than once since she left, and he was so drunk even then that her not being there hardly seemed to register. Still, his being there meant I was able to get money out of his pants lying in the floor where he dropped them. I used it to get some Viennas and bread and milk and Mountain Dew for me and my brothers. I think Dad didn't care about much of anything else except the next drunk by that point, so her being gone had no importance to him. Right after that he disappeared to wherever he went between handyman jobs that he scrounged up when he wasn't at home sleeping or beating mom or getting her pregnant.

If I were to add this memory to my catalogue, it would read this way:

Number of hours it took to put our clothes and a few pictures and the family Bible in garbage bags a neighbor provided and load them in the cab's trunk: about one

Number of years I'd lived with my father and mother to that point: fifteen

Number of years before I saw my father again: nine

One of the policemen who was in here to question me was a little nicer than the others, more like a new social worker than an old cop. I noticed his name badge said "Gilbert," and I wondered if he was related to the Gilberts back in Haywood that have the big nursery. After he finished writing down answers to questions I had answered so many times I could repeat them,

word for word in the next round, he wanted to know if he could ask me a personal question, off the record, just to satisfy his own curiosity and maybe to let me know why the police kept coming back with more questions about my statement, why they couldn't just let me lie here and stare out the window and listen to the hum of the air conditioning and the soothing names of doctors being called to different rooms.

I told the policeman, though, to go right ahead, and so he did.

"I've been doing this an awful long time, and I've seen some sad victims and awfulness." He paused here and picked a piece of lint off his shirt sleeve. He glanced up at me, then continued. "What you need to know is the reason we keep askin' you the same questions is because you don't respond right, you don't respond normal. You just don't help a woman with a busted up face and blood everywhere and broke ribs off the floor and her not be tore up. It makes it look like you was expectin' it, Miss Corliss, and that has to make somebody wonder. If you wasn't involved—and I know you prob'ly think your injuries is enough to say the opposite, but people do some craziness for money—you've got to explain. So what we want to know is, what we keep pesterin' you for, is why do you act like this... so...so detached... unless you was gettin' somethin' more out of that robbery than a messed up face and a tube in your chest?"

I say nothing, just shake my head. He asks again if I can explain, and I say, "I reckon that's just the way I have always been."

But if I could speak freely, what I want to say is this:

If I could take you back to where I came from, you might understand. If I could take you back to the bedroom in the back of that trailer, the first time; if you could stand beside me there at the edge of the bed, the frayed and torn sheets stained and wet from the blood and my mother's broken water; if you could feel the relief I felt when the slick thing in my hands didn't cry, didn't breathe even when I held it up as best I could, didn't gasp, the blue on its face showing through a light purple, almost lavender, my mother's favorite color; if you could know with me that this was one less for me and her to take care of, one less for me to soothe when it understood what was happening to Mother, one less for me and Mother to try and feed with government cheese and biscuits, and when the food stamps ran out then from flour we borrowed from neighbors-- biscuits and wild onions in the spring, and cornbread with government butter while it lasted and maybe with potatoes and beans if they came in good in the fall and neighbors were generous, and cornbread and Banner sausage and more cheese or whatever was there in the winter if Dad had thought to leave us any money-- and if you could have it to do again eleven months and twelve days later, the same situation, only this time I'd had been given an idea, and I took the idea from whatever god offered it; if I could take you back there, you might understand.

I took what was pushed out of my mother this second time. I took it in its dark slipperiness and laid it on plastic wrap that I brought home from a school party, plastic I had already laid out on the floor all on my own in between the last of Mom's pains when I knew from remembering the first time that it wouldn't be long now till the head crowned, and when I pulled it all the way out myself-- I was praying it would be like the first, then I wouldn't have to follow through on the idea-- and when my mother wasn't conscious enough at that point, I thought, to push, to even see, I thought, what I was going to do, and when I saw this one was alive and knew what that meant

for it and for all of us, then I did what I was ready to do. Afterwards, after I carried through what seemed then like not even a choice, I unwrapped its small head and laid the limp but still warm baby next to my mother, her eyes closed and her face pale, anemic to start with and then all that blood, in and out of being aware at all, and I took the wet and bloodied plastic off the floor and went out back and a short way up the path to the reservoir box, and off to the right of it and under a maple that I knew would be red come fall, and I lit a match to some hemlock twigs under the plastic that melted it and sizzled on the fluids but did the job and left it a nothing, a nothing that I covered with a glassy piece of quartz, quartz that was everywhere in the branch that fed the reservoir and that was what you had left when a whole living mountain was worn down through cold and heat and centuries and aeons and storms and being tromped on by everything that lives and dies on it to nothing but its bones.

