Luke Blanchard

Flash Burn

On a night in November a boiler tank exploded into the chest of Nathan Birch. Dylan heard the news over the phone. "Tell your daddy he's got to come down here," said the factory supervisor. "He's got to fill in the third shift. Tell him Birch is dead." Dylan hung up and looked out the kitchen window to the backyard. Streams of cold air smelling like ice and dirt were coming through the cracks around the sill. The stars were focused in the black, and at the edge of the field Dylan could see his father's shop flashing from the light of a welding torch.

He went out the backdoor. The grass was stiff from the cold and pressed against the frozen ground. His sneakers had been sitting next to the stove, but they quickly lost their warmth. His father once told him that things spread out when they're hot, like a piece of metal beneath the torch. But winters in the Virginian mountains seemed to prove the opposite, especially here in their field where Dylan could feel the space growing. And his father's sculptures helped to push the world apart. His father referred to these sculptures as The Work. Going to the factory was a job, and chopping wood was a chore. At the end of October, all the lushness and closeness of his father's voice, slurring through spring, laughing at community baseball games in late summer, died with the trees. Only The Work remained in winter, dark and bony like the empty forests around their house.

Dylan had named some of the pieces, but he never told his father. *Elephantsquid* was a tall jumble of metal and glass next to the maple tree with the tire swing. The most striking feature of *Elephantsquid* was its eye, an old clothes-dryer window that was surrounded by a heap of rusty gutters snaking into the sky. The entire structure sat on top of four heavy pipes that looked like elephant legs. Near the front of his father's shop was *Antennaman*, a slender sculpture made of old roof antennas and weather vanes, all bound together with wire, standing nearly twelve feet tall, sprouting metal like a cornstalk. At the very top of this thin figure was a copper rabbit, with an arrow marked north swinging around its ears.

His father's shop was long and flat, like a gas station convenience store, and patches of paint had peeled away on the concrete walls. Dylan watched his father move around in the yellow light, a large black welding mask covering his face and thick gloves covering his hands. Then the torch fired, and Dylan jerked his head away to look at the sky. "Never look at the light," his father said. Dylan watched the stars, waiting for the hiss of the torch to stop, amazed that the skin of the universe was

safer to look at than the welding light. How could a torch be so powerful? Everyone at school seemed to take this phenomenon for granted. "It's flash burn, dummy, of course it'll burn your eyes," said a boy at recess.

The noise died down, and Dylan went into the shop before it could start again. The room was hot and smelled like gasoline. Fumes stuck in his lungs after breathing the cold night outside. Scrap metal crowded the corners, and bare light bulbs were attached to extension cords that threaded over shelves and through the rafters. The entire back wall was covered in pegboard, and most of his father's tools hung there: levels, hammers, wrenches, and many other things Dylan couldn't name. The old man flipped open the mask and wiped his face with a rag. When he saw his son, he laid the torch on his workbench.

"Nathan Birch is dead. The supervisor says you got to fill in the third shift tonight."

"How did it happen?"

"A boiler tank exploded."

"Who called? Frankie or Bill?"

"I don't know."

"Your brother home?"

"No, sir."

"Grab that broom and start sweeping up. I'll be right back."

He took off his gloves and mask before leaving. Dylan got the broom down from the wall where it hung with a rake. A layer of dust and slag had built up on the concrete floor. Dylan swept around the new sculpture, careful not to bump the metal. Some of the parts he recognized from the past summer, a crushed dirt-bike frame, a dented water fountain.

He always felt uncomfortable in his father's shop, as if his presence could somehow ruin the sculptures or dull the tools on the wall. One side of the shop was a garage door where the finished pieces were taken out. His father never announced when a piece was complete, but when Dylan heard the rusty screech of the garage door, he knew The Work was growing.

There was no dustpan in the shop. Dylan thought about using some scrap metal, or the paper plate on the workbench, but before he could make a decision, his father opened the door with such force that most of the piles were spread out in the gust. He was buttoning up his blue jumpsuit with the name *Syntoc* stitched across the front in yellow lettering. In the darkness behind him a light snow was falling.

