

What a Hunter Hears

Ben Tabor

First Place—Essay Competition

When I was young, everyone was a hunter. Every family member I could name and every one of them that I couldn't expected me to be a wonderful hunter. Every child in my family received a BB gun when they graduated from kindergarten, my younger cousin got a rifle for her eighth birthday, and every member of my family over the age of thirteen had killed a buck. So, when my father said he would take me hunting for the first time for my birthday, I was expected to be overjoyed.

I dreaded the trip for weeks.

If hunting was an artform, my father was the Picasso of blood. He stood a little over six feet tall, with tree trunks for arms and a razor blade for a brain. He was always laughing, sweating, or both. He had a reputation for being the biggest, most respected person in the room and, perhaps most importantly, was a better hunter than most of the family.

That Friday evening, we loaded up his truck and drove to the camp. The deteriorating camp roads went up and down a series of hills, coating the truck with dust from the peaks and mud from the valleys. We arrived in time for an evening hunt, and I hastily pulled on a camouflage jacket and rough jeans. We drove Dad's ATV for maybe half an hour up a winding and rugged trail.

We rode in relative silence for the first ten minutes or so before letting the crickets be our radio. The trees huddled tightly together like they had something to fear. Slowly, however, the trees thinned out, and we could see past the foliage on both sides. The forest extended far off to the left, and, on our right, an abrupt drop, maybe four stories deep, into a river one hundred and fifty yards wide. The drop was maybe five feet at its farthest from us, and at one point I

could have stuck my hand out over the ledge. It was the most beautifully terrifying sight I'd ever seen.

The trail diverged from the river, instead following a small stream a few feet away and proceeding deeper into the woods. After another few minutes of riding, Dad began to slow the ATV down, and it came to a creeping halt maybe fifty yards from the plot. He meticulously eased down off the ATV, lifted his gun and pack, and motioned for me to do the same. I, with as much stealth as a little boy can muster, clambered off the ATV, hoisted my bag, and after nearly dropping it, slung my rifle over my shoulder.

Despite the leaves crunching beneath our feet, we managed to stealthily approach the shooting house at the closer end of the plot. It was a wooden hut seven feet off the ground that couldn't fit two grown men. Dad and I squeezed ourselves into the shooting house, sat down in the two withered plastic chairs, and waited.

I learned something about my father while we sat in that little hut and waited for the sun to set. I learned where he practiced his patience. We sat for four hours, trying to breathe slowly and limit the creaking of the house. Dad barely moved during those four hours, simply taking a small sip of water near the beginning. Not long after the sun had begun to set, however, I saw Dad tense slightly, and he slowly motioned towards the back of the plot. I watched as the creature emerged from the thick, damp underbrush, maybe a hundred yards away. Her grey-beige coat looked orange in the setting sunlight, and her big black eyes surveyed the field, suspicious of the peas and ryegrass that grew in the open space. She walked out, as quiet as a mouse, onto the edge of the plot. After a moment of waiting, even I could



On Display

Logan Harden

Second Place, Fine Art
Acrylic and Watercolor

hear the soft *chomp, chomp, chomp* of her eating away at the grass.

Dad lowered his head slightly and whispered. He identified her as old, due to her more greyish fur and lack of companions, and as a good size for eating. He told me to creep my rifle out the little screen hole and take her. So, I, silently as possible, eased my rifle out the window, and began to slow my breathing. Shaking uncontrollably, I turned the safety off, bottomed out my breath, and lined up the crosshairs of that rifle with her front quarter. I didn't let my eyes sway from that spot as I eased back my shuttering finger.

I don't remember the bang or jerking upwards during the shot. I don't remember the strength of the rifle's kick. I don't remember the man's words. I barely remember the fury present in his voice as he ripped the gun from my hands and moved me down those steps.

I remember her screams, though. I remember finding her in a hole a dozen feet from the plot, with a

bullet wound in her hindquarters and blood matting her back half. I remember the flies that swarmed the red of her blood and brownish pink of an intestine. I remember a rifle, strangely familiar, being shoved into my hands. I remember that when I raised the rifle, shooting her wasn't a process. There was no breathing or precision. Just another gunshot and another wasted bullet. Dad claims that there was not enough meat left to be worth skinning, and he tossed her in the gut pile for the coyotes.

A few years later, I decided to go hunting again. I felt that same up and down of those dirty hills, was rendered speechless by that same view of the river, and wore those same rough jeans. I was plagued by the same creaking of that old house, and that same memory of her screams. I guess that everyone hears her screams. △



Small Bird

Emily Gambill

Photography

I Used to Build Forts in Fields of Cotton

Audrey Paige Robinson

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

We created freedom where there was none.
My cousin's sticks and stones and my broken bones.
A hidden place to have our own foolish fun.
A place to waste our youth until we are left alone.

My cousin's sticks and stones and my broken bones
we must sacrifice for a chance to grow up.
A place to waste our youth until we are left alone.
Drugs and liquor now fill once empty cups.

We must sacrifice for a chance to grow up.
Selling every last part of us for a college degree.
Drugs and liquor now fill once empty cups.
Was losing everything worth feeling free?

Selling every last part of us for a college degree.
A hidden place to have our own foolish fun.
Was losing everything worth feeling free?
We created freedom where there was none.