If I could take you there, I want to say, then my calm is something you'd understand.

And if you could be there when I watched my mother explain to Social Services, to the police, to the ambulance drivers that had no feeling for us except the disgust that showed on their faces, to those who had to come and take the baby, the babies, two in two years, after I went to the neighbors that had a phone that was connected and asked them to call the same ones as last time that needed to be called; if you could be there to stand beside my mother as she told the truth as I told myself she knew it, barely held herself up, pale, cleaned up, her housecoat clean both times and her underwear lined with rags to catch the blood, you would know what I know and you should know since you're a cop and have seen some dying yourself: Almost always, dying is a good thing.

So that gun held to my head had been there since I did what I did in that room twenty years ago, and if it had finally gone off, the trigger squeezed by no more than a frightened boy, I would have been relieved that my turn was finally over, that I was about to come up even for what I had done, for what made my mother not able to look me in the eye, for what was a toxic secret between us, even if I pretended for the longest that she wasn't conscious enough to know, even if I did it for her, too, her mostly. Even if my dying would have been messy, it would have left a clean space behind for something else to fill, something else to have a turn, something or someone that might actually have a chance to do right *that felt right* in this short span.

Number of times Mom talked to me about the babies I delivered: zero

Number of people I've told about the one: no one, until now

When Jimmy Swaggart was taken off the air, another TV evangelist took his place, another church had a chance to get rich and let its minister drive a Cadillac and have a house with a swimming pool and a big staircase. And when that minister fell off the podium down into the pews, or down into the dirt, down with the rest of the congregation that may or may not have acted surprised when their preacher wound up sullied, he probably either felt pretty good for having had the experience of living among the haves, or maybe, even better, he learned Jesus's fine lesson about poverty being a desirable state if you really want to understand what's essential. And I guess inadvertently you learn humility as well. Being as low as you can get has a large degree of

comfort because it's all out of your hands when you're that far down, and a lot of people miss that detail when they're feeling superior to and sorry for someone that's in the gutter. Like I am now, except these white sheets that smell a little like bleach make me feel like I'm the one responsible again, like someone handed it all back to me, like the final place I was in on that floor wasn't final or freeing after all, and I might, before it's all over, have to go even lower to get where I have to go.

The sheets smell a little like the 7-11 floor the day the boy came in with a coat on and toboggan, not unusual in our cold winter, but unusual when a few minutes later he would pull down the toboggan as the ski mask it was. Something hopeful and desiring of justice came clear to me when he had my cheek pressed hard into the linoleum tile, after he smashed my face down on that floor still clean up until that point. That close, I could see clearly the intricate patterns and shapes cut into the linoleum, and the lines looked like outlines of continents in a frozen sea, and I thought it was as beautiful and enigmatic as the world must be to God looking down at the land spreading out in all that water and all of us people creating messes he never planned but that are interesting nonetheless. And before I felt what I knew were my ribs cracking, I could distinguish the hygienic, poisonous smell of the Clorox I had cleaned with from the smell of my own blood pooling gently from my nose; from the smell of the beer spilled from bottles the boy fired into that some poor guy with paint from his day's work splashed on his white coveralls was reaching for to get through the bursitis and the evening; and I could distinguish it all from the pungent shit smell that came from that same man who fell into the Budweiser cooler when the ski mask boy shot him for no reason at all and before either one could even say what it was they ever really wanted.

But the policeman is patient, and he asks, one more time, wanting a real answer, why I am this way unless I am culpable. The irony would make me laugh if my face was less swollen. I have to give him some kind of answer other than what I just said or want to say, so what I give him is this: "I'm thirty-five years old, old enough and seen enough myself that nothing anymore really gets to me, not some crazy boy with a .22, not some pitiful painter thinking he's on his way home to get a buzz going but gets a bullet instead, and not good police doing their job but aiming their questions at the wrong person."