"You done with the sweeping yet?"

"Yes," said Dylan.

"It was Bill that called, so there's no way in hell I can get out of work. You got school tomorrow?"

"No, sir, it's Saturday."

His father turned around and looked toward the house. Then Dylan heard the faint whine of classic rock and the sound of Casey's '65 Mustang coming up the driveway, a familiar chugging and scraping that sounded like a broken dishwasher. In September, Casey had bought the Mustang from a used dealer in Chesterfield, paying with the cash that he had saved up for two years mowing lawns and spreading manure at the Bryant's farm down the road. The car was a dusty brown because the

paint had been buffed away for a new coat, but Casey couldn't afford a paint job. He often wiped off the headlights, the only surface on the car that could be cleaned with a rag. Rust had eaten away the bumper, and the Mustang hood ornament was disappearing beneath a scaly red, but the headlights were as clear as a glass of water.

"Goddamnit, he's gonna block me in. Turn off those welding tanks and shut off the light before you leave."

He ran up the field to the house. Dylan looked at the tanks in the corner, two cylinders of dented metal, one green and the other blue. A hose came out of each tank, curving together until they ended in the torch, a long piece of metal with a spout and adjustment knobs. The door to the shop was still open, letting in cold air and stray snowflakes that fell on the floor and turned into wet spots. He ran over to the tanks, almost knocking them over in his haste, and turned each brassy nozzle to the right, watching the needle in the dials slowly fall like tranquilized eyelids.

He cut off the lights and shut the door on his way out. The snowflakes were heavier now. Dylan's father was standing in front of Casey's headlights, directing him to a spot in the driveway, which was hard to see in the snow. The Mustang snarled impatiently, and Casey swerved to the left, jerking to a stop near *Spiderweb,* a sculpture made from old bicycle tires. Casey shut off the engine and slid out the driver side window because his doors had been jamming in the cold weather. Dylan went into the house before the argument started. Casey came in soon after, cheeks flushed from anger and the cold. He stomped his boots on the kitchen floor, while Dylan looked for a clean glass in the sink.

"We got anymore firewood, Dildo?"

"It's on the front porch."

"Go get some. I'm gonna call Jennifer. I don't give a shit about the old man's rules."

A week after Casey bought the Mustang, he was idling in the parking lot of the local grocery store, waiting for any low-cut tank top to walk out the double doors. Jennifer happened to be buying cough syrup at the time. The two of them drank the whole bottle while speeding around the curves of Old Farm Road. Casey stumbled into the house later that night with cherry-red stains on his shirt and two cigarettes smoking between his lips. He talked about his new girl, how she looked naked and some other things Dylan didn't quite understand, before falling asleep on the kitchen floor. After that incident, their father had forbidden her presence in the house.

Dylan came back into the living room with an armful of wood. Casey was wearing a tank top and holding two dumbbells. When he was younger, Casey would shoot a paint gun to relieve his anger at their father, or sometimes punch his bedroom wall. Now he lifted weights, and no matter what time of the year it was, he did it outside.

"Build up that fire. I'll be in the back."

The Mustang started up, playing garbled rock music and shining light into the yard. Through the kitchen window Dylan could see Casey's body strain with each curl. The snow had stopped falling, and the air was still except for Casey's

breath. Light from his Mustang reflected off the angles and curves of The Work, and the eye of *Elephantsquid*, bright as the tip of his father's torch, welded everything together.

They lived in an old, drafty farmhouse which their father had been renting for fifteen years. People from the historical society came sometimes to poke around and take notes. Mrs. Ruttebaker, the owner of the house, often talked about selling the place to the state. She thought it could be transformed into a living museum where people dress up in old clothes and churn butter or play wooden checkers while smoking corncob pipes. Once a month, she came to the house to argue with his father about The Work, which she claimed was too close to the house and destroying history. She was an older woman, and all her dresses looked like blue nightgowns. Long bead necklaces hung from her withered neck. "History is precious, and you are destroying it," she would yell at Dylan's father. The two would argue for half an hour in the yard about regulations until he stomped inside to get a pile of papers, which he shuffled and pointed at angrily. But Mrs. Ruttebaker liked the children, Dylan especially. She would pat his head with ring-laden fingers, but he never said anything to her, afraid of betraying a secret about The Work and angering his father.

