

**Look**

The soldiers were warned. The prairie where they conduct field exercises is a graveyard, the land riddled with unmarked burial grounds and old foundations. Sometimes the tracks of the tank bottom out, sinking through the rotted floor of a one room shack buried by twisters and time. The sum of someone's whole life, the space in which they lived and loved and mourned disappears beneath the artillery without even a crunch.

The bones are worse. The tracks turn up the shattered remains of skulls, fragments of femurs fragile as broken pottery. The soldiers have to think of it like that, so far removed from the skeletons that hold them upright. There are moments when they catch themselves staring into a rotted out nasal cavity or tracing the curve of a rib.

*That could be me*, they think. But most shake the thought away. Most have a reserved plot at the veteran's cemetery up the road on Custer Hill, a gated community for the dead, where their names will be polished and protected. They are serving their country, they will never be left, never be anonymous bones in a field.

"If you see one, just turn around," the commanding officer says. "We have no real idea of where they are."

"Everywhere," Private First Class Greendeer thinks. Thousands and thousands of years of ancestors drifting beneath the dirt like an oil slick. *We are everywhere.*

One of the boys nudges her shoulder. The sun is shining too bright for her to read his name patch. She can't tell her platoon apart otherwise, they look so much alike, all white boys in the same identical outfit and military fade. She hadn't anticipated this when she swore in, this ache to see her face reflected in another person. She's never been so far from home.

*I wanted this*, she has to remind herself. *I asked for this.*

“Not afraid of a little bone yard, are you Bambi?” the boy asks.

“No,” she says. The bun at the nape of her neck aches, yards and yards of hair coiled to a fist at the base of her skull. It’s a heavy thing, to carry your whole life with you wherever you go. “But you should be.”

*Crunch.* This is how the soldiers learn to shoot, by looking into the bowl of an empty skull and seeing nothing. By grinding human teeth under their boots and not pausing to wonder what words were spoken with them. Private First Class Greendeer thinks about the veterans’ cemetery up the road, about the mahogany boxes, the tiny flags replaced with care every November. Victory is getting to provide your dead with dignity.

One of the boys kicks a jawbone with the tip of his boot. “Look at this shit,” he says. “It has two rows of teeth.”

“Fucking weird,” someone else chimes in.

“Ya think it’s a monster?”

“Leave it alone,” Greendeer says.

“You gonna make me?” the boy asks. His boot poised, ready to crush the bone back into the ground.

“It’s a child,” she says. She breathes in. She thinks about the mahogany boxes. She’ll get dishonorably discharged if she shoots him. But she thinks about it, sometimes. She waits until the other soldiers walk away. She kneels in the grass and cradles the tiny jaw in her hands.

*I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

She slips the bone into her pocket like nothing has happened at all.

“Look away,” the commanding officer says. They are breaking the law by training here,

by ignoring the dead. All remains must be returned to their nation. But who has the time? Where else would they train? The Army would have to admit they'd been wrong the whole time, that they'd been looking away for decades, for centuries. "It's only a problem if we talk about it."

The soldiers try to look anywhere else but at their feet. They stare at the endless prairie sky. They scan the horizon for the warning signs of a tornado, that finger of cloud pressing too close to the ground, like a child tapping the glass of an aquarium. The soldiers look homeward, missing someone or being grateful to be away from the lives they have constructed for themselves. Some of the soldiers find themselves thinking about the mahogany boxes, about that plot of land they reserved for their own bones. That is when they turn to look at Private First Class Greendeer, the only girl on the tank crew. She can feel them looking at her, the way you can feel ants crawling up the side of your leg. She knows what they say when they think she's not listening.

*Just wait till I get her alone.*

*Bitch needs to get laid.*

*Bro, you know what you can do with all that hair?*

Private First Class Greendeer sits on the back deck of the tank to keep warm. It doesn't snow here, the way it does back home. The air is cruel and stingy, the wind biting at her face.

It's deer hunting season. She should be in a tree stand with her father. She should be hanging the animal for him, splitting the muscles from the bone. He can't do it anymore, now that the arthritis has got his fingers, curling his once capable hands in strange directions like tree roots. She should be making sure her father survives the winter.

A boy slams his palm onto the back deck of the tank, beside Greendeer's thigh. She jumps.

“That’s going to give you cancer,” he says, pointing to where her body meets the tank.

“You’re a cancer,” she says. And she means it. But the boy laughs around a chunk of chewing tobacco. Her platoon always laughs at her, even when she has knives in her teeth.

“A penny for your thoughts, Bambi?” the boy says. She can see his name plate. Jackson. He tried to date her once. She doesn’t like him. She doesn’t really know him. She doesn’t really want to, but some things hang so heavy in her chest that she has to hear the words spoken or else explode.