The policeman seems only a little more satisfied now that I have spoken yet another version of truth, but he tells me if they catch the boy, and he says the police think they know who he is, they hope he will corroborate my story, but until then I will likely get a lot more visits from the police even after I go home.

Home. It's the acres Sully and I wanted to buy when we were together, before he got tired of trying to figure out my long silences and make his way through the impossible thickets of my vindictive nature, and when he knew nothing and no one could really break through them, not even a man who picked up after himself, was gentle even when he was drunk on hard liquor, could fry chicken and make mashed potatoes like somebody's grandma, made love like he meant it, and who was violent with me only once, when he tried everything else he knew to make me normal, and I hurt him more than he hurt me. Then he left. And I quit all my night classes and didn't go back to work until I got another job as a temp in an office that I also eventually left when I got the manager's job at 7-11. The temp job left me nights without classes or Sully, so I got a second job working the mostly unwanted evening shift at the 7-11, where I was promoted to manager when I was recognized as responsible and honest, which I am, mostly, and I've been there for ten years

without incident to speak of until the boy came in with the gun four days ago.

Number of times I've wanted to call Sully: 3,782, at least once each day since he left.

Number of times I've called: zero

Number of months it took me working two jobs to save enough for a down payment on three acres and a singlewide: twenty-seven

Number of men who've been with me since Sully: zero.

This policeman, whose visits I have almost begun to enjoy, leaves, and I hope it's him they send the next time. I hope it's him that comes out to my place when I get to go home. He's about the same age, I believe that my dad would be if he's still living.

I saw my dad once when I was twenty-four. I had lived with mom and her sister in a place outside Tampa—the place we eventually landed with our garbage bags of belongings— for as long as I could. As soon as I had my sixteenth birthday I quit school and finished up with my GED, then took any job I could get to help my mom and aunt along, but it was never enough. Social Services split up my brothers and put them in foster care, and our mother became more silent than ever. Her sister seemed to love me, and I think my mother still did as well, but she wouldn't look at me when I talked to her, so after Mom got a decent job at a local plant sorting good eggs from bad (a fact that struck me as funny since it had taken her all my growing up years to recognize a bad egg), and my five brothers were all with other people and headed in directions that no longer seemed to have anything to do with me— by that time a nineteen year old who could do whatever was necessary, and at that time, leaving seemed necessary— then I left to go back home, or at least to a county near home but where everyone wouldn't know my whole family history.

It wasn't that I missed my memories, but I did miss the slope of the land and the high ridges of spruce and balsam and long shadows under oaks in the afternoons. Tampa has its own kind of southern beauty with its rustling palmettos and leaning palms and still creeks with their faint and not terrible smells of sulfur, but the sounds and smells were foreign to me in a way that made me yearn for the place where the Corliss's— where I— came from, and where I would one more time see my father before he disappeared again.

The day before I agreed to move in with Sully, I went back out to where I had lived up to my fifteenth year in Haywood County. I had avoided it until then, but I needed to say something to that rock if it still lay near the reservoir box. When I got there the trailer was still there, abandoned and in bad shape—broken windows, limbs laying on parts of the roof and other parts caving in. We had rented it cheap from a distant relative because it was in bad shape even then, and I guess they couldn't rent it out once we left and everyone knew stuff that had gone on there. The path was gone, but I could go in that direction and find the wooden box that housed our spring. Under the old trees the shade was deep, but the huge old maple was easy to find, and even in the filtered light its leaves were a rich crimson in mid -October. The rock was there, the moss that had been on it thicker, but enough of the quartz still shining through that I could identify it as the one. I sat next to it and said my words, not a prayer, though, even if I wafted those words to something beyond me, because what I had done could not be forgiven since I would have done it

again in the same situation.