Dylan knew little about the sculptures, but he did know where the parts came from. His father went scavenging during the summer at the Gloucester County landfill. Every other Saturday, he left the house at eleven o'clock at night. A friend name Carter gave him a better deal when no one else was around.

Casey hated the smell their father brought home from the dump, and he would shut himself in his room, blaring AC/DC from a cassette player. But one of Dylan's chores was helping to unload the truck. He often fell asleep at his bedroom window and dreamt of unloading the Ford, so when the headlights did shine through the glass, accompanied by the familiar rumble of gravel, he went down into the driveway and did the same thing again, not sure if he was still dreaming. His father would smell like rotten milk and cat piss. Orange dust would be pasted to his sweaty skin like he'd been caught beneath a crop duster. Dylan picked up the smaller things, coils of wire or broken chairs, and they moved everything into a pile at the edge of the yard.

"So some guy died, and that's why your dad is working tonight."

Jennifer was sitting on the couch next to Casey. They were both sipping from a bottle of cough syrup. She asked questions without a questioning tone, like she really didn't care. Her brown hair was long and stringy, overwhelming her tiny frame. A spray-on tan had left her skin a light orange color, but there were patches on her thighs that had been missed. A small star tattoo marked her right breast, and she wore choker necklaces made of turquoise and metal. Casey took a drink of the cough syrup.

Dylan was sitting on the floor by the stove. Splinters from the logs jabbed his legs, and the heat

made his skin itch. He would have gone upstairs if the house was warmer. Casey wouldn't kick him out of the living room until Jennifer's eyes looked like grapes and the entire bottle of cough syrup was gone.

"How'd it happen, Dildo?"

"A boiler tank exploded."

"Probably ripped his body to shit," said Casey. "His boy Jason is in my health class, and he's got this huge scar right on his forehead. Wouldn't be surprised if he got it from messing up some equipment just like his daddy. Those Birches are all just ripped to shit."

Dylan knew what his brother meant because he'd heard the stories, just like everyone else who had a father that worked at *Syntoc*. A year ago that winter, Nathan Birch was a supervisor in the factory, wearing khakis on the job and sitting in his office all day. Once a month he drove to Virginia Beach and lost his paycheck on shark fights arranged by a wealthy restaurateur who had aquariums in his basement. Some of the workers said Nat wore a shark-tooth necklace beneath his shirt. When he couldn't pay off his debts, men showed up in a white SUV and trashed his house with golf clubs and baseball bats. In the morning everything was scattered on the front lawn, and a friend with a dump truck came to take it all to the landfill. Laura Birch, Nat's wife, was crying and screaming the whole time. Jason had to hold her back after she cut herself trying to gather broken plates and shattered lamps. Several days later, Nathan drove a forklift through the break-room wall with half a handle of vodka in his hand. He was lucky to get hired again as a janitor. On the weekends, he put a grill in the bed of his truck and drove around the county selling hamburgers in gas station parking lots or outside of Little League games. Everyone said the buns were stale and the patties fell apart.

"Jason Birch has been trying to stare me down ever since the dump fire last summer. He probably thinks he can whoop me, just because his pa gave the old man a bruising."

"Pa fought Birch?"

"Don't you know anything? Hart Lancaster was up there that night firefighting with the other guys from the station. He said the old man pulled up in his truck at about eleven-thirty, and they told him to leave. Men were yelling and running around with hoses, flames kickin' into the sky. Nat Birch was firefighting that night too. Birch said something, and the two of them started throwing fists."

Dylan remembered that night at the end of August. His father was late coming home from the dump, and when he returned his clothes smelled like smoke and ash. Dylan came outside to help him unload the truck, but the bed was empty. His father was bruised and bloody. The next day at school, Dylan heard about the fire at the landfill, but he had never learned why his father was bleeding.