“It’s deer hunting season,” she says. A smirk carves its way up Jackson’s face.

“Oh is it?” he asks, tugging at the pocket of her uniform, where it stretches across her upper thigh.

“Don’t be like that,” she says.

“What? My hands are cold.”

Jackson reaches his hand into her pocket. She can feel his fingers there, so close to her skin. She wants to stab him, to send her utility knife through the open canal of his ear. She wants to bury him out her to rot. Jackson’s fingers find that scrap of jawbone, those two lines of teeth, neat and waiting. He pulls away from her, sharp and jumpy like he is afraid something will bite him. He slips off the tank, landing with a thud in the tall grass.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asks her.

“You.”

Near the South gate stands a memorial for Wounded Knee. Private First Class Greendeer can see it in the distance if she cups her hands over her forehead. She can see it like a mirage, pressing itself into the sky, like the grey barrel of a gun. The stone tower was built to

commemorate the two soldiers who were killed in friendly fire while their buddies were dumping whole families, still bleeding, into paupers' graves.

Greendeer had gone to see the memorial up close when she first arrived, not knowing who it was for. This idea, that the Army had remorse for what it had done to people like her left a hot coal of hope burning in the pit of her stomach. She could build a life here, if only she knew they were sorry. She read the plaque and wretched on the manicured lawn, her palm open and cool against the hard stone.

*Friendly Fire.*

Jackson invited her to a military ball once. She bought a dress at the PX. She braided her hair complicated and thick, like Rapunzel, like all the princesses that never belonged to her. She drank whiskey and smiled tightly at the table beside the military spouses who stared blinking and dazed like they were not this used to being out in public. A man stood up, clinking his knife against his glass.

“A toast to the cavalry and its brilliance,” the man said. “Which began with its victories over the savage Cheyenne.”

All around her people held up glasses, toasting not victory but massacre. She is not Cheyenne. But these people, that she is supposed to trust with her life, were cheering for the murder of a people who looked more like her than not. She scanned the ballroom for someone, anyone, who was holding back. There she was, by the door, a woman with a face like Greendeer's, like a moon, with hair trailing down to the small of her back. The woman looked back at Private First Class Greendeer. She'd seen her around before. She was one of the wives. They nodded at each other in commiseration.

*Do you ever get over sleeping with the enemy? Or is there always a moment, in the*

*middle of the night, when you roll over, look at his face and find someone else's words pounding at the back of your throat?*

*Friendly fire.*

Private First Class Greendeer doesn't sleep in the field. Sleep is something you pay for in safety. She cannot afford it. When she is desperate, she locks herself in the driver's hole and steals fifteen minutes or so at a time. She watches the other soldiers crawl off with their sleeping bags, their bodies stretching onto in the tall grass.

"Wanna join?" one of them calls. "You can squeeze in here with me."

She flips him the bird. Jackson stares up at her like she's a ghost. He's afraid of her now. She doesn't think that's better than laughing at her. She wants to be neither joke nor cautionary tale. She just wants to be. She can't do that here.

There is no moon. The ground and sky are the same color now, a bottomless black. She lights a cigarette. The ember glows, reminding her that light exists, that the sun will come back for her. She watches the platoon until they grow still under the stars. Her breath clouds around her, mingling with the smoke from her cigarette. Deer season. She should be wrapping meat in butcher paper. She should be laying out strips of muscle in the dehydrator. There is somewhere else she should be.

She swings her body off the tank. She makes her footsteps small against the dry ground. She feels around with her toe, until she strikes something like pottery. She stumbles through the dirt until her fingers brush bone. She is piecing them together, one scrap of femur and shard of skull at a time.

She pulls the sun-bleached jawbone from her pocket. She presses her fingers along the

timeworn teeth, until they leave an indent across her skin, like a wound.

*Is it a monster?* The men had asked.

“You were a child,” she says. Her platoon is unconscious and careless. She wants to pull each of them up by the backs of their heads, to scream at them.

*Look.*

She winds her way through the tall grass until she reaches a river of pavement. She walks until she finds the chain link fence, separating post from the rest of the world. There was a rumor once that if you touched the fence, someone would shoot you. Greendeer doesn't believe in rumors. She lays the jawbone against the fence, beside the asphalt.

“I'm sorry,” she says. This is where she will build the pile, a tower of humanity, an above ground catacomb of washed up remains. She wants to give each bone a mahogany box. She wants to give each skeleton a patch of land that belongs to them. The only thing she can do is make it impossible for people to look away.

*Look.*