Instead, I talked to that rock about me knowing that what one person did didn't matter, that what we did to each other and this planet we live on is small, and that fifty years, a thousand years, or thirty seconds are all the same since they're all temporary anyway, so if that feeling that had been most of who I was since I laid that piece of quartz on that spot could be lifted from me just long enough to live a life even for a few years like other people, with another person who looked me in the eye and saw something he liked, then I would be grateful, then I would add that gratitude every day to the lists I sent outwards to that god who listened like the counselor I was sent to before I quit high school, listened with a blank face and without suggesting, was just there and could not help me, but listened nonetheless. *I'm not asking to be forgiven, I said, and I'm not asking to lay my burden down like the songs say, not forever anyway, just for a little while so I can love someone back like a normal woman might do.*

But instead of answering my prayers, what the quartz rock gave back to me was seeing my father that same day. As I left the county, feeling not one bit different than before I went and prayed to that rock, I stopped to fill up at a new gas station on the four lane as I left town, and a much older but still familiar form was attempting to hitch a ride just at the edge of the parking lot when I pulled in. I recognized him about as soon as I saw him, but I knew that even if he was in a condition to see who I was, which he wasn't, we would have no reason to speak to each other. So instead I just watched him as I pumped my gas. He had moved a little further out of the parking lot and was holding an unsteady thumb out for anyone's mercy when I came out after paying, but I was not anyone, and mercy had been in short supply with me for a very long time. So I kept driving until he was a dark line on the horizon behind me. The only thought I took with me from my foray back into the woods of my childhood was that if there was any magic to be had from praying, it was, as I had always feared, only of the dark variety.

Out the window in my room I can see tree limbs. I'm on the second floor, and the bare limbs aren't close enough for me to identify the bark. I figure they're oaks or maples. Those are usually the trees people leave when they're building. Then later they plant Bradford pears and weeping cherries. And if they love the mountain plants, probably sarvis and redbud and dogwood. I love the mountain plants, the mountain trees. I love the scarlet maples, and whatever is left from what I did, whatever was left after I burned the plastic, it lies beneath that quartz, I hope it likes where I left it.

I wrapped it in the plastic and pressed the plastic tight around its head and over its mashed nose and eyes not open and mouth still clotted up but working to take in the air that was clean and came through the screen from up the mountain with the rain smells still in it and the smell of humus that's all that remains of ancient upheaval and everything under the earth and on it struggling to survive one more day and Mama unconscious or maybe dead for all I knew from losing all that blood. And then when it wasn't working its mouth anymore, I unwrapped the plastic.

I like to believe I will leave here and find solace in the woods that are on my property. I know I will go back to work at 7-11 as soon as I am able. I may have to find a way back to that

place where the boy had me on the floor and it seemed I could just let the world run on without me in all its mystery. Or maybe I can just be where I am, me and my catalogue of the present, and won't have to wander too far off my own acres to be where I need to be. Maybe the brother gods have made a truce, and the bubbling hole in my lung and the bore of that pistol pressed so hard into my scalp that it's still sore four days later was enough for them both. I guess it doesn't matter, because either way, it's me that has to keep making my payments until I'm finally debt free, one way or another, one payment after another. If the policeman I like comes back next time, I may ask him if he's related to the Gilberts in Haywood, and if so, maybe he can talk with me about trees, about smoke bushes in particular. They're not native, so none grow on my acres, but I've always wanted one.

Recently I've begun looking up the Latin names of the trees on my land, and I like the way the sound of Latin gives what it names a little added dignity. For instance, the botanist Linnaeus called the chestnut oak *quercus prinus*, and even though it's not the tallest tree in the forest, the Latin sounds important. The American Flora Society has said it should be called *quercus montana*, which I like because I know what *montana* means. So here's my last little catalogue for you:

Number of *quercus montana* on my three acres: 12

Typical lifespan of *quercus montana*, or chestnut oak tree: five hundred years

It seems to me that what is most likely true about the Bible is when God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush on a mountaintop, and what I like is that, besides being on a mountain, the bush just burns on but isn't burned up. Smoke bushes remind me of that story. I could believe in a God who talked to me from a smoking bush as well as one that burned, and I could believe he cared about the oppression I brought on myself when I killed my only sister when I was fifteen, just like he cared about those Israelites and their oppression in Egypt so long ago.

Or not really so long ago, if you put it in the right perspective.

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