"What did Birch say to Pa?"

"It doesn't matter what he said. It was probably true whatever it was. Ain't no other grown men around here spend their time welding trash together. And I'm sick of having the only

cocksucker that does called my father!"

Casey looked down at his biceps and flexed. Jennifer took a long swig of cough syrup, and Dylan could see her eyes ripening in the dark. Finally the heat was too much, so he retreated to the edge of the room, pretending to have some interest in the box of kindling beneath the window. The smells of the living room were fainter in the shadows, and slivers of cold were coming through the floorboards. Jennifer blinked and grinned at Casey, but the cough syrup had drained her smile of any familiarity, leaving behind a weightless impersonation like cotton for snow. Casey put his hand on Jennifer's chest and tossed the empty bottle onto the rug. It bounced once, landing next to the stove where the dregs of syrup shone ruby red in the crackling light.

Dylan sidled into the hallway, feeling the air grow colder as he moved away from the light. He ran upstairs, trying to warm up his body before getting into bed. But the sheets were cold, and he could hear Jennifer and Casey moaning downstairs. He hung over the side of the bed, hoping the blood rush would somehow heat up the room. There was a stack of his father's old hunting magazines that he had forgotten beneath the box springs. He balanced himself with one hand, and slid the magazines out with the other. The issue on top displayed a man crouching behind a pile of rocks, aiming his rifle at something invisible in the distant autumn foliage. Dylan had looked at these magazines before, but he couldn't read very well, and there were few pictures. All of the front covers had men dressed in hunting gear, but there was never any game in sight. Dylan imagined each scruffy man leaving his cabin at the sight of a deer and tracking it into the forest until the animal had vanished. The title *Hunter* seemed a mockery of these men, who were hiding confusion and weakness beneath predatory faces.

He thought about the night of the dump fire, how his father had a similar stern gaze in his eyes, while a line of blood ran unnoticed down the side of his face. The bruises and blood embarrassed Dylan because he had never seen his father so weak. He preferred to see his father behind a welding mask, the hiss of the torch cutting through the silence. He'd wanted to look away that night, to leave his father bleeding alone in the driveway, but he couldn't leave in silence. His father's face demanded a word, like a waiting hunter demanded the snap of a twig, or the distant call of an animal. A storm of bugs swirled around the porch light. Dylan had asked the first thing that came to mind. "What makes a torch powerful enough to cause flash burn?" His father leaned against the truck, looking up at the sky. "Just air," he said.

It was Jennifer's giggling, not the crash that woke him up. Dylan heard loud sounds all the time, his father pounding sheet metal for a sculpture, his brother shooting cans in the front yard with a paint gun. He was also used to the quiet shuffling of feet going by his door, or the dull sound of the clothes drier. But feminine laughter registered in the middle, like conversation, which was rare in their house, and both could open his eyes with the force of a strange, unsettling dream.

Jennifer laughed again, harder this time, and Dylan went to his window, expecting to feel cold air breathing off the glass pane. Instead the sun had risen hours ago behind an overcast sky and the field was dewy, rather than white. This happened once or twice every winter. The temperature shifted into the low sixties and the clouds insulated the world. But there was never enough time to fill the air with the smell of blooming flowers and fresh grass. Crows flew through the trees, and the smells released in the warmth were human, like the tinge of gasoline and burning brush piles.

A bicycle tire, rusty and flat, bounced through the yard followed by the sound of laughing. Dylan pressed his forehead against the windowpane, and peered toward the front of the house, but he couldn't see Casey or Jennifer. He went downstairs to get a better view, and through the living room window he saw Casey's Mustang covered in bicycle tires, the remnants of *Spiderweb*. Two long tire marks ran up to the driveway, the spot where he had parked the previous night. Casey had run into his father's sculpture with as much speed as the Mustang could manage in such a short distance. He and Jennifer were sitting on the dented hood, tossing pieces of the *Spiderweb* into the yard and drinking from another bottle, this one larger and dark brown.

Seeing the wrecked sculpture reminded Dylan of his mother, the only other person to attack a piece of The Work. Three years ago, Dylan learned that she was having an affair with a man named Grady Dupont, the owner of a motel right off I-81 and a drunk. His brother told him that much, and it was all that Dylan knew about the man until his mother took him to Grady's Inn one day between trips to the post office and grocery store. She didn't explain why. He followed her into the motel and there was Grady Dupont standing at the front desk, watching television and drinking beer. When he saw Dylan, he slammed down his beer and glared at Dylan's mother. The two of them went into a backroom, and Dylan sat down on a sofa, pushing aside a pillow and a pile of blankets. He took a piece of candy from a bowl on the coffee table. It tasted like mothballs. After several minutes, the two adults came back out, Grady with a fresh beer, and Dylan's mother with a swollen lip and a black eye. "And tell your goddamn kid to get off my bed," said Grady before sitting down again in front of the television.

A week later, she was cooking dinner, when his father came into the kitchen with an old cardboard box, bringing the smell of mildew into the steamy room already thick with macaroni and cheese. Dylan was sitting at the kitchen table and ignoring the homework spread out among the dinner plates. It was early autumn, and their family was changing with the season. The house was sluggish with history in the warmer months, and on rare occasions Dylan's parents sometimes laughed together about the distant past, about loopy aunts and daredevil cousins that Dylan would never meet. But those moments ended with the summer. The trees had changed and bugs were dead in the dust of the windowsills.

"What are you doing with those pictures?"

"Throwing them out."

The bruises on his mother's face looked green in the kitchen light. She stirred the pasta, and shook too much salt into the pot.

"What pictures are they?"

"It doesn't matter, they're mildewed."

"I never thought that would bother you," she said, looking out the window at The Work. "Dinner's ready now."

Dylan's father walked out the backdoor. The fan above the stove was humming. Dylan's mother took off her apron and left the kitchen. A minute later, she went out into the backyard with Dylan's T-ball bat. He watched through the window as she swung at a sculpture, a twisted knot of old piping and rebar. "Bruce!" she screamed over and over as the bat slammed into the metal. Hearing his father's name was strange, like hearing a sound in the woods right before a buck appears. Then a pipe fell off the sculpture and hit her in the face, breaking her nose. She dropped the bat and wailed into her hands, cupping the blood. Dylan's father stood quietly by the garbage cans. Ten minutes later, she drove away with the last trace of her husband's name. Dylan began naming the sculptures that night, starting with *Grady*, whose pipe was immediately replaced, even before Dylan's mother had driven out of sight.

Now, three years later, looking at his brother drunk amongst the scattered sculpture, Dylan knew that Casey would leave just like his mother. When the sculptures were intact, the holes and edges sliced up the sky above the open field, as if their father had taken a hammer to that part of the world and cracked it like a windshield. Casey would punch his way through those cracks, making a hole for himself to escape. It seemed that's what their father wanted. Casey smashed the empty liquor bottle against a tree, and the shards cut his hand. He took off his shirt to wrap the wound, revealing a muscled torso that Dylan remembered from years ago as bony, when he and his brother had gone swimming together. But everything spreads out, swells against itself. Dylan put on his sneakers and ran into the woods before he could see his brother leave. The growl of his Mustang sang through the trees like the sound of an airplane lost in the sky.

Dylan found an old loggers' road, rutted and patched with sandy dirt. There were pictures in the farmhouse of the clear-cut land from decades ago, black and white skies bearing down on acres of stumps. But the site had been given up after all the timber was harvested, and new trees grew in along with a knotted mess of brambles and weeds that choked out the forest floor.

The sun had faded into the gray sky, but the temperature felt hotter than a day in June. Dylan's legs were tired and scraped from briar patches, and sweat was stinging the cuts. He thought about loggers trudging through the hills, their boots pounding into the dirt, their squinted eyes envisioning houses, furniture, toothpicks, and all the other details that would be carved out of the forest. Dylan wondered if anything in his house had started in these woods—maybe a chair, or the kitchen table.

After an hour and a half of walking, Dylan

started to worry about hunters. In his haste to leave, he had forgotten that it was deer season in Virginia, and he was wearing brown corduroys and a green T-shirt. From late October through February they came to the woods around Dylan's house, usually more interested in drinking beer than shooting anything. Smashed Budweiser cans were as numerous on the ground as the shed antlers, which fell off the deer in late winter and sometimes survived the year, if mice or rain didn't wear them away.

Around the next bend, a large maple had fallen across the road, a massive tree that had somehow survived the logging years. Its roots were curved and white, some as thick as fire hoses, and others as thin as hair. Leaves had gathered in the pit left by the trunk, and a boy, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, was crouching in that pool of brown and gray. He was wearing a bright orange vest and a Washington Redskins cap. As Dylan approached, the boy crushed some leaves in his hands and stood up. He was short, probably only a foot taller than Dylan, and the sweater beneath his vest was oddly shaped, tight around the chest, but loose and dangling on the arms. Patches of hair darkened his face, mostly on the right side, and the pride in his eyes seemed to thrive on this adolescent beard. He adjusted the cap on his head, and Dylan glimpsed a large scar running along his hairline.

A rifle was hanging on a nearby root, and Dylan was reminded of the *Hunter* magazines beneath his bed, dozens of strong-jawed faces lost in the woods. The boy spit a string of tobacco juice into the leaves, and Dylan jumped in surprise.

"You just cost me three hours of waiting, boy. Could've had a five-point buck. It's been strutting through here all right. Could've had a whole freezerload of deer meat." He crouched in the leaves and dug around for a handful of dirt as if he were tracking an animal. "Mom could've cooked those steaks with ketchup. Boy I could eat three or four in one sitting. You hunt?"

"No."

"Not even with your dad?"

"My pa doesn't hunt."

"My dad worked in a factory. I'm not gonna do that. I just need a freezerload of deer meat, and I can feed my mom and me for a year. That's all I need." He sat down in the leaves like a child in a ball pit. "Where you from anyway?"

"My house is back that way."

"You can look at my gun if you want. But don't blow your head off. That's a good gun right there, and that's all you need." He took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Dylan took the rifle off the root and studied it carefully to please the stranger. The strap was frayed, and the muzzle smelled like grease. The butt was worn and wooden, reminding Dylan of the floorboards at home. When Dylan looked up, the boy was rubbing his forehead and staring at the ground. Suddenly the surrounding tree trunks seemed like boiler tanks, all of them waiting to explode.

"What's your name?"

"Dylan."

"Your brother ain't Casey is it?"

"Yeah."

"And your daddy's Bruce?"

Dylan nodded. There was a shed antler on the ground, and the hard white was pockmarked like the moon. Jason spit again, this time harder and closer to Dylan's feet.

"You want to go hunting with me? I know a place."

"I should probably go home."

"You can carry my rifle."

A crow swooped down and started pecking at the ground, its dark eyes shining like the soupy gaze of *Elephantsquid*. Before Dylan could put the rifle back, Jason was walking away. The crow flapped into the trees, and the son of Nathan Birch didn't bother looking at the startled bird. He adjusted his cap, rubbed his forehead, and kept walking.

Jason's truck was parked about six miles away, next to a small road without painted lines. It had taken two hours to complete the hike, and the sun was close to setting beneath the clouds. Dylan was lost now, and he was hesitant to get in the truck with Jason, who had been silent during the walk. But he didn't want to make him angry by refusing to get in. When Casey was irritable, nothing angered him more than disobedience.

The floorboards in the cab were crusted with mud, which turned to powdery brown beneath Dylan's shoes. Jason pulled onto the highway with his window open, and gusts of cool air swirled through the cab. Dylan held the rifle on his lap, until Jason grabbed it and rested it on his own knees, the barrel facing toward the passenger seat. He placed his cap on the dashboard, revealing brown hair matted with sweat, and Dylan couldn't resist looking at the scar. The line was thin, with a natural curve like the horizon. Jason caught him looking and scowled.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

"You were looking at my scar, I know it. People always think there's something wrong with me, like I'm missing a brain or something. Isn't that what you were thinking? I had a lot of fluid in my head when I was a baby, and the doctors had to let out the swelling. But they didn't cut up my brain or nothing."

There were telephone lines running parallel to the road. Dylan remembered getting the call about Nathan Birch, and he imagined the man's ghost shooting through the wires to follow his son's truck. A dented metal sign peppered with buckshot appeared by the roadside. Gloucester County Landfill Five Miles was stamped across it in bold, governmental lettering. Dylan could smell the trash through the open window, and the scent reminded him of his father. The sky was darkening, and the wind picked up, tugging at the bare trees.

"Your dad builds things don't he? Welds shit together."

"I guess so."

"My dad knew yours from the factory. Did you know that?" Dylan was silent, thinking about his father's bloody face.

"After my dad lost his good job a year ago, he started drinking more, going out to the Exxon with

a grill and a handle of whiskey. Sometimes he fell asleep there, without even calling me and mom. One night, your dad pulled into the lot to fix a strap on his bed. His truck was full up with trash. Dad drove home that same night, looking for his rifle and swearing that some of mom's lamps were in that truck. Mom was crying, but he passed out on the kitchen floor, and I left him there. I didn't understand how he could get fighting angry at a man with trash and not those men who wrecked his house with golf clubs.

"I didn't understand until the dump fire last summer. Dad was a volunteer fighter, running around putting chemicals down to hold in the flames, and he got lost in the smoke. He was on his knees trying to breathe, thinking he was going to die, when somebody pulled up in a truck, and it looked like the headlights were floating ten feet off the ground. That's when my pa knew he was in a pit, and he could see enough to climb out.

"It was your dad's truck that saved him, and he said later that he would rather have died had he known. It was like my dad was just another piece of trash to be picked up, just like your dad thought our lamps were nothing but trash that he had any right to. We owed something to the men who wrecked our house. Even the men who fired dad were owed something for what he did. But when my dad crawled up out of the pit and saw your dad, he shouted 'I don't owe you nothing!' Then tore into him. Would have killed him, if the other boys hadn't stopped the fight."

Jason turned onto a small gravel road. Plastic bags and scraps of cardboard were caught in the tree branches. A break in the trees to the left revealed a ragged hole in a chain-link fence. Jason pulled his truck to the shoulder and grabbed a hunting knife and some garbage bags from the glove compartment. He gave the bags to Dylan, and got out of the truck still holding his rifle. The smell of trash was stronger now, and Dylan was shaking. Jason opened the passenger door and told him to get out.

They scrambled up a crumbling hill and found a dirt road printed with the large tread of cranes and dump trucks. Pale orange dust marked the boys' clothes. The sun had drifted below the horizon, leaving a cold sliver of light on top of the mountains. The gusts were sharper in the openness of the landfill, and the clouds in the sky were tearing into pieces. Dylan shivered as the day's heat escaped through the cracks.

He had expected fields of charred waste, but months of new trash had covered up the scars, and in the gray dusk these hills took on the living darkness of an ocean. There were memories breathing here, memories that his father had collected and torn apart like gutted fish. The road ended at a steep embankment, and Jason's silhouette blended against the sky. The smell of rot grew deeper, and the trash below appeared to be moving in the faint light.

"State troopers come here," said Jason. "They dump the deer from the highway, and leave 'em to rot. But you can come at the right time and find fresh meat, enough to feed you for a whole year."

Jason raised his rifle and shot a blast at the sky.

The black below scattered into birds, their heavy wings breaking apart the air until the flapping dissipated with the rifle's echo. Dylan could see the pile of deer now, impressions of bodies speckled with glass-marble eyes. Jason laid his gun on the ground and pulled the hunting knife from his belt. He grabbed the garbage bags from Dylan and slid down into the pit. The antlers were cracks in the dark mass, and Jason was cutting his way through, slicing up meat that he would take home to fill his freezer. Dylan looked at the wisps of cloud receding into the distance and the winter stars sinking deeper into the sky. Just air, his father